

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

UAC



NSW CURRICULUM REVIEW

Response to Interim Report

December 2019

ABOUT UAC

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 support lifelong learning and promote equity of access to education. Central to that mission is a strong culture of service to students and the community.

UAC has a trusted and valued position in the education sector. Applicants, especially Year 12 students, turn to UAC for authoritative information and advice about the ATAR, unbiased information about university admissions and courses and for an easy interface with which to apply. Institutions rely upon UAC services that allow them to focus on their core capabilities of learning and teaching, research and student and community engagement. Parents, schools, the media and the public know UAC as their first point of reference for university admissions.

OUR RESPONSE

UAC welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the NSW Curriculum Review Interim Report, *Nurturing wonder and igniting passion: Designs for a future school curriculum*.

In particular, we are keen to provide feedback about Reform Direction 15: Reviewing ATAR.

1. ATAR: BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS

The ATAR plays an important role in the transition from secondary to higher education by providing students and institutions with an effective measure of overall academic capability at the end of Year 12.

Recent reports from UAC and others have again highlighted the effectiveness of the ATAR and the additional benefits it brings in terms of equity and efficiency. While universities outside Australia manage their selection processes without using an ATAR, those countries also use more time-consuming and costly methods such as interviews and scholastic ability tests as part of their admissions process.

The UAC ATAR reports can be found at:

<https://www.uac.edu.au/assets/documents/submissions/nsw-curriculum-review-response.pdf>

<https://www.uac.edu.au/assets/documents/submissions/uac-effectiveness-limitations-atar-report.pdf>

These reports also acknowledge that the ATAR has its limitations, and it's important that it is one part only in a more complete and nuanced admission landscape.

There are indeed pressure points in the system as a whole and negative unintended consequences of the ATAR. These are somewhat inevitable given the perceived high stakes associated with the immediate transition from Year 12.

2. UNIVERSITY SELECTION PROCESS

As noted in the Interim Report, university offers are made on the basis of an applicant's selection rank. For HSC students this is usually their ATAR and other criteria as shown broadly in Figure 8 of the Interim Report.

However, Figure 8 omits some important steps in the calculation of the ATAR. It is not just the sum of the scaled subject marks.

From the scaled marks an aggregate of the best 10 units is calculated, which must include at least 2 units of English. (This step is relevant to the discussion of potentially weighting desirable subjects, discussed below.)

That aggregate is then converted into a percentile rank that shows your position relative to the students who started Year 7 with you (regardless of whether they completed Year 12). This is important because it is used Australia-wide and is comparable across jurisdictions. Without that step the scaled marks are not comparable across Australia and while they may be able to be input into the UAC system to generate the required selection ranks, the process would fail for interstate applications unless a schedule similar to the one that has been used for Qld OPs were developed, which would mean HSC students applying interstate would know their ATAR, while others would not.

In addition, while the ATAR is but one potential input into the overall selection rank, it is more than just "an intermediate step in the calculation of the rank that determines whether a student will be offered a place in a university course" (Interim Report, page 100).

The ATAR retains its currency for the student beyond entry into university immediately after completion of Year 12. In other words, it is a stand-alone qualification regardless of its inclusion in a UAC selection rank at a point in time.

3. THE SUGGESTION TO NOT CALCULATE AND REPORT ATARS, BUT REPORT INDIVIDUAL COURSE SELECTION RANKS INSTEAD

We understand that this suggestion has the benefit of removing the focus on the ATAR as a single measure of achievement, which is welcome. However, there are problems beyond the obvious one highlighted in the Report of the potential for the Selection Ranks to become default ATARs.

If students have transparency of their Selection Ranks and adjustments for particular courses (as they should), they'll be able to reverse engineer their ATARs anyway, and we suspect that it what they will do. The major difference is that there will be less transparency than would be the case were ATAR made available (as is the case currently).

Other suggested benefits of this proposal could or already occur under the present system. Universities can and do implement prerequisites now, and when it happens it positively influences student behaviour. For example, there has been a growth in the number of HSC students taking Mathematics since the University of Sydney implemented Mathematics prerequisites for many of its courses. Weighting some HSC subjects more highly than others occurs now through the use of subject adjustments, and is inherent in the ATAR itself in that a student's areas of strength are reflected in the subjects that student has chosen. Universities also have access to data on the standards achieved by students in each of their HSC subjects to make appropriate determinations about their strengths.

The inclusion of more HSC courses in the university admission process can also occur now; what is lacking in the courses not currently included is sufficient academic rigour to be considered appropriate preparation for university study.

Finally, and as highlighted above, there is the problem of NSW university admissions being run differently to that interstate. While that situation has existed with Queensland for many years, the solution has been to provide transparency to those students about how their OP translates into an ATAR equivalent. For example, a student with an OP of 15 has an ATAR equivalent of 65.00. Under this proposal, HSC students applying interstate would require similar transparency and would effectively know their ATAR. There is also the problem of use of the ATAR in university admissions well beyond the immediate transition from Year 12.

4. THE SUGGESTION TO NOT CALCULATE AND REPORT ATARS OR SELECTION RANKS, BUT USE PLACE/QUOTA INFORMATION INSTEAD

While we agree with the intent to avoid the Selection Rank becoming a default ATAR, this suggestion has serious flaws. Places in most courses are not determined by quotas but by minimum selection ranks.

A student's position in the "queue" for a certain course can only ever be judged at a point in time because it depends on the preferences of other students. How would an applicant know how other applicants will behave? If you are 6th in line for a course that has 20 places but then more applicants add that preference that are more qualified than you, your position changes.

This is potentially a very confusing and opaque system for students.

5. ALTERNATIVE WAYS FORWARD

There is no doubt that university admission processes are adapting to broader social changes and reflecting a community desire for the consideration of the whole student. While current processes adequately consider both the academic profile and the social and economic circumstances of the student, over time there will be further development of the assessment of soft skills and other student attributes. These changes have already reduced the reliance on the ATAR, and that will continue. Indeed, UAC is currently working with key stakeholders nationally to better support lifelong learning and improve access to education and other pathways after school.

In the meantime, rather than eliminating the ATAR, a better approach may well be for UAC, schools, universities and other stakeholders to continue to educate students and the public about the benefits of the ATAR. We can also do a better job of explaining how the university entrance system works and the role of the ATAR in that system. Universities can also continue to influence student behaviour with appropriate use of prerequisites to allow better choices for Year 12 and ultimately better matching of students to university courses.

Additionally, improvements in the status of VET, and a better understanding and appreciation of all the pathways available to students after school will also lessen the importance of the ATAR in the education landscape. We note that other recent and current reviews are addressing this issue from various perspectives.

UAC thanks the NSW Curriculum Review for the opportunity to provide this response to the Interim Report and would welcome further discussion in person. We look forward to further collaboration with the Review and with the education sector more broadly to improve the transition of Year 12 students into tertiary education.