

The UAC logo is a dark blue square with a green diagonal stripe running from the bottom-left corner to the top-right corner. The letters 'UAC' are written in white, bold, sans-serif font in the upper left portion of the square.

UAC



Inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment

UAC Submission

June 2026

Introduction

The Universities Admissions Centre (NSW & ACT) Pty Ltd (UAC) was established in 1995 and is the largest tertiary admissions centre in Australia. 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 turn to UAC for unbiased and authoritative information about university admissions and courses and for an easy interface to apply for courses from across multiple institutions.

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 the ATAR and university admissions in NSW and the ACT.

UAC is a member of the Australasian Conference of Tertiary Admissions Centres (ACTAC), which coordinates a consistent national admissions system and comprises the five state/territory tertiary admissions centres in Australia as well as the University of Tasmania. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority is also a participant in ACTAC processes.

As a not-for-profit working in the broad interests of the education sector, UAC is well-placed to provide objective and data-driven information to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education.

UAC is therefore pleased to provide the following response to the Inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment.

Specific terms of reference addressed in this submission

The inquiry has the following terms of reference.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education will inquire into the factors driving educational attainment.

The inquiry will consider the factors that drive variations in educational attainment including between and among boys and girls, from early learning, through school education, (including vocational education and training (VET) in schools), to tertiary education. It will seek to identify the factors driving differential engagement, participation, and outcomes at all levels and transitions from lower to senior secondary school; from school to tertiary education; and from education into the workforce and broader society.

The inquiry will include consideration of the research base, and factors responsible for the differences between and among boys and girls in:

- *school readiness and progression through school education*
- *school learning outcomes in the National Assessment Program and other datasets*
- *school attendance rates, school retention rates and senior secondary school attainment rates*
- *representation in the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on school students with disability*
- *learning approaches and pathways, including subject selection, that may influence uptake of different forms of post-school education*
- *participation and completion rates in vocational education and training (VET) in schools, and*
- *participation, completion and attainment rates in tertiary education, including VET, apprenticeships and higher education.*

The inquiry will also consider:

- *drivers of any differences in outcomes based on gender, cultural and linguistic diversity, socio-economic status*
- *potential evidence-based solutions to raise educational standards and results for learners not meeting standards, including where there is evidence for targeted approaches based on gender or other factors*
- *current policies and strategies to improve educational outcomes for boys and girls, and their impact, and*
- *other matters the Committee considers relevant.*

In this submission, UAC is addressing the following specific sections in the terms of reference:

The inquiry will include consideration of the research base, and factors responsible for the differences between and among boys and girls in:

- *participation, completion and attainment rates in tertiary education, including VET, apprenticeships and higher education.*

The inquiry will also consider:

- *drivers of any differences in outcomes based on gender, cultural and linguistic diversity, socio-economic status*

UAC holds data on NSW secondary school student progress through the educational journey: finishing the HSC, obtaining an ATAR, applying through UAC, receiving an offer and enrolling at university. This submission looks at ATAR and first year university results as well as the rates of progression with respect to gender, socio-economic status, regionality and Indigenous status. Unless stated otherwise, all information presented in this report is from the 2025 HSC/2026 admissions year.

It is important to note that students can apply to university through a Tertiary Admission Centre such as UAC or directly to universities. According to the Federal Department of Education Paper “Undergraduate applications and offers 2025”, the number of direct applications to universities in 2025 was 41% of all applications, with the remainder being through Tertiary Admissions Centres. Courses that rely on an ATAR requirement and/or with limited places (such as Medicine) typically require application through a Tertiary Admission Centre.

The data presented in this submission relates to applications made through UAC only.

ATAR performance

The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is a number between 0.00 and 99.95 that indicates a student's position relative to all people of the same age in their state. The sole use of the ATAR is to help universities select students for their courses.

ATARs are calculated in each state to reflect a student's rank against other students within that state. In NSW, the ATAR is calculated and released by UAC and is based on an aggregate of scaled marks in 10 units of HSC courses comprising the best 2 units of English and the best 8 units from the remaining units.

Each year following the release of the ATAR, UAC publishes a scaling report that provides information on the calculation that year. Much of the data in the following section is taken from the 2025 scaling report, which is publicly available on the UAC website.

Participation

- In 2025, 77,693 HSC students completed at least one ATAR course¹; of these, 68,896 were awarded the HSC, while 60,432 received an ATAR.
- Of the students receiving ATARs, 46.3% were males and 53.6% were females.

Results

- The median ATAR for females was 71.60 whereas the median ATAR for males was 69.80; the overall median ATAR for all students was 70.75.
- There were 53 students who received the top ATAR of 99.95 – they comprise of 19 females and 34 males from a mix of government selective and independent schools.

Figure 1 below compares the numbers of male and female students per point of ATAR. More males received an ATAR above 98 – 56.4% compared to 43.6%. However, there are more females than males in almost every other ATAR category between 45 and 98.

¹ An ATAR course is a NESA Board Developed Course for which there is an examination conducted by NESA that yields graded assessments.

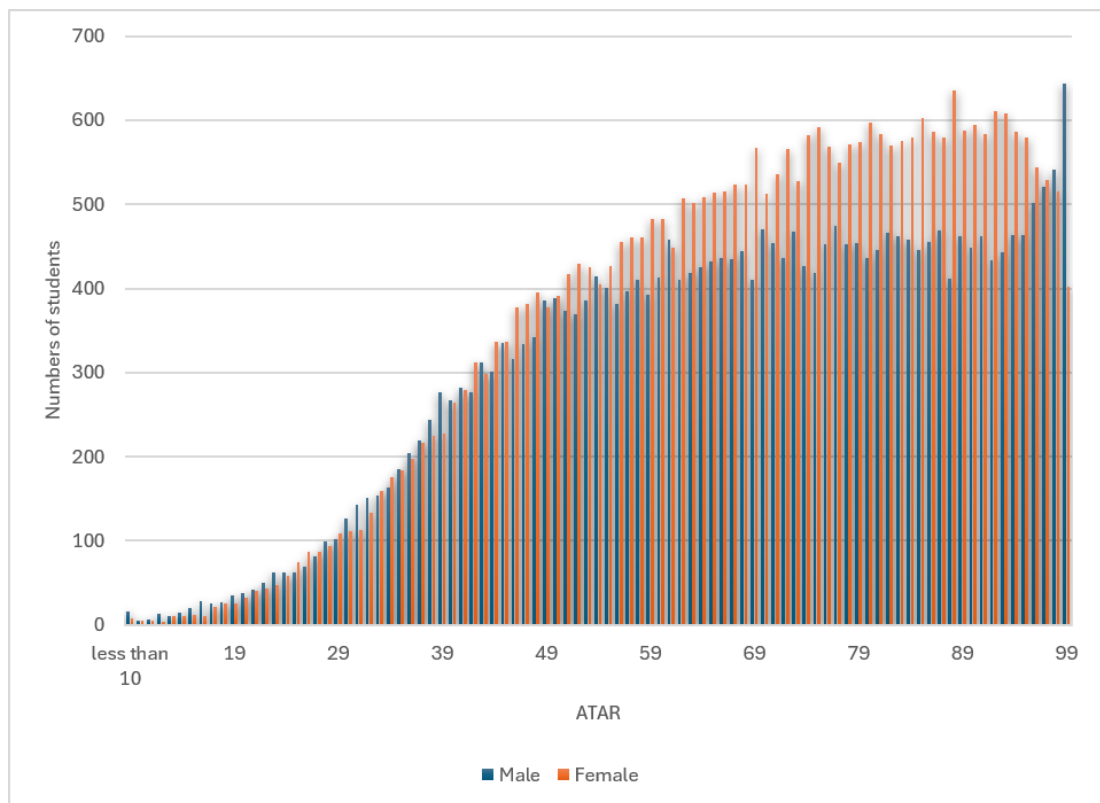


Figure 1 – 2025 ATAR by Gender

- In 2025, 48.6% of the HSC aged population was female. If there was no gender-based difference in HSC participation and performance, one would therefore expect 48.6% of each ATAR category to be female.
- To quote page 19 of the report “However, there are considerably more females than would be expected given their proportion in the HSC-aged population on almost every aggregate score ... reflecting higher retention rates and better performance for females”.

Figure 2 below shows the ATAR performance by Gender and IEO. In this graph, it is shown that there are more females in every Index of Education and Occupation (IEO) quartile for an ATAR above 70.

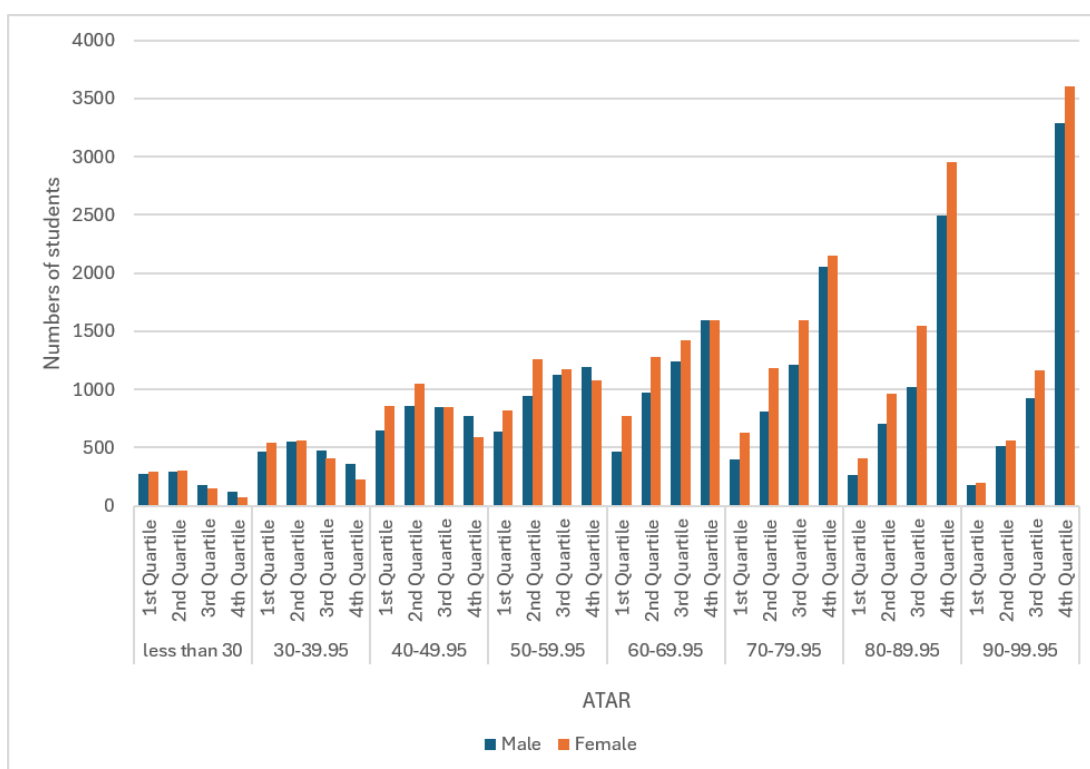


Figure 2 – 2025 ATAR by Gender and IEO quartile

Overall progression towards university

In this and subsequent sections relating to progression towards university, each Year 12 student is classified according to their furthest point of progress in the following sequence: obtaining the HSC award, obtaining an ATAR, applying through UAC, receiving an offer and enrolling at university. It is assumed that progression is sequential, with each stage dependent on completion of the preceding stage. For example, enrolment at university requires receipt of an offer; which in turn requires an application through UAC, and so on.

This submission includes data from the UAC applications of Year 12 students for 2025 admissions. While this covers the majority of university applications, it does not cover direct applications. Therefore, the dataset in this paper should not be taken as a complete picture of all university admissions for Year 12 students in NSW and the ACT. However, the trends shown are likely to be equally applicable to direct applications.

Figure 3 shows the educational progress of UAC applicants from obtaining the HSC, obtaining an ATAR, applying to UAC, receiving an offer and enrolling at university.

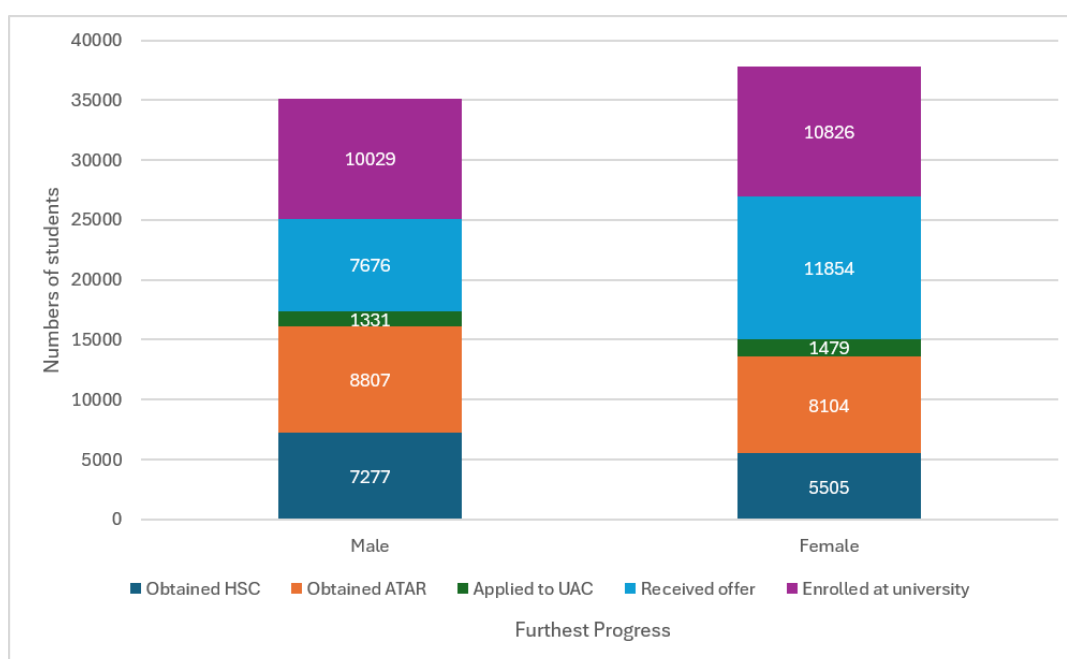


Figure 3 – Educational progress by gender

Most students who finish the HSC obtain an ATAR. In turn most students who obtain an ATAR apply to university through UAC. Close to half of the students who receive an offer from UAC enrol at university. A proportion of students shown to have received offer (and not enrolled) may have instead accepted and enrolled in an offer directly from a university.

The application journey is also broken down by gender, with females progressing further along the enrolment pathway and ultimately enrolling than their male counterparts. More males go no further than completing the HSC and receiving an ATAR. More females apply to UAC, receive an offer and enrol at university.

Progression by quartile

Figure 4 displays the educational progress of applicants per socio-economic status quartile.

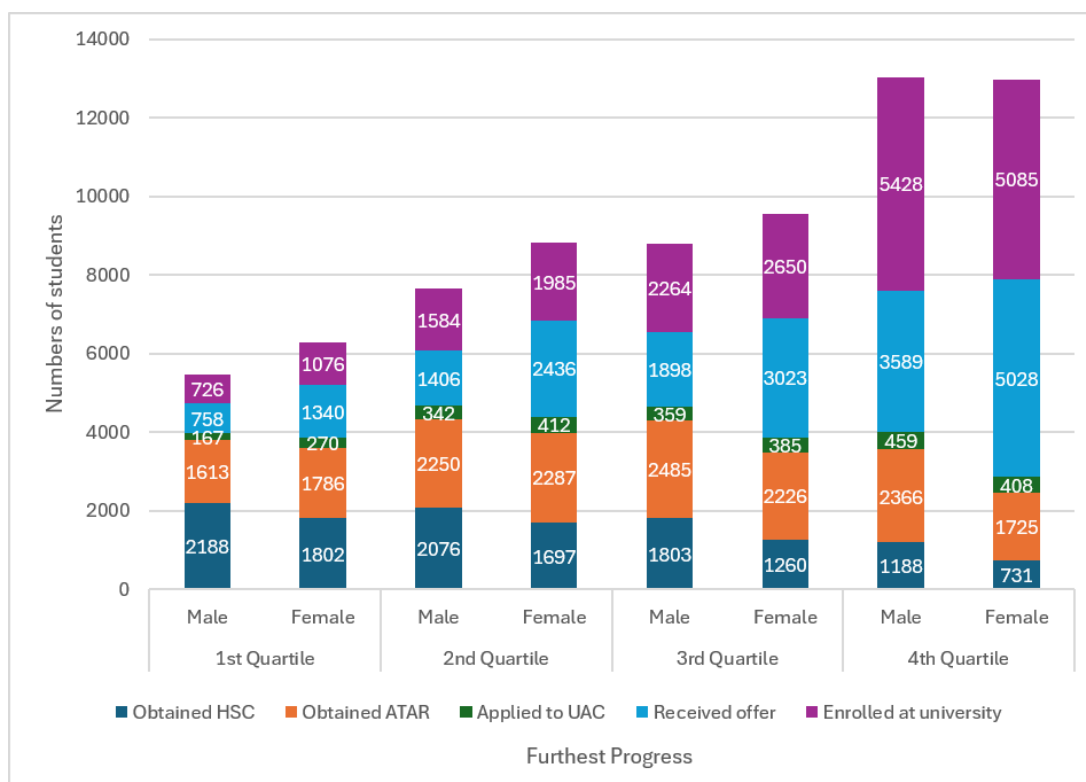


Figure 4 – Educational progress by SES quartile

As with Figure 3, in Figure 4 there are five educational progress categories – obtained HSC, obtained ATAR, applied to UAC, received an offer and enrolled at university. The highest SES quartile (4th quartile) has the largest number of total students in the complete educational journey, i.e. they have enrolled at university and thereby completed all preceding stages in the progression. The lowest SES quartile (1st quartile) has the fewest number of students in the complete educational journey.

Figure 4 is also broken down by gender. There are more female enrolments than male enrolments in each quartile, except for the 4th quartile where there are more male enrolments. More females receive offers than males in each quartile, including in the 4th quartile. Males outnumber their female counterparts in each quartile when it comes to only completing the HSC.

Progression by regionality

Figure 5 displays the educational progress of applicants by their region of residence, that is metropolitan, inner regional, outer regional, remote or very remote.

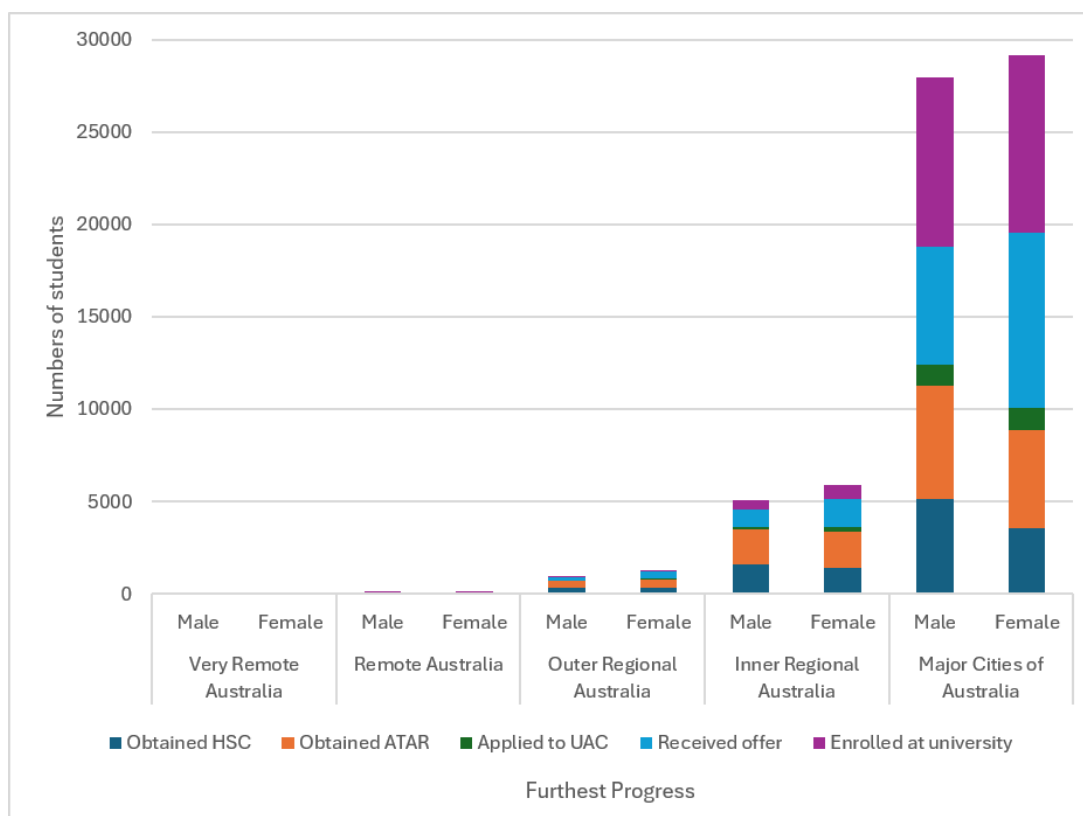


Figure 5 – Educational progress by regionality, student numbers

Figure 5 shows that the largest group of students enrolling at university are those residing in major cities. The more remote the applicant, the lower the number of applications to and enrolments at university.

With regards to gender, more females than males enrolled at university from the major cities, inner regional and outer regional areas.

Figure 6 shows the same data as Figure 5, but as a percentage from within each cohort, i.e. males from major cities, females from major cities, males from inner regional areas and so on. Remote and very remote areas do not have high enough application numbers for representative percentages to be calculated.

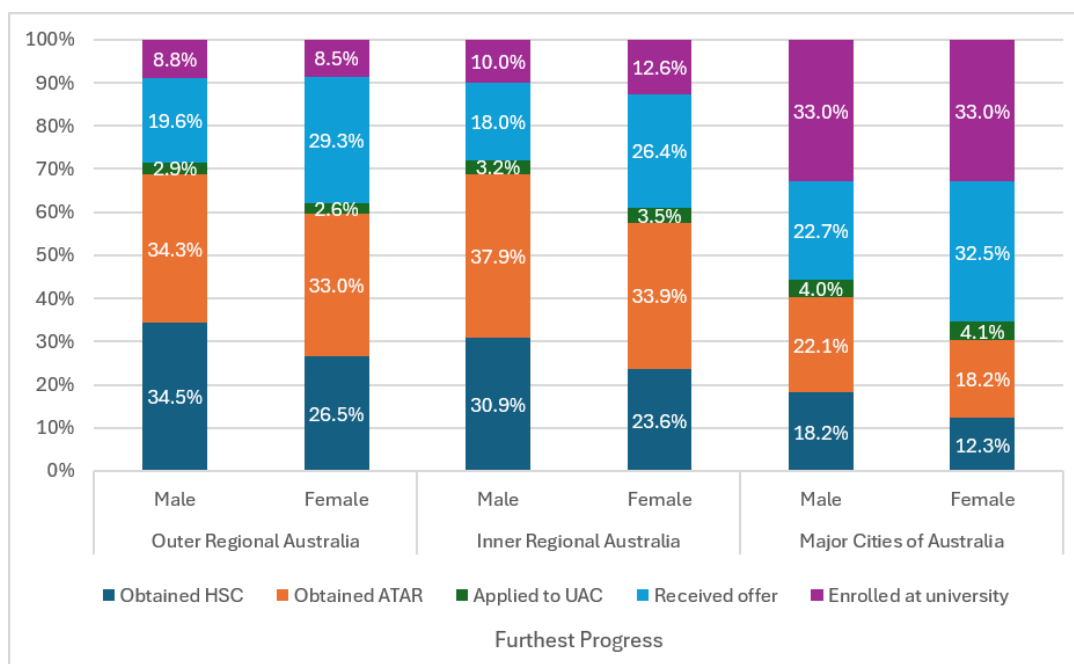


Figure 6 – Educational progress by regionality, percentage

The highest percentage of enrolments, offer receipts and applications to UAC are from students in the major cities. In percentage terms, the largest group of students who obtained only the HSC are those from outer regional areas.

With regards to gender, a higher percentage of females received offers from UAC, while a higher percentage of males only obtained the HSC. This pattern is consistent regardless of regionality.

Progression by Indigenous status

Figure 7 shows the educational progress of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous applicants.

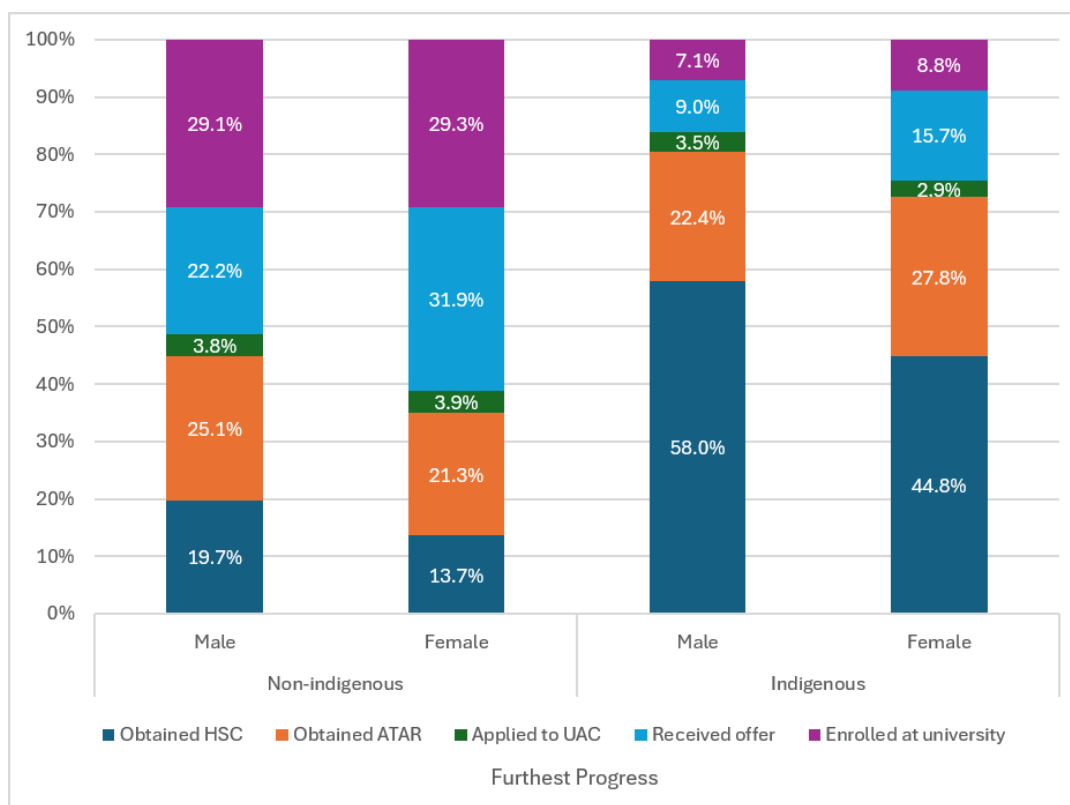


Figure 7 – Educational progress by indigenous status

Looking purely at Indigenous against non-Indigenous applicants, it is shown in Figure 7 that a much greater rate of non-Indigenous students enrolled at university and applied to UAC. A much larger percentage of Indigenous students only obtained their HSC.

When looking at the gender, a slightly higher rate of females enrolled at university, both for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. A higher rate of females received offers, both for Indigenous and non-Indigenous applicants. A higher rate of males progressed no further than the HSC. For Indigenous students, this gender difference is particularly large, with 58% of male Indigenous students receiving only the HSC (compared to 45% of female Indigenous students).

First year outcomes at university

Figure 8 shows the first-year outcomes at university by ATAR, gender as well as Index of Education and Occupation (IEO) quartile. This analysis is based on the 2023 ATAR cohort who completed first year at university in 2024.

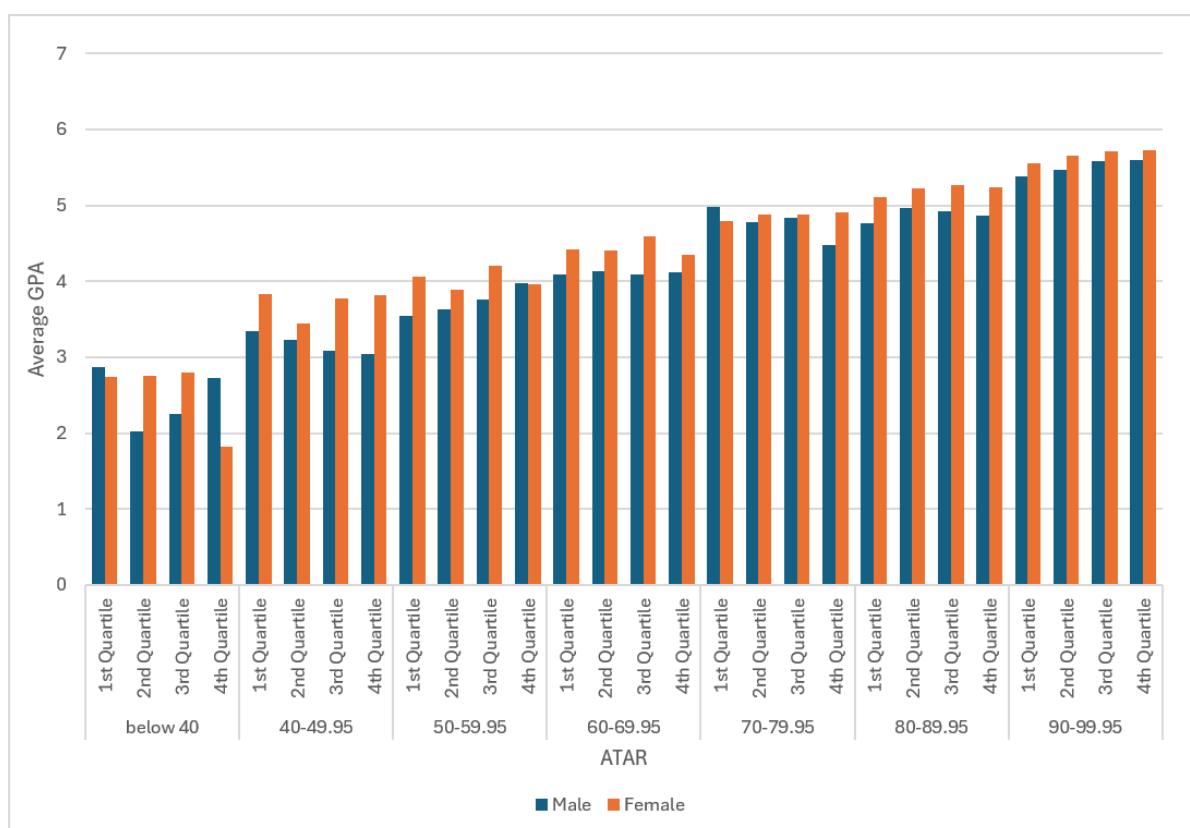


Figure 8 – First-year outcomes by ATAR, gender and IEO quartile

It can be seen in Figure 8 that on average, students with a higher ATAR achieved higher first-year GPA than students with lower ATARs. Indeed, there is a gradual increment in average first-year GPA as ATAR increases.

In general, given the same ATAR, females tended to achieve higher average first-year GPA than males.

At the highest ATAR range (90-99.95), high SES appears to be associated with stronger first-year university performance. However, this effect diminishes at lower ATAR ranges and, in some cases, reverses, with students from the lowest SES quartile outperforming their higher SES counterparts.

Conclusion

In general, females apply to UAC, receive an offer and enrol at university in higher numbers than their male counterparts. This is irrespective of SES or Indigenous status or regionality. The exception is in the 4th SES quartile where more males than females enrol at university.

More males feature with very high ATAR (>98) than females. However, more females obtain ATAR results in almost every category between 45 and 98 and possess a higher median ATAR.

For students who receive a similar ATAR, female students generally achieve a higher first year GPA than male students.

More students from the 4th (i.e. highest) IEO quartile enrol at university or receive an offer than any other quartile.

The numbers of students applying to UAC, receiving an offer and enrolling at university are highest in the major cities and generally decline in more regional and remote areas.

Non-Indigenous applicants enrol at university and receive an offer at much higher levels than Indigenous applicants. There is a significant difference between male and female Indigenous students receiving only the HSC, namely 58% of male Indigenous students and 44.8% of female Indigenous students.

UAC hopes this information is of use to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education. We thank the committee for the opportunity to put forward this submission. We are happy for this submission to be credited to the Universities Admissions Centre (NSW & ACT) Pty Ltd (UAC).