Improving the transparency of higher education admissions

August 2020

TEQSA

Contents

Executive summary

In 2016, following a request from the Minister for Education and Training, the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP, 'the Panel') delivered 14 recommendations to achieve greater transparency in the admissions information for higher education. The _Final Admissions Transparency Implementation Plan_ ('IWG Implementation Plan'), which was developed by the sector-led Implementation Working Group (IWG), states that by March 2020, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) would undertake a review of the sector's responses to the Panel's recommendations.

This report presents TEQSA's summative evaluation of the sector's responses against the Panel's recommendations and the IWG's _Phase Two Common Terminology and Information Sets_ ('Phase Two Information Sets'). TEQSA's evaluation focussed on the requirements and activities outlined in the IWG's documents that are relevant to the agency and did not explore outcomes beyond this scope in detail. In undertaking its evaluation, TEQSA adopted a stratified sampling method comprising an evaluation of 64 of the 111 providers that deliver higher education to domestic undergraduate students (28 universities, 36 higher education providers).

Overall, TEQSA found that there have been improvements in the transparency of admissions information, with the majority of sampled providers (**92 per cent**; **59** out of 64 providers) being found to have engaged with the Panel's recommendations by implementing changes to their admissions information[1].

- **Five** providers had achieved a high level of transparency of their admissions information, with only minor issues preventing full implementation of the IWG's specifications.

- **42** providers had implemented most of the changes with one substantial gap. These include outdated student profiles, missing Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) tables, and incorrect usage of the applicant groups.

- **12** providers provided the requisite admissions information as a separate document on their websites. This was in line with the initial actions in the Implementation Plan due by August 2017 but should have progressed further by the time of the summative evaluation.

Five providers did not have evidence of having implemented any of the recommended changes. Two of these providers had made some effort to update their Tertiary Admission Centre's (TAC) page, noting that the Implementation Plan states it is acceptable for providers to have admissions information solely on the TAC site, provided it is clearly linked and accessible from the provider's website.

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1. The analysis presented in this section considers improvements made by providers at either the first stage or second stage of the IWG Implementation Plan.

In addition to the findings above, TEQSA identified several areas for further improvement within the sector. These include:

- Providers needing to ensure that ATAR profiles are up-to-date.

- The types of adjustment factors should be detailed more clearly and consistently.

- Greater quality, consistency, and clarity of admissions information for the four applicant groups (Higher Education Study, Vocational Education and Training, Recent Secondary Education, and Work Life Experience).

- The availability of course level admissions information on credit transfer, recognition of prior learning and advanced credit can be improved.

While the positive changes in the sector in response to the Panel's recommendations and the IWG's Implementation Plan are encouraging, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the need for clear and transparent information, with expectations of increased demand from domestic school leavers for tertiary education. Further, there is evidence of different entry options for current and prospective students emerging as providers respond to the changing needs of prospective students completing a disrupted final year of secondary education.

Background

Context

In February 2016, the Minister for Education and Training requested that the Higher Education Standards Panel ('the Panel') provide recommendations to improve the transparency, comparability, and accessibility of information about entry pathways to higher education while minimising regulatory impact on providers.

In response, the Panel released a [consultation paper](#) on the transparency of higher education admissions processes and subsequently received [82 written submissions](#). Through the consultation process, the Panel found a diversity of application pathways and admissions processes in Australia's higher education sector, further increasing the complexities for prospective students as they navigate the admissions and application processes into higher education.

In November 2016, the Panel released its final report, _Improving the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions_ ('final report'), which set out 14 recommendations. The final report highlighted inconsistencies in the ways in which admission requirements were expressed and the need for coordinated action. The Panel's key recommendations include the use of common and consistent language to describe ATAR thresholds and other admissions requirements, and the presentation of information on admissions processes using agreed and standardised templates to ensure comparability for prospective students. In response to the Panel's report, the government accepted the Panel's recommendations.

TEQSA was asked to undertake a review of the sector's responses to the Panel's recommendations.

Admissions Transparency Implementation Plan

A sector-led group, the Admissions Transparency Implementation Working Group (IWG), was established to develop a practical response to the Panel's recommendations. The IWG released the Implementation Plan, which sets out specific actions for higher education providers ('providers'), TACs, the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (the Department), and TEQSA to undertake across three stages from 2017 to 2020.

By adopting a staged approach, this ensured that any transitional arrangements and adjustments would be manageable for providers and prospective students. The Implementation Plan sets out six objectives:

1. Standardised presentation of admissions information

2. Adoption of common admissions terminology

3. Revised ATAR-related thresholds and definitions

4. Tertiary Admission Centres adopt more consistent approaches and reporting and streamline interstate application processes

5. TEQSA monitoring and guidance on admissions transparency

6. New national admissions information platform.

In order to achieve these objectives, the IWG proposed the adoption of agreed information sets on admissions-related information as a key mechanism that sets out the consistent formats and terminology. These are not mandatory and the information sets were designed in a manner to enable appropriate adaptation to suit each provider's individual needs.

- **Whole-of-institution admission information set**[2]: conveys common admission policies and requirements that apply to all (or the vast majority of) courses offered by the provider.

- **Program/course admission information set**: sets out admission criteria for each course and is different from the whole-of-institution set, including a small amount of comparable data about recent offers and enrolments in the course.
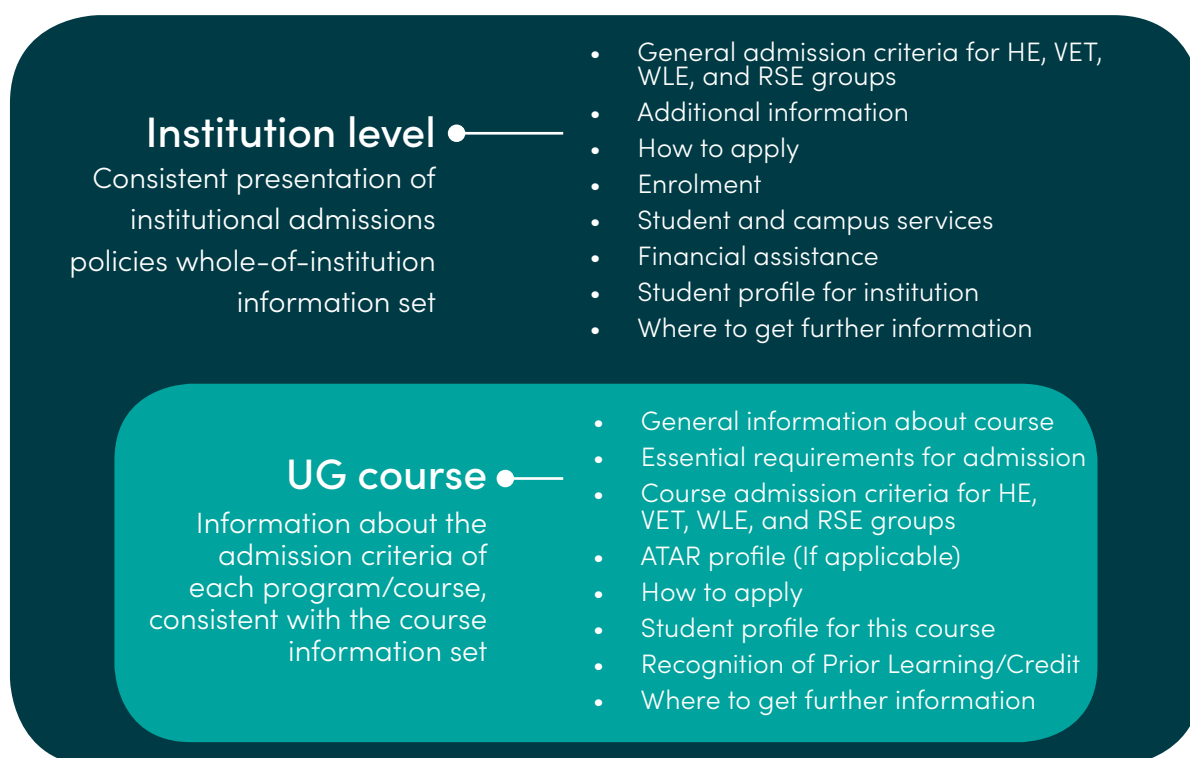
The information sets were designed to support prospective domestic undergraduate students in Australia, including applicants for diploma, advanced diploma, associate degree and bachelor's degree courses.

In July 2018, the IWG released an updated specification document, _Phase Two Common Terminology and Information Sets_ ('Phase Two Information Sets'), for adoption by the end of May 2018. This document sets out the template and types of admissions information that all providers are expected to display on their publications, websites, or the relevant TACs for both the institution and course levels. These requirements are summarised at Figure 1.

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2. For the purposes of brevity, 'whole-of-institution' will henceforth be referred to as 'provider level' or 'institution level'.

Institution level

Consistent presentation of institutional admissions policies whole-of-institution information set

- General admission criteria for HE, VET, WLE, and RSE groups
- Additional information
- How to apply
- Enrolment
- Student and campus services
- Financial assistance
- Student profile for institution
- Where to get further information

UG course

Information about the admission criteria of each program/course, consistent with the course information set

- General information about course
- Essential requirements for admission
- Course admission criteria for HE, VET, WLE, and RSE groups
- ATAR profile (If applicable)
- How to apply
- Student profile for this course
- Recognition of Prior Learning/Credit
- Where to get further information

The two central elements of the information sets are the ATAR tables for courses that use ATAR as an admissions criterion, and student profiles at both the institution and course levels. Providers also need to categorise their admissions information into four background groups that would assist potential applicants to locate the types of information most relevant to their circumstances and past educational experience—Recent Secondary Education (RSE), Higher Education Study (HE), Vocational Education and Training (VET) Study, and Work Life Experience (WLE).

- **Recent Secondary Education (RSE)**: Applicants whose admission is based mostly on secondary education undertaken at school, technical and further education (TAFE) or other VET or higher education provider (Australian or overseas equivalent) within the previous two years.

- **Higher Education Study (HE)**: Applicants whose highest level of study enrolment since leaving secondary education is a higher education course.

- **Vocational Education and Training (VET) Study**: Applicants whose highest level of study enrolment since leaving secondary education is a VET course.

- **Work Life Experience (WLE)**: Applicants who left secondary education more than two years previously and have not undertaken VET or higher education study since then.

In accordance with the fifth objective of the IWG Implementation Plan, TEQSA carried out a summative evaluation of the sector's implementation of admissions transparency from

September 2019 to December 2019. At this point, it was expected that providers would have fully adopted and integrated the requirements of the Implementation Plan, including those set out in the Phase Two Information Sets.

This report presents TEQSA's summative evaluation of the sector's responses against eight of the Panel's recommendations which are grouped into two themes:

1. Accessibility and transparency of admissions information

2. Comparability of admissions information.

TEQSA's evaluation focussed on the requirements and activities outlined in the IWG documents that are relevant to the agency and did not explore outcomes beyond this scope.

Summary of TEQSA's findings against the Panel's recommendations

Key Theme 1: Accessibility and transparency of admissions information

Admission criteria that is accessible, clear, and transparent allows prospective students to make informed choices regarding their higher education studies. Within the context of this report, 'transparency' and 'accessibility' specifically pertain to the following Panel recommendations:

Panel Recommendations

Panel Recommendation 1.1

A student-centred approach is critical to the provision of information about admissions.

Panel Recommendation 1.3

Access to clear information relating to admissions requirements and various entry pathways are to be made available to all applicants equally.

Panel Recommendation 4

For each course, the provider should publish information that clearly identifies the basis for determining admission to the course, including whether admission is on the basis of ATAR or an alternative pathway.

Panel Recommendation 5

Where admission to a course is determined in whole or part on the basis of an individual's ATAR, the provider should publish information that identifies clearly the minimum ATAR admission requirements for the course and the provider's bonus point arrangements. ATAR acceptance outcomes or thresholds should be reported at the completion of all offer rounds.

TEQSA's findings

Student-centred approach (Panel Recommendation 1.1)

TEQSA found strong evidence within the sector of a student-centred approach to the provision of admissions information. At an institution level, 78 per cent of the 64 sampled providers had a direct link to an admissions landing page on the homepage of their website. This was recommended by the IWG as a means to ensure prospective students can locate the required information in a direct and intuitive manner. Further, 80 per cent of sampled providers had an accessible student profile at the institution level.

Notwithstanding, there were a few areas identified for further improvement. These include:

- Recognition of the admissions information needs of students with prior study experience (Higher Education or Vocational Education and Training) at the course level. This could be addressed through clear admissions information being made available by providers regarding advanced standing (34 per cent of sampled providers included detail on this), credit transfer (52 per cent of sampled providers had detail on this), and recognition of prior learning (50 per cent of sampled providers included information on this).

- Ensuring that admissions information is included on provider webpages rather than through attached documents (20 per cent of sampled providers relied on the use of standalone PDF documents).

Entry pathways (Panel Recommendations 1.3 and 4)

TEQSA evaluated the availability of admissions information across four student background groups: recent secondary education (RSE), prior higher education study (HE), prior vocational education and training (VET) study, and work and life experience (WLE).

- Overall, TEQSA found that 84 per cent of sampled providers and 75 per cent of sampled courses had admissions information for prospective students in the RSE group. This group had the highest level of admissions information compared to other student background groups.

- At an institution level, the majority of sampled providers included admissions information for students in the prior higher education study (80 per cent), prior VET study (81 per cent) and work and life experience (67 per cent) categories.

TEQSA found that there is scope for improvement within the sector to provide admissions information at the course level in the prior HE study, prior VET study, and WLE student background groups at a course level. In each of these categories, the proportion of sampled courses with admissions information were 62 per cent, 56 per cent and 61 per cent, respectively.

ATAR information (Panel Recommendation 5)

In terms of publishing information on admissions pathways, minimum ATAR requirements and adjustment factors,, 57 per cent of courses that used ATAR scores as the basis for admission, used the ATAR template provided by the IWG. This template sets out information on the highest, median and lowest scores for students admitted in a previous intake. TEQSA found instances where intake information was outdated (this applied to

approximately a third of sampled providers), and encourages the sector to ensure the currency of their ATAR and student profile information.

TEQSA identified considerable room for improvement by the sector in setting out ATAR adjustment factors, with this detail only being available in the published course information for 6 per cent of sampled courses.

Key Theme 2: Comparability of admissions information

One of the key intended outputs of the admissions transparency project was to have admissions information that is comparable across providers and courses. The following Panel recommendations relate specifically to the theme of comparability:

Panel Recommendations

Panel Recommendation 2.1

Make information on admissions policies available in a comparable format so that individuals can make better informed choices about providers and courses of study.

Panel Recommendation 3

Common language around admissions processes should be adopted by all higher education providers.

Panel Recommendation 8

A template should be adopted by higher education providers to publish institution level information in a standardised format about their admissions processes, which would be made available to prospective students on the national higher education admissions information platform.

Panel Recommendation 9

A template should be adopted for higher education providers to publish study area information in a standardised format about their admissions processes, which would be available to prospective students on the national higher education admissions information platform.

TEQSA's findings

The adoption of common language around admissions processes and using the IWG templates to present admissions information serve to enhance the comparability of admissions information across providers and courses. This allows prospective students and parents to make an informed choice about further study.

Templates and comparability (Panel Recommendations 2.1, 3, 8 and 9)

TEQSA found that 73 per cent of providers (47 out of 64) had attempted to meet the second stage of the IWG Implementation Plan, which requires the adoption of the full information sets and the agreed set of common terms in their admissions information[3]. Of these 47 providers:

- Five providers had achieved a high level of transparency of admissions information, with only minor issues preventing full implementation of the IWG's specifications.

- 42 providers had implemented most of the changes with one substantial gap. The gaps include outdated student profiles, missing ATAR tables, and incorrect usage of the applicant groups.

The remaining 12 providers only provided the requisite admissions information as a separate document on their websites. While this was in line with the first stage of the Implementation Plan (due by August 2017), the providers had not proceeded to make updates consistent with the second stage of the IWG Implementation Plan by two years later.

TEQSA found that five providers did not have evidence of having implemented any of the IWG's recommended changes, however two of these providers had made some effort to update their respective TAC page. The Implementation Plan states that it is acceptable for providers to have admissions information solely on the relevant TAC site, provided it is clearly linked and accessible from the provider's website.

Noting that the analysis above is at an institution level, there is much work still to be done by providers to ensure that their course level admissions information is standardised and consistent. TEQSA encourages providers to continuously review their admissions information to ensure it is up-to-date and consistent.

In summary, TEQSA's recommended areas for further improvement include:

- Ensuring available course level information for various student background groups.

- Providing clear course level admissions information on credit transfer, recognition of prior learning and advanced credit.

- Ensuring the currency of ATAR profiles where applicable.

- Providing clear detail on ATAR adjustment factors.

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3. NB: This analysis is limited to a consideration of providers that implemented improvements consistent with the second stage of the IWG Implementation Plan. The analysis presented in the Executive Summary, by contrast, included improvements made by providers at either the first stage or second stage of the IWG Implementation Plan.

Summary

TEQSA has found that the majority of sampled providers have endeavoured to improve the transparency of their publicly available admissions information by engaging with the Panel's recommendations and implementing changes to their admissions information. However, TEQSA's evaluation shows that there is much further opportunity to enhance the transparency, accessibility, and comparability of admissions information at the course level.

TEQSA has identified several areas for further improvement within the sector. These include:

- The need for current ATAR profiles and ATAR information.

- The need for greater consistency in admissions information around adjustment factors (where applicable), especially at the course level.

- Greater quality, consistency and clarity of admissions information for the four applicant groups (Higher Education Study, Vocational Education and Training, Recent Secondary Education, and Work Life Experience).

- Greater accessibility and transparency of course level admissions information on credit transfer, recognition of prior learning, and advanced credit.

Appendix A: Summative Evaluation Assessment Methodology

Scope of assessment

The Higher Education Standards Panel made 14 recommendations in its final report relevant to TEQSA's regulatory functions. The scope of TEQSA's summative evaluation included an assessment of providers' engagement with Recommendations 1.1, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 9 of the final report; data was specifically collected by TEQSA for the purposes of this assessment.

A further five of the 14 recommendations (1.2, 1.5, 11, 12 and 14) were not within the scope of the summative evaluation.

- **Recommendation 1.2** — Higher education providers exercise autonomy over their admissions policies, consistent with the requirements set out in the Higher Education Standards Framework.

- **Recommendation 1.5** — Higher education providers are to be held accountable for public claims against their stated admissions policies.

- **Recommendation 11** — TEQSA should have an active role in monitoring compliance with guidance to the sector on transparency in higher education admissions, complementing the regular cycle of assessing applications for provider re-registration.

- **Recommendation 12** — TEQSA should draft a Guidance Note to providers, canvassing best practice in providing clear information on admissions processes.

- **Recommendation 14** — Further consideration should be given to assessing the factors and approaches that contribute to student success, completion and attrition rates in higher education.

The above five recommendations, while not within the scope of TEQSA's summative evaluation, have been addressed by the agency through the course of separate activities.
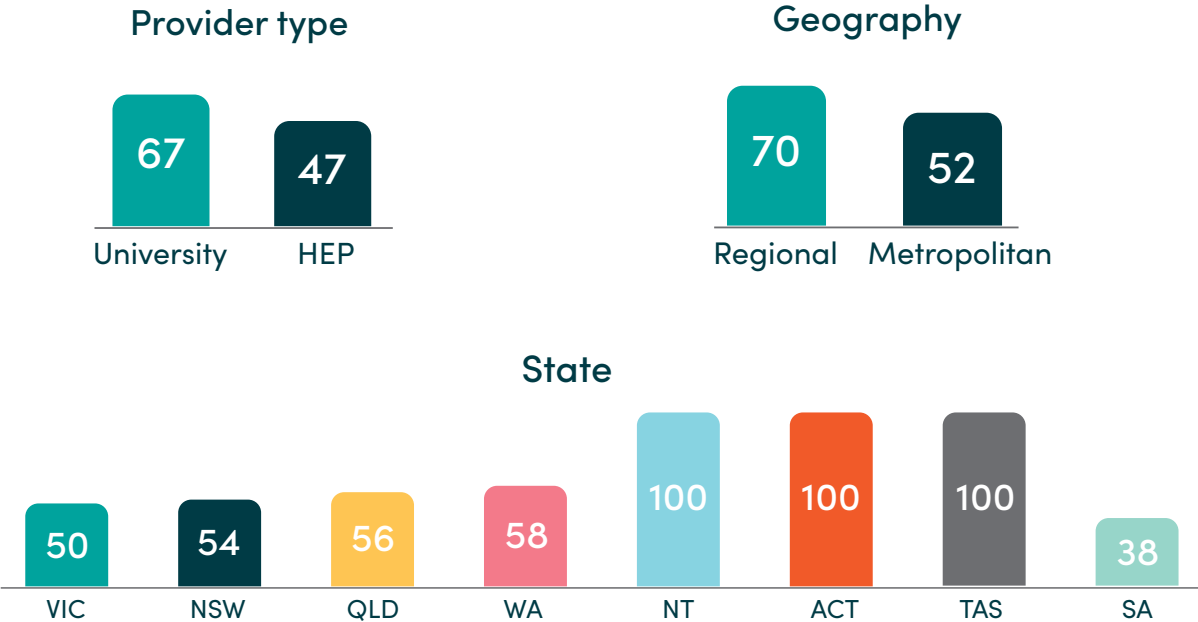
- TEQSA published a report on admissions transparency in June 2017—*Characteristics of Australian higher education providers and their relation to first-year student attrition*.

- The providers' updates on their progress of implementing the Panel's recommendations were shared by the Department with TEQSA.

- TEQSA released a Good Practice Note, *Improving retention and completion of students in Australian higher education*. The document identified innovative and effective approaches used by providers to improve retention and completion rates.

Sampling

The IWG determined that the focus of the admissions transparency project would be on prospective domestic undergraduate students, including applicants for diploma, advanced diploma, associate degree and bachelor degree courses. This meant that 119 out of 178 registered higher education providers at the time were in scope.

A stratified sample of 64 providers was selected to achieve a representative geographical spread, by ensuring providers across each state and territory's metropolitan and regional areas were included. To create a representative sample of provider types, the sample included providers with dual accreditation, university-affiliated colleges, single discipline and religious providers. This approach also ensured diversity in student demographics. As shown in Figure 1, 67 per cent of universities and 47 per cent of higher education providers in scope were included in the sample; providers across all states were included in the sample, and providers across regional and metropolitan areas were represented.

Figure 2. Percentage of in-scope providers included in the sample by provider type, geographical location, and state (%)

Provider type

67	47
University	HEP

Geography

70	52
Regional	Metropolitan

State

50	54	56	58	100	100	100	38
VIC	NSW	QLD	WA	NT	ACT	TAS	SA

The evaluation also included admissions information presented at course level. Of the 114 courses evaluated, 20 were diploma courses, two associate degrees and 92 bachelor degrees. The courses selected spanned liberal arts, humanities, fine arts, science, law, business, languages, information technology, music, education, theology, medicine, hospitality, accounting and more. To ensure a representative sample of courses, a variety of admissions options such as auditions, folios, interviews, minimum ATARs and subject prerequisites and combinations of these were selected.

Data gathering

The Panel's recommendations and the Phase Two Information Sets formed the framework for TEQSA's summative assessment. In terms of the four applicant background groups described by the IWG (RSE, HE, VET, WLE), TEQSA has conducted its evaluation on an assumption that providers should include entry information relating to all four groups. TEQSA recognises that this may not reflect the practices of providers for all courses. TEQSA conducted desktop evaluations of provider websites and TAC sites (as necessary); for each provider, institution level information and two selected courses were assessed against the relevant IWG recommendations and the IWG's Implementation Plan. If providers offered fewer than five undergraduate courses, only one course was assessed. The resulting data was entered into a purpose-built section of TEQSA's database to maintain quality and consistency of data collection and evaluation. Data collection commenced on Monday 2 September 2019 and concluded on Tuesday 24 December 2019. An additional 24 assessments were performed during January 2020 of providers who had implemented changes as a result of their initial evaluation.

At the institution level, 130 data points were collected, while 104 data points were collected at each individual course level. The qualitative data analysis includes hyperlinks, assessment comments and screenshot documentation.

TEQSA