Australian Government

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency

TEQSA

Advice on Admissions Transparency

February 2018

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Admissions transparency means that prospective domestic undergraduate students can easily find good quality admissions information that allows them to compare courses and providers and make informed study choices. In October 2016 the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) made recommendations to achieve greater transparency in higher education admissions. A sector-led working group, the Admissions Transparency Implementation Working Group (IWG) was established to develop a practical response to the HESP's report. To implement admissions transparency providers should follow the joint higher education sector and Australian Government implementation plan and the updated common terminology and admission information sets (hereafter, referred to as 'the updated specification') available from the IWG's website by May 2018.

Following the first phase of implementation of the Admissions Transparency Project, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) conducted a formative evaluation by surveying all provider websites. Recognising that full implementation was not required in the first phase, we observed a number of things that might prevent prospective domestic undergraduate students from easily finding the information they need to make a decision about applying for a course. The following advice is informed by findings from our formative evaluation of the implementation of the Admissions Transparency Project and feedback from the IWG, providers, tertiary admission centres, students and peak bodies.

Accessibility

Admissions information is considered transparent if a prospective student can easily find the information they need to make a decision to apply for a course.

> The location of admissions information should be obvious from the provider's homepage.

> Suitable headings for admissions information could be 'future students', 'admissions information', 'apply', 'how to apply' or 'study'. Avoid headings such as 'admissions transparency', 'TEQSA information', 'TEQSA admissions' or 'information sets'.

> Remove any obstacles to easy access, such as the need to register and provide contact details before access is made available. Clear links should be provided from the homepage to admissions information that is presented in websites that have different styles, domains, or providers.

> Consider providing an email address for prospective students to ask questions about admission, and ensure the location of student administration offices within the campus is explained.

> Consider facilitating access to information about admission requirements by providing a search function, a site map or a course finder facility.

> Consider user experience when designing your website and ask students from different academic backgrounds if they were able to find the admissions information they wanted. Consolidate similar information on one page rather than spreading it across a number of pages. Reduce the number of pages a prospective student needs to access to get the information they want.

> Consider providing a link to the Open Day page available all year round so that prospective students know what date it will be. If appropriate, include information about other ways in which prospective students can get to know the provider and the courses they offer, through information nights, virtual tours, campus tours, 'student for a day' sessions or maps for self-guided tours.

> Ensure that information about whole-of-institution admissions is located at a higher level, or on a separate page, to course-specific admissions information. Where necessary, links from course-specific admissions information to whole-of-institution admissions information should be provided.

> If a link to the relevant Tertiary Admission Centre (TAC) is used in relation to the provider, it should be a link directly to the provider's page on the TAC (not the TAC homepage).

> Ensure that all information relevant to prospective students is accessible to the public and not in course information for current students. This should include information about:

  • course and unit details (often provided in handbooks)
  • important dates (including closing dates for applications)
  • appeals and grievances procedures
  • deferral
  • fees and charges
  • student services that may support a prospective student to study (for example, access to childcare, disability support, student grants, scholarships, links to study allowance).

> Accessibility is also about supporting prospective students from different academic backgrounds who have different needs. Consider providing tailored products for prospective students who would be the first in their family to undertake higher education, Indigenous people, and people with a disability, and ensure that this information is easy to find.

> Information on websites should be accessible to a wide range of people with disability. The Australian Government provides helpful Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

Consistency and comparability

Admissions information is considered transparent if it is consistent and comparable wherever the provider offers information about their courses for 2019 (including the website, brochures, handbooks, and TACs). If information is not consistent and no explanation is provided, prospective students may be confused by mixed messages or apparently minor differences. This can occur both within and across providers. Prospective students should be able to find admissions information that uses the same terms and covers the same types of information across all providers, as described in the updated specification.

> Information for prospective students should be grouped for presentation to students from different academic backgrounds as per the updated specification:

  • Group A   Higher Education Study
  • Group B   Vocational Education and Training Study
  • Group C   Work and Life Experience
  • Group D   Recent Secondary Education (within the past two years).

> Consider publishing the public glossary that is included in the updated specification and adding any technical or other terms that might be institution or course specific.

> When updating admissions information, ensure all 'terms to be avoided' have been removed. This can be done by finding and replacing any instances of '**forced offers**', '**bonus points**', 'Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) **cut-off**' and '**Clearly-in** ATAR'. [1]

> If adopting the new common terms or information sets is challenging, contact the TEQSA Admissions Transparency Team for advice.

> Avoid using acronyms and jargon. Consider testing readability by asking some secondary school students to read the website or publications and identify terms they do not understand.

> Avoid changing the order of data in the student and ATAR profiles so that this data is easily compared across providers. The student and ATAR profiles provided in the updated specification are strict templates.

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1   In this document, ATAR means 'ATAR or Overall Position in Queensland'.

Data presentation and quality

Implementation of admissions transparency includes the presentation of a whole-of-institution student profile and course-specific student and ATAR profile tables. Prospective students rely on these data to guide them in their decision-making so accuracy and timeliness are important.

> Staff with responsibility for extracting these data are encouraged to record the process (step by step, how they did it) so that the data is extracted in the same way in successive years, and is therefore comparable.

> Ensure a reference period is noted at the top of the table. Use the most recent data available and ensure information is checked for currency each year.

> Check that the sub-totals presented in the student profiles add up to the total and the proportions add up to 100 per cent.

> Ensure that the course ATAR profile matches the course admission information. For example, if the course requires all applicants to attend an interview, ensure that the course ATAR profile shows the number of students selected on the basis of ATAR alone is zero or update the admission information.

> Ensure recent secondary education (within the past two years) is disaggregated into the three sub-categories (solely on the basis of ATAR, on the basis of ATAR plus additional criteria, and ATAR was not a factor). Ensure that any recent secondary student selected on the basis of special consideration is included in the 'ATAR was *not* a factor' category of the student profile.

> Follow the instructions for masking data to maintain privacy and prevent derivation as provided in the updated specification. Importantly, if suppression is required, suppress the cell with the smallest value (that is greater than five), and avoid suppressing the total wherever possible.

> If the student profile includes students in the solely ATAR or ATAR plus additional criteria box, an ATAR profile is required.

> The ATAR profile includes a column for the highest, lowest and median unadjusted ATAR and a column for the highest, lowest and median selection rank of applicants who were offered a place in the course. A selection rank includes the impact of any equity, subject or other adjustment factors. For each course, providers are required to present the ATAR column but providing the selection rank column is optional. Do not include adjusted ATARs in the ATAR column.

> Providing a 'Minimum ATAR/Selection Rank required for consideration' or a 'Guaranteed Entry ATAR/Selection Rank' is only necessary if your institution or the course has adopted this approach. However, if applicants are assessed based on minimum or guaranteed ranks these must be published. If a Guaranteed Entry ATAR/Selection Rank changes before the application closing date, it should be updated.

> Ensure that staff who provide enrolment advice to prospective students understand how an ATAR is calculated, the difference between an ATAR and a selection rank, and how the selection rank is devised. This should also be explained on the website and in publications. If the provider or the TAC adjusts the ranking of applicants in ways that are different from other providers or TACs, this should be explained by both the TAC and the provider.

How applicants are assessed

Admissions information should assist students to realistically appraise their prospects for success in applying for admission to a course. If the criteria on which assessment is based for prospective students from different academic backgrounds are not provided, this may deter a person from applying.

> Give the prospective student an understanding of how their application will be assessed. This is particularly important for applicants who fit more than one background group and for those who are not being assessed on ATAR alone. Consider explaining:

> * the criteria upon which assessment is based

> * what types of professional or community experience and informal learning would be considered relevant

> * what expectations or guidelines the provider has in regards to a portfolio, audition or interview requirements, and the weighting of those in relation to an ATAR or selection rank

> * the weighting of study, work and life experience in your assessment and how these add value to an application

> * how an applicant who has completed a bridging or enabling course, a STAT test or other pathway program, is assessed differently from other applicants, if that is the case.

> If this information is also available on a TAC website, ensure the information available from the provider is consistent with that.

> Consider including a list of application information (for example, birth certificate, other education results), and links to the forms, that need to be provided so that prospective students can easily understand the documents that they are required to submit with their application.

> Consider indicating to prospective students that they may find information from more than one background group is useful or relevant to them.

> If the academic background groups do not reflect the basis on which students are assessed, it would be useful to explain to prospective students how they correlate with the way in which students are assessed. For example, applicants with ATARs more than three years old may want to know if they are competing for a place alongside recent school leavers, or whether they will gain entry based on their work experience. If terms such as 'school leavers', 'non-school leavers', 'adult entry' and 'mature age' are used, explain how they relate to the four background groups.

> Ensure that all the details of eligibility for adjustment factors and the maximum total adjustments possible are published. Prospective students will then be able to determine what their selection rank might be if they are eligible for adjustment factors. Consider co-locating information about the different adjustment factors available, and the programs that set aside places for particular groups (for example, Indigenous students or people with elite sporting ability). If information about an adjustment factor program is available on the TAC website, then provide a link to that page.

> Present comprehensive information about how prior study is assessed. Consider including a list of courses that are already recognised for Credit Transfer or advanced standing.

> The providers' policies and procedures about Recognition of Prior Learning, Advanced Standing and Credit Transfer should be readily available on the provider's website, including any fees payable. Ensure that this information is clearly accessible to prospective students and not just via webpages for current students.

> Avoid using alternative but similar-sounding terms (for example, credit for prior learning) that may confuse prospective students. Recognition of Prior Learning, Advanced Standing and Credit Transfer are defined in the Australian Qualifications Framework.

> Consider supporting prospective students who may not meet the assessment criteria by providing a list of admission pathways. That is, any option (and links to further information) that will enable prospective students to meet the entry requirements of their chosen course.

TEQSA's role

TEQSA is Australia's independent national quality assurance and regulatory agency for higher education. TEQSA registers higher education providers who demonstrate compliance with the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015* (the Standards). TEQSA is also a member of the IWG, which is a sector-led working group established to develop a practical response to the HESP report, *Improving the transparency of higher education admissions*.

TEQSA wants to support higher education providers to implement admissions transparency. We recognise there is a strong relationship between the intentions of the Standards and the admissions transparency requirements. If a provider fully implements admissions transparency (as per the IWG's guidance) they will be compliant with the admissions transparency elements of the Standards. The Standards that relate to admissions transparency are set out in the Appendix below. Our Admissions Transparency Team will work directly with providers to help them fully implement admissions transparency. We will also engage with stakeholders via webinars and capital city forums.

TEQSA will monitor and report to the community and the government on the implementation of admissions transparency. We will also support providers by offering examples of good practice in admissions transparency and are keen to receive suggestions of good practice and we would particularly like to help providers who face challenges in implementing admissions transparency.

Where can I find more information?

Email: admissions@teqsa.gov.au   Tel: 03 8306 2463   Web: teqsa.gov.au/admissions-transparency

Appendix

The relevant standards in the Higher Education Standards Framework

The Standards that are directly concerned with admissions transparency are in four domains of Part A of the Higher Education Standards Framework. The Standards encompass (paraphrased):

Domain 1 (Student Participation and Attainment)

> 1.1.1 the documentation of admissions policies and procedures
> 1.1.2 students are informed of their rights and obligations
> 1.1.3 conditions of study and contractual arrangements relating to admissions
> 1.2.1 assessment of prior learning
> 1.5.7b records of credit granted by recognition of prior learning

Domain 2 (Learning Environment)

> 2.2.2 recruitment and admission of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
> 2.3.1 and 2.3.2 procedures and support services available to students with adverse personal circumstances
> 2.3.3 the needs of students with mental health, disability and wellbeing needs
> 2.4.1 mechanisms for reporting grievances

Domain 5 (Institutional Quality Assurance)

> 5.3.7 course evaluation and improvement informing admission criteria

Domain 7 (Representation, Information and Information Management)

> 7.1.1—7.1.5 responsible (i.e. neither false or misleading) representation of study offerings
> 7.2.1 information for students is available and accessible, accurate, relevant and timely
> 7.2.2 plain English information is available prior to acceptance of an offer.