Media release – Friday 9 December 2016
For immediate release

Fact sheet: What is the ATAR and how do cut-offs and bonus points work?

THE ATAR is a rank that measures a student’s overall academic achievement in the NSW HSC in relation to that of other students. Because the ATAR is a rank, it allows the comparison of students who have completed different combinations of HSC courses. Tertiary institutions need to rank students because often there are more applicants for courses than there are places available.

Tertiary study success depends on many factors, including personal attributes such as ability and motivation, but an achievement measure like the ATAR has been found to be the best single predictor of success.

Who calculates and releases ATARs?
ATARs are calculated on behalf of institutions in NSW by the Technical Committee on Scaling – a committee set up by the NSW Vice-Chancellors’ Committee. ATARs are confidential and released by UAC to:

- students who have requested an ATAR
- institutions to which the students have applied.

They are not provided to the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards NSW (BOSTES) or to schools.

How is the ATAR calculated?
To be eligible for an ATAR a student must satisfactorily complete at least 10 units of Board Developed courses for which there are formal examinations conducted by BOSTES. These courses are referred to as ATAR courses (and are categorised as either Category A or Category B courses).

- The ATAR courses must include at least eight units from Category A courses, two units of English, three courses of two units or greater, and at least four subjects.
- The ATAR is based on an aggregate of scaled marks in 10 units of ATAR courses comprising the best two units of English and the best eight units from the remaining units, which can include up to two units of Category B courses.

HSC marks achieved in different courses cannot be compared, because it does not take into account the comparative difference between candidates in different courses. So, HSC marks are scaled before they are added to give the aggregate from which the ATAR is determined.

The scaling process takes the raw HSC marks provided by BOSTES and estimates what the marks would have been if all courses had been studied by all students. The scaling algorithm is designed to encourage students to take the courses for which they are best suited and which best prepare them for their future studies. The underlying principle is that a student should neither be advantaged nor disadvantaged by choosing one HSC course over another.

Scaling modifies the mean, the standard deviation and the maximum mark in each course. Adjustments are then made to the marks of individual students to produce scaled marks, which are the marks the student would have received if all courses had the same candidature.
Although scaled marks are generally different from the raw marks from which they are derived, the ranking of students within a course is not changed. Scaled marks are not reported to students. The scaling process is carried out afresh each year. It does not assume that one course is intrinsically more difficult than another or that the quality of the course candidature is always the same.

**What is the relationship between the HSC and the ATAR?**

The HSC and the ATAR have quite separate functions even though they are both based on the same course results.

*The HSC is:*
- a set of results that provides a profile of achievements across a range of HSC courses
- an exit certificate that marks the end of 13 years of schooling
- the gateway to further study and employment
- awarded and released by BOSTES.

*The ATAR is:*
- a rank which provides a measure of overall academic achievement in the HSC in comparison to other students
- used by institutions to rank and select applicants in an equitable way
- based on scaled marks, not HSC marks
- calculated by the institutions for all eligible candidates and released by UAC.

**How do students get an ATAR of 99.95?**

There’s no magic formula to achieving an ATAR of 99.95. Each year, students who achieve the highest rank of 99.95 have done a wide variety of subjects. The top students do have one thing in common, however, they all were placed at or near the top in all their subjects. Just doing a particular set of subjects won’t guarantee you get a high ATAR – what really matters is how well you do compared to everyone else. The best advice for students is to do subjects they enjoy and are good at, rather than choosing subjects because of a belief that they will scale well.

**Do institutions use selection criteria other than the ATAR?**

While the ATAR may be the best single predictor of academic success, institutions acknowledge that there are other selection criteria which are relevant to certain courses. Institutions may base their selection of students on an interview, audition, portfolio, questionnaire or test. Sometimes these selection criteria are used on their own and sometimes in conjunction with the ATAR.

**Are the cut-offs the ATAR students need to get into a course?**

No. The cut-off for a course does not necessarily represent the minimum ATAR required for entry into the course. Cut-offs include bonus points, and many students with ATARs below the cut-off get offers.

**If a student is eligible to get bonus points, does that student’s ATAR change?**

No. Bonus points don’t change the ATAR; bonus points change a student’s selection rank for a particular course that has been listed as a preference. If a student is allocated bonus points, that student may receive an offer to a course even though their ATAR is below the published cut-off.

**If bonus points don’t increase the ATAR, then how do they work?**

Bonus points are awarded for various things, such as performance in relevant HSC subjects, living or attending school in an area defined by the institutions, and consideration through Educational Access Schemes (see overleaf). Bonus point schemes are different for each institution and often for each course at the same institution. This means that a student’s selection rank can be different for each course listed in
their course preferences. For Year 12 students who have bonus points, their selection rank for each preference = ATAR + bonus points.

**Do the cut-offs include bonus points?**
Yes. The cut-off is the lowest rank (including any bonus points) required for entry into a particular course.

For example, course A has six applicants and only three places available. The six applicants have the following selection ranks:

1. 99 (ATAR of 99)
2. 98 (ATAR of 97 plus 1 bonus point)
3. 97 (ATAR of 95 plus 2 bonus points)
4. 96 (ATAR of 96)
5. 95 (ATAR of 93 plus 2 bonus points)
6. 94 (ATAR of 94)

Offers will be made to applicants 1, 2 and 3. Applicant 4 will not receive an offer even though that applicant has an ATAR higher than applicant 3. The cut-off for course A will be 97.

**Do institutions give any consideration to students with long-term educational disadvantage?**
All institutions have Educational Access Schemes (EAS) for students who have experienced long-term educational disadvantage. These schemes make provisions for students whose studies have been disrupted by a variety of factors, such as the illness of a family member or excessive carer responsibilities, or who are statistically under-represented in higher education.

Most institutions allocate bonus points to eligible EAS applicants, which may allow those students entry into a course even though they have an ATAR below the published cut-off.

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