University Admissions Framework Project

UAC Submission

February 2025

Introduction

The Universities Admissions Centre (NSW & ACT) Pty Ltd (UAC) was established in 1995 and is the largest tertiary admissions centre in Australia. Owned by universities in NSW and the ACT, our mission is to provide excellence in admissions services and promote equity of access to tertiary education. Central to that mission is a strong culture of servicing the needs of all our stakeholders, in particular our institutions and applicants.

UAC has a trusted and valuable position in the higher education sector. Applicants, in particular Year 12 students, turn to UAC for unbiased and authoritative information about university admissions and courses and for an easy interface with which to apply. Institutions rely upon UAC services to handle the bulk of the admissions process, allowing them to focus on their core capabilities of learning and teaching, research, and community engagement. Parents, schools, the media, and the public know UAC as their first point of reference for university admissions in NSW and the ACT.

As a not-for-profit working in the broad interests of the education sector, UAC is well-placed to provide objective and neutral advice to the Commonwealth Government and the Australian Council for Educational Research.

UAC is therefore pleased to provide the following response to the University Admissions Framework Project.

Summary of UAC Response

- School leavers interested in university study have in recent years been afforded the opportunity to apply for and receive an offer to university before their Year 12 exams (known as early offers).
- In NSW and the ACT early offers can be made through multiple channels. UAC administers the centralised Schools Recommendation Scheme, and many universities also have their own schemes that accept applications directly from students.
- The early offer pathway has now become mainstream in NSW and the ACT. By securing an early offer, students can reduce stress and anxiety, plan with greater certainty, and approach their final year of school with more confidence.
- Students are thus overwhelmingly in support of early offers, as shown by the record number of applications to UAC's Schools Recommendation Scheme in 2024 (27,038 applicants compared to 5,447 applicants when the scheme began in 2014).

- In addition, early offer applications made direct to universities have seen significant growth, having risen in the last six years from 46,266 to 78,176 applications.
- Further testament to the popularity of early offers is in the volume of traffic to the UAC webpage that lists all the early offer schemes available to Year 12 students. This page has had 156,436 views in the last 12 months, averaging 13,036 views per month.
- 84% of the students surveyed in UAC's 2025 Lifestyle and Learning Report reported using an early offer scheme.
- Early offers provide benefits to both students and universities. Early offers improve student wellbeing and enable students and universities to plan for future enrolment.
- Studies have shown that early offers reduce the stress and anxiety attached to Year 12 and ATAR and allow students to continue working towards doing well in their exams.
- Joint research between UAC and the University of NSW has shown that students who received an early offer had a small but significant positive effect for academic buoyancy for the remainder of their high school studies (Martin and Tam, 2024). Another study showed a reduction in stress for students and that students are motivated to prove their 'worth' in exams (Patfield, 2023).
- Some school principals have raised concerns about student attention after early offers. However, this is not the case in all schools or with all students and there may be other factors. However, it is important the interests of schools be considered in this light.
- UAC is valued by schools and students for providing comprehensive information about the admission process, including from our website, email newsletters, social media channels (Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok), webinars, customer service team, ATAR enquiry centre, school visits and open days. UAC tools such as Subject Compass, Course Compass and ATAR compass also provide important assistance to students navigating their senior years and preparing for university entry. Recognising that not all students are ready for university immediately after school, UAC also has a specific "Pathways to university' section on our website to provide information about other options for post-secondary studies including diplomas, undergraduate certificates, university preparation programs, TAFE and private college courses, and STAT tests.
- Simplifying the messaging or providing greater support to students from under-represented backgrounds could encourage more university applications (including those for early offers) from this cohort.
- There is an opportunity for UAC and the Federal Department of Education to partner on a campaign to reach traditionally under-represented students highlighted in the Universities Accord (First Nations students, students from lowest quartile SES backgrounds, students from regional, rural and remote areas, and students with disability).
- UAC recommends that students be allowed to accept early offers without also being required to undertake an enrolment process until after ATAR-based offers are made.
- UAC recommends the automatic creation of access schemes applications nationwide for students who reside in the lowest quartile SES areas or attend a school in a rural, regional or remote area. This would remove potential barriers for admission from these cohorts.
- While there are benefits to current approaches, further nationalisation of admissions and potential next steps for the national admissions framework should be considered in the context of the operational options available and the additional benefits that would be realised for students and the education sector.

UAC Response to Questions – Early Offers

Early offers are those made to students before they have received the results from their senior secondary studies.

Note that this section on early offers relates solely to Year 12 students.

What are the benefits of early offers – for schools, for students, for universities?

For students

- Early offers are well established in the NSW and ACT market, having been in existence for over ten years. As noted in the Australian Government 2023 Higher Education Student Statistics, across the country the majority of Year 12 students seek to continue onto university. Early offers allow them to secure this opportunity ahead of their exams, building confidence in their ability to achieve a university education and inspiring that aspiration in other students. Expanding the number of students with a university education is a key goal of the Federal Government and recommendation of the Universities Accord; early offers are one way to do that.

- Early offers provide students with certainty about their post-school destination earlier than the ATAR-based rounds in December and January. This is of particular advantage to students who have to relocate long distances such as rural residents, or students moving to regional areas to study.

- Studies have shown that early offers reduce the stress and anxiety attached to Year 12 and ATAR and allow students to continue working towards doing well in their exams. Students are motivated to prove their 'worth' and ensure that they don't let their peers down (Patfield, 2023).
- Many of the students surveyed for the UAC Lifestyle and Learning Report reported that early offers reduced their stress and allowed them to relax more. In the 2025 Report (to be published in March 2025), there was a consensus that early offers resulted in a positive effect on their state of mind. Some advice from the 2024 Year 12 cohort to the 2025 cohort included:
    - "Apply for early entry, it's so so good to have that weight off your shoulders. I think it helped me to focus more on actually studying and less on stressing about my ATAR."
    - "Applying for early entry is the best thing you can do, it's not unfair and it's worth any process for the way you can relax even throughout the exam period!"
    - "Do not forget to apply for early entry, it takes away so much stress! Also, have a few outlets that will give you a break from school or studying e.g. sports, gym, music."
    - "Work hard and try getting an early entry offer to relax your mind."
    - "Get early admission! It really makes you feel better about the HSC."
- Anecdotal evidence gathered by UAC at student events and careers expos suggests that early offers also give greater certainty and relieve stress for the parents and carers of students, who are typically heavily invested in the students' success.

- A study co-authored by UAC and the University of NSW (Martin and Tam, 2024) showed students who received an early offer had a slight improvement in their perseverance towards academic challenges – the report stating, “There was a small but significant positive effect for the academic buoyancy of students who had applied for and received an early entry offer”.

- The early offer pathway has now become mainstream in NSW and the ACT. By securing an early offer, students can reduce stress and anxiety, plan with greater certainty, and approach their final year of school with more confidence.
- Students are thus overwhelmingly in support of early offers. This is shown by the record number of applications to UAC’s Schools Recommendation Scheme in 2024, with more than 27,000 students applying, an almost 500% increase since the start of the scheme in 2014.

- In addition, early offer applications made direct to universities have seen significant growth, having risen in the last six years from 46,266 to 78,176 applications.
- Student enthusiasm is also shown by the data from UAC’s 2025 Lifestyle and Learning Report, in which 84% of the 16,700 students surveyed reported using an early offer scheme.

- While most early entry schemes are not specifically designed for equity cohorts, the UNSW Gateway program is specifically for students attending a gateway school (a school with a below average Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA) score) or living in a low-socioeconomic area based on IRSAD or IEO indexes of SEIFA, attracting many applicants to the scheme from the lowest SES quartile.

- The agreement currently in place between State Education Ministers and universities that early offers will not be released before the September prior to the student commencing studies has been a positive development for schools and students. This has allowed offers to be released at a time in which students are less likely to be distracted from their studies.

For schools

- Early offers give students peace of mind, relieving pressure from a stressful time, improving their outlook and boosting their mental and physical wellbeing. This is of benefit to schools given their concern for the welfare of Year 12 students.

This is reflected in responses from students in the 2025 UAC Lifestyle and Learning survey:

  - “Try as hard as you can even if given early entry.”

  - “Study as much as you can and give it your all and not just give up after early entry.”

  - “Apply for early entry, it’s so so good to have that weight off your shoulders. I think it helped me to focus more on actually studying and less on stressing about my ATAR.”

  - “…push yourself the whole way no matter if you get early entry.”

  - “…don’t let early entry stop you from trying.”

- Schools wish for students to perform well in Year 12, and studies have shown that students in possession of an early offer can perform at their potential in the final exams. As research from Martin and Tam showed, “There was a small but significant positive effect for the academic buoyancy of students who had applied for and received an early entry offer”. When a student performs to their potential, it is of benefit to both the student and the school.

- Some school principals have raised concerns about student attention after early offers. However, this is not the case in all schools or with all students and there may be other factors. However, it is important the interests of schools be considered in this light.
- The agreement currently in place between State Education Ministers and universities that early offers will not be released before the September prior to the student commencing studies has been a positive development for schools and students. This has allowed offers to be released at a time in which students are less likely to be distracted from their studies.
- Given widespread expectations from students and parents about early offers, supporting their students through the early offer process is one way that schools can meet the needs of their communities.

For universities

- Early offers allow universities to directly engage with students for a longer period of time and provide them with the information and support necessary to a smooth and successful transition from school to university.
- Early offers enable some students to attend university who otherwise believe they would not have been able to (Patfield, 2023).
- Early offers allow university student support staff to engage with and resource plan for students from key equity groups such as First Nations students, students from lowest quartile SES backgrounds, students from regional, rural and remote areas, and students with disability.

Are there any disadvantages of early offers?

- It is worth noting that one of the areas of potential disadvantage, that is the time that offers are released, has already been addressed through the agreement that early offers not be released before September. It was a disadvantage that early offers could be released at vastly different times between institutions. It is also an advantage now, that early offers are released at a time in which students are less likely to be distracted from their studies.
- Early offer messaging has some complexity and can create confusion for students. Students receive information from multiple sources, making consistency more difficult to achieve.
- There is also potential for confusion among students regarding the early offer process eg where to apply and by what deadline.
- Students receiving a range of offers can also be confused about which offers to accept and whether they need to enrol when they accept.
- Allocation of all university offers is reliant upon access to robust and validated data about the preparedness of a student to undertake university study. Most NSW and ACT early offer schemes use Year 11 results as a proxy for ATAR, as UAC data has shown that student results in Year 11 correspond well with results in Year 12/ATAR (Tam, 2024). National access to Year 11 results has not yet been established in the same way as Year 12 results, making the early offer process less streamlined than the process for ATAR-based offers. National access to Year 11 results is recommended to provide greater support and opportunities to students in a consistent way throughout the country. However, for this recommendation to be effective the current variances between the states in reporting methods for secondary education would first need to be addressed.

- A 2023 study showed inconsistency amongst schools on the level of engagement with the early offer process. Some schools weren't "open about early entry offers" while other students were "encouraged pretty heavily within our school as a good option" (Patfield, 2023).

- Not all universities have early offer schemes. If early offer schemes were offered more broadly and consistently, they can help widen participation and potentially be used to promote courses aligned with national skills shortages.

What motivates students to apply for early offers?

- As noted above, most secondary school students seek to continue onto university. Early offers enable them to secure this opportunity as soon as possible.

- As also described above, early offers give students the knowledge that they will be proceeding to university much earlier than is possible through the December/January offer rounds. This is a particular motivation for students who have to relocate long distances such as rural residents, or students moving to regional areas to study.

- Early offers give greater certainty to students, reducing the stress and anxiety attached to Year 12 and ATAR (Patfield, 2023).

- Studies have shown that students in possession of an early offer can have a reduction in stress levels, allowing them to perform at their potential in the final exams. Joint research between UAC and the University of NSW (Martin and Tam, 2024) showed students who received an early offer had a slight improvement in their perseverance towards academic challenges – the report, stating "There was a small but significant positive effect for the academic buoyancy of students who had applied for and received an early entry offer". Studies (Patfield, 2023, Martin and Tam, 2024) have shown no evidence of students 'taking their foot off the accelerator' when it comes to their final Year 12 exams.

- Student responses to the UAC 2025 Lifestyle and Learning survey show that the overwhelming motivation for applying for early offers is the dual effect of stress relief and the safety of obtaining an offer prior to receiving results.

    - "Work hard and try getting an early entry offer to relax your mind."

    - "Don't stress too much, early entry will save your life…

    - "…having early entry to multiple Uni's takes the pressure off if your indecisive about your future."

    - "Work hard and try getting an early entry offer to relax your mind.""

- Students may feel that they would be at a disadvantage compared to their peers if they did not apply for early offers.

Can you share any evidence of the impact that early offers have on student wellbeing, engagement and/or learning outcomes in their final year of school or after they enter university?

- Feedback from UAC's Customer Service and Community Engagement teams whose daily work involves interacting with students is that early offers give students greater certainty, giving them piece of mind, relieving pressure from a stressful time, improving their outlook and boosting their mental and physical wellbeing. This corresponds with the feedback from

students interviewed in a study that showed early offers reduce the stress and anxiety attached to Year 12 and ATAR while students still worked to prove their 'worth' and ensure they don't let their peers down by continuing to do well in their exams (Patfield, 2023).

- In the 2024 UAC Lifestyle and Learning Report, Year 12 students were asked for their advice for the following year's cohort. Typical responses included:
    - "Apply for early entry, it's so so good to have that weight off your shoulders. I think it helped me to focus more on actually studying and less on stressing about my ATAR."
    - "Applying for early entry is the best thing you can do, it's not unfair and it's worth any process for the way you can relax even throughout the exam period!"
    - "Do not forget to apply for early entry, it takes away so much stress! Also, have a few outlets that will give you a break from school or studying e.g. sports, gym, music."
    - "Work hard and try getting an early entry offer to relax your mind."
    - "Get early admission! It really makes you feel better about the HSC."
- As noted elsewhere, joint research by UAC and the University of NSW (Martin and Tam, 2024) showed that students who received an early offer had a slight improvement in their perseverance towards academic challenges. The report stated that "There was a small but significant positive effect for the academic buoyancy of students who had applied for and received an early entry offer".

How do school students currently access information on early offers?

- Students can access information on early offers from UAC, including both UAC's own early offer scheme (the Schools Recommendation Scheme) and early offer schemes offered directly by individual universities. This is through UAC's website, email newsletters, webinars and social media, and directly through Customer Service and through our Community Engagement team that attends and delivers presentations to schools and careers expos and university Open Days NSW and the ACT (and in some cases interstate) throughout the year.
- Students can access information on individual university early offer schemes directly from the relevant universities.
- Students can also obtain information on early offers from schools through careers advisers and other teachers, and the school's own communication channels. This information is typically sourced from both UAC and universities.
- Students also ask family and friends for information, either those currently applying or who have previously applied or have some knowledge of the process. In fact, a 2024 study showed that "The majority of the younger participants (those under 25) indicated that their parent/s played a significant role in encouraging their entry to higher education" (O'Shea, 2024).
- Students can also obtain information on early offers from the media, which again can be sourced from both UAC and universities.

Do you have thoughts on how the early offer process could be improved for students, including those students at risk of disengaging?

- UAC aims to provide comprehensive advice and information about university admissions to schools, students, parents and the public. UAC and the other tertiary admissions centres are institution and course agnostic – we facilitate and support students in making informed choices about course selection and access to higher education. Naturally, universities, schools and other parties will have slightly different messages, potentially causing confusion for students. Unfortunately, the confusion is often greatest in those students typically underrepresented in higher education. All students would benefit if information about early offers was able to be simplified and/or applied more consistently.

- A report was tabled in December 2024 by the *Joint Select Committee on Arts and Music Education and Training in New South Wales*. Recommendation 13 of the report stated, "That the NSW Government work with University Admissions Centre to develop a 'myth-busting' awareness campaign targeted at students, parents and schools to provide accurate information about HSC creative arts subjects in relation to the ATAR and scaling". In a similar way, UAC and the Federal Department of Education could partner on a campaign to reach traditionally under-represented students highlighted in the Universities Accord (First Nations students, students from lowest quartile SES backgrounds, students from regional, rural and remote areas, and students with disability).

  There should be equity of access to information for students, and a campaign like this would support this goal. UAC data could be leveraged to determine those cohorts particularly underrepresented in applications and/or offers and target the campaign to those students.

- UAC also recommends consideration be given to Federal Government subsidies/payments of admission centre application fees for students from the lowest quartile SES backgrounds.

- UAC automatically creates access scheme applications for students who have applied through UAC who reside in the lowest quartile SES areas, or attend a school in a rural, regional or remote location. This broadens awareness of university admission to a wider group of students and gives those students access to special consideration. The automatic creation of access schemes applications could be rolled out nationwide for all applicants in these cohorts, not just those applying through UAC.

- The agreement currently in place between State Education Ministers and universities that early offers will not be released before the September prior to the student commencing studies has been a positive development for schools and students and is consistent with research that proposed a designated timeframe for the release of early offers either immediately before or after Year 12 exams (Patfield, 2023). It is recommended that this agreement and the September timeframe be nationally mandated.

- A similar nationally consistent approach could be taken with the application periods for individual university schemes. This would simplify the process for students by providing a consistent window of time in which to apply.

- To avoid the risk of students inadvertently enrolling in more than one course and/or enrolling in a less preferred course, UAC recommends that students should not be asked to enrol in their early offer until after the main ATAR-based offer rounds in December and January. This would improve outcomes for students in their subsequent university studies.

- Early offers could require not only the completion of Year 12 including sitting the HSC exams, but a minimum ATAR, to further allay concerns of students not reaching their potential in their exams. This could be managed at the institution and/or course level.

- Not all universities have early offer schemes. If early offer schemes were offered more broadly and consistently, they can help widen participation and potentially be used to promote courses aligned with national skills shortages.

UAC Response to Questions – University admissions processes

How do current admissions practices support or impede students in making informed choices about course selection that align with their capabilities, interests and aspirations?

How current admissions practices <u>support</u> students

- Between tertiary admissions centres, universities, schools, government, media and other sources, a wealth of admissions information is currently available to students to help them make informed choices.
- UAC provides comprehensive information and guidance to students about the admissions process, the ATAR and course choices. There is a wide range of publications available on our website for students from Years 10-12. During the admissions period, we publish lowest selection rank information from the major offer rounds to assist students choosing their university course preferences.
- UAC encourages students to pursue education in areas that are of interest to them and align with their personal strengths. UAC does not recommend particular courses or universities in our advice; we support students in making informed decisions for their future.
- UAC provides extensive information, resources and support to schools, which provides schools with the tools they need to expertly guide students seeking entry to university.
- UAC provides online tools for students to help them navigate choosing their Year 11 and 12 subjects (Subject Compass), the ATAR (ATAR Compass) and their choice of university course preferences (Course Compass)
- Other tools provided by government to help students make informed choices are also useful in this context, including “My future” which matches interests and strengths to career decisions and the “Your Career” careers information website.

How current admissions practices <u>impede</u> students

- As an admissions service for multiple universities, UAC can provide comprehensive, consistent and unbiased information and advice to students. Information is also provided to students from many other sources including schools, universities, media and social media. The sheer volume and variety of information is difficult for students to distil and comprehend. Feedback from our Customer Service team is that this makes it more challenging for students to select the preferences that truly correspond with their best interests or skills. Studies have shown that the variety of messaging results in some students selecting courses that don’t reflect their true preferences (Guillen et.al, 2020). Unfortunately, this confusion is often greatest in students from underrepresented backgrounds who may not have the social capital to navigate the complexity and volume of the information available.
- Many students don’t fully understand their options for changing preferences after they receive an offer, which may lead to a sub-optimal choice at enrolment.
- While there are benefits to current approaches, further nationalisation of admissions and potential next steps for the national admissions framework should be considered in the

context of the operational options available and the additional benefits that would be realised for students and the education sector.

What information can prospective students access to help them through the application process for non-ATAR entry pathways?

- Again, prospective students have information available to them from tertiary admissions centres, schools, universities and the media/social media.

- UAC is passionate about providing access to university for as many people as possible. We emphasise through all our communication channels that there are many non-ATAR pathways available and encourage students to explore all their options.

- Recognising that not all students are ready for university immediately after school, UAC also has a specific “Pathways to university’ section on our website to provide information about other options for post-secondary studies including diplomas, undergraduate certificates, university preparation programs, TAFE and private college courses, and STAT tests.
- The media is also a source of this information, and UAC’s media releases and social media posts on non-ATAR pathways are increasingly being quoted by the media.

How could admissions practices be made more equitable for students from low SES backgrounds, regional and remote areas, students with disability and First Nations students?

- Admissions practices have become more equitable over time with the introduction of access schemes and/or early offer programs for students from underrepresented backgrounds. Additionally, the proportion of equity students accessing university through alternative entry pathways such as VET courses, special admission programs and enabling programs has increased over time (Jackson et al., 2023).

- UAC automatically generates access scheme applications for students who have applied for university who reside in a low-SES areas, or attend a school in a rural, regional or remote location. This removes a barrier of entry for this cohort and paves the way for more students from these underrepresented cohorts to have access to university admission.

- UAC research has showed that for applicants in each ATAR band (>90, 90-80, 80-70, 70-60, 60-50, 50-40, 40-30, <30), students from the lowest SES quartile apply to university at a higher rate than applicants in the highest SES quartile (Manny 2020). This suggests that equity in applications already exists for students with an ATAR and efforts to improve equity for underrepresented groups will need to focus on non-ATAR pathways and/or removing any barriers to enrolment and retention.

- UAC research has shown that “university students from a disadvantaged background generally slightly outperform those from a non-disadvantaged background with the same ATAR” (Manny et.al, 2021). This highlights the importance of removing barriers to the ongoing enrolment and retention of these students and increasing the participation of these cohorts through non-ATAR pathways.

- Ideally, all students should have the same access to admissions information and advice. Unfortunately, our experience at UAC in working with schools and students has shown that is not the case. Some schools (and particularly those in under-represented areas) do not have dedicated resources available for career guidance (or have less experienced careers advisers), and some schools choose not to engage with access schemes because of a misguided philosophy that students should get in ‘on their own two feet’.

- Simplifying admissions information would be of particular value to students from underrepresented backgrounds. The confusion that results from multiple (and sometimes inconsistent) information sources has a more noticeable impact on students without the social capital to navigate the volume and complexity of information.

- Consideration could be given to Federal Government subsidies/payments of admission centre application fees for students from the lowest quartile SES backgrounds.

- Given that admission to university often comes at the end of 13 years of schooling, for university admission to be truly equitable, there must be appropriate support for students from under-represented backgrounds throughout the education system.

Can you share any evidence of the impact that direct entry processes have on student learning outcomes, including withdrawal/retention rates and academic performance?

- Admissions criteria for direct entry are the same as for other admissions and UAC is not aware of data that shows any difference in withdrawal/retention rates and academic performance between direct entry and other admissions.

If there is anything else that you would like to add about university admissions, including early offers, and their impact on students, schools or universities, please feel free to add it here.

- We support the continued relevance of the ATAR as the fairest way to determine university offers. There are multiple pathways to university study, and UAC encourages students to explore all of them, but for some courses demand outstrips supply and a fair and robust process is needed to allocate offers. The ATAR provides the best and fairest summation of a student's achievements from senior secondary schooling in comparison to their peers and is a comprehensive measure of both ability and effort. Research by UAC also shows that the ATAR is the best available predictor of university success, as measured by students' first-year grade-point-average (GPA) (Manny et al., 2019).

- Increased use of admissions centres nationally in TAFE/VET course admissions would help reduce perceptions of TAFE/VET as inferior to university and allow students to move more seamlessly through tertiary education.

- There would be value in an annual report from the Department of Education on the subsequent university performance (as measured by first year GPAs) of all Year 12 students regardless of entry pathway. This would allow for system-wide comparisons between students enrolling in an early offer and those enrolling in ATAR-based offers.

UAC would like to thank the Australian Council for Educational Research for the opportunity to submit this response. We are happy for this submission to be credited to the Universities Admissions Centre (UAC).

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