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# ACTAC SUBMISSION TO NATIONAL UNIVERSITIES ADMISSIONS FRAMEWORK CONSULTATION

AUSTRALASIAN CONFERENCE OF TERTIARY ADMISSIONS CENTRES (ACTAC)

## ACTAC: Coordinating admissions nationwide

The Australasian Conference of Tertiary Admissions Centres (ACTAC) comprises all Australian tertiary admissions centres: QTAC, SATAC, TISC, UAC, VTAC, and the University of Tasmania. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority is also a participant in ACTAC processes.

ACTAC facilitates coordination and sharing of practice between tertiary admissions centres to benefit learners and providers and assist interstate student mobility. ACTAC welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on early offers and admissions practices as part of the National Universities Admissions Framework consultation.

## Early offers benefit students, schools and universities

“Early offers” or “at-school offers”, made to students prior to the final release of their senior secondary results, provide a range of benefits to students, schools and universities.

For students, early offers create **opportunities to engage with and explore tertiary study options much earlier** than traditional application timelines allow. This early engagement gives students additional time to consider the practical aspects of their future studies, such as arranging accommodation, planning for transport needs, and managing other lifestyle adjustments that may come with a new study environment. This is particularly beneficial for students from rural and regional areas, who often face the challenge of relocating and need ample time to plan their transition.

Importantly, early offers can provide a **sense of security** during a typically stressful period. Research supports these benefits, indicating that early offers can reduce the stress and anxiety associated with Year 12 exams without reducing students' motivation.<sup>1</sup> Early offers are also popular with students, with UAC's 2025 lifestyle survey finding that 84% of surveyed students used early offer schemes<sup>2</sup>.

Early offers can also play a pivotal role in **promoting equity**, with initiatives like the UNSW Gateway program demonstrating how these offers can widen tertiary participation from underrepresented groups, including students from low-SES backgrounds, by explicitly

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<sup>1</sup> Patfield, S. *Understanding the equity implications of university early entry schemes: final report*. University of Newcastle; 2024. Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/1496055>

<sup>2</sup> Unpublished Universities Admissions Centre survey; 2025.

targeting these groups and offering additional supports for senior secondary studies and the tertiary application process.

Schools also benefit from the early offer system by witnessing **improvements in student well-being**. Many schools have observed that early offers help to lessen the intense pressure that students can face during their final year of secondary education. Research in NSW suggests that students who receive early offers tend to maintain their academic effort throughout Year 12.<sup>3</sup>

For universities, early offers support **engagement with students who may otherwise lack confidence in their ability to attend higher education**. Early offers also support universities in planning resource allocation for effective course delivery, as well as student support services for students from equity cohorts.

### **Are there disadvantages of early offers?**

Where early offer schemes are numerous, complex and varied, there can be potential for student confusion or overwhelm, especially for those exploring tertiary study options at multiple institutions. Different early offer programs may have different application processes, deadlines, and outcomes. Students with less support and social capital may struggle to navigate the different early offer programs available. As the early offers landscape evolves, tertiary admissions centres are well-placed to support students in navigating this process as a trusted and impartial source of advice on tertiary study.

The availability of early offers varies, with some universities and courses not participating. This can lead to inequities in access to the benefits of early offers.

A perceived disadvantage mentioned by some stakeholders is the risk of students reducing their academic efforts after receiving an early offer, or 'devaluing' their ATAR. Research to date has not borne out this phenomenon, with results in one study showing "no indication that students 'slacken off' ... if they have applied for early entry and/or received an offer"<sup>4</sup> and another finding "a small positive effect in academic buoyancy for students who had received an early entry offer"<sup>5</sup>. This risk is also mitigated by early offers generally being conditional on completion of year 12, and the national agreement not to release early offers prior to September.

### **What motivates students to apply for early offers?**

Early offers are popular with students for both academic and practical reasons. Early offers allow students to act on their interests while exploring tertiary study options. Early offers provide additional motivation for students to undertake course research, attend open days, and engage with tertiary institutions during their secondary schooling.

In addition to academic exploration, the security of an early offer brings significant peace of mind, reducing the stress students often experience in the final years of secondary schooling. Knowing that they have secured a place at a university before final exam results are released, whether in a preferred course or as an 'insurance' option, helps alleviate the stress and uncertainty typically associated with the transition to higher education.

Practical considerations also play a crucial role in motivating students to apply for early offers. Having certainty about their study plans enables students to make informed decisions regarding accommodation, living arrangements, finances, transport, and other logistics related tertiary study. For many, especially those from rural and regional areas who may

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<sup>3</sup> Martin, A. & Tam, H. *What is the link between an early university entry offer and the academic and personal wellbeing outcomes of students in their final year of school?*; Learning and Individual Differences; 2024. 116. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2024.102571>

<sup>4</sup> Patfield, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Martin & Tam, op. cit.

need to relocate for study, an early offer is of great benefit in planning a smooth transition to university life.

### **How do students currently access information on early offers?**

Early offer information is available through a variety of channels, including university websites, guides provided by some tertiary admissions centres, and other general sources of information on tertiary study such as open days, expos, school careers advisers, and social media. Tertiary admissions centres can play a role in increasing navigability and accessibility of early offer information.

### **How can the early offer process be improved for students?**

Supporting tertiary admissions centres to run early offer schemes or provide consistent information will make the process easier to navigate for students, especially those with less access to support. Tertiary admission centres can leverage their school networks and outreach programs to expand access to the benefits of early offer programs and provide additional opportunities to students who are not currently accessing these programs.

Expanding targeted early offer schemes to include underrepresented groups such as Indigenous Australians, those from regional and rural areas, low-SES, and students with disabilities is also key in achieving the increased participation targets set in the Australian Universities Accord. Coordinated national campaigns via ACTAC could support increased take-up of early offers and tertiary study generally within these cohorts.

### **Current admissions practices: how are students supported in making informed course selections?**

Tertiary admissions centres play a key role in facilitating course exploration and comparison through our online search tools and strong engagement with the school sector. TACs ensure that students have access to reliable, unbiased, and comprehensive information about tertiary admissions, including course selection, entry requirements, and alternative pathways.

Resources provided by TACs include course exploration tools which allow applicants to search across all universities and other study options in their state, as well as planning study pathways based on year 12 study programs, ATAR estimates, career interests, and prerequisite studies. These resources, as well as strong engagement with the school sector, provide students with timely, accurate information and guidance during the crucial decision-making process.

The TAC model provides students with the opportunity to apply for multiple courses, across different tertiary institutions, in an efficient and transparent manner. The frictionless ability to add courses at different institutions via the preference model, without requiring individual applications, is a key enabler of student agency and mobility. This flexibility not only broadens students' academic options but also empowers them to make informed decisions about their future. By facilitating comparisons and encouraging exploration of diverse academic pathways, tertiary admissions centres support students in selecting courses that best match their individual strengths and aspirations.

However, student outcomes are stronger when these resources are supplemented with advice and support from schools, tertiary institutions, parents, and other sources. Research indicates that students from rural, regional, and low-SES backgrounds often receive less guidance on university admissions, making it more difficult for them to navigate their options effectively.<sup>6</sup> Tertiary admissions centres are well-placed to coordinate increased supports for

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<sup>6</sup> Stone, C., King, S., & Ronan, C. *They just give us the shiny picture, but I want to know what it's really like: Insights from regional high schools on perceptions of university outreach in South Australia*. Australian and International Journal of Rural Education; 2022.

disadvantaged cohorts where funding is provided in line with the aims of the Australian Universities Accord.

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

Tertiary admissions centres play a key role in providing transparent access to course information, including selection criteria, helping prospective students apply for courses with confidence. Course selection criteria for each course, whether ATAR-based or otherwise, are published in advance on TAC websites via course search tools, providing transparent information and application instructions to applicants. This information is further reinforced through community information events and social media outreach, ensuring students have a clear understanding of the variety of options available to them.

TAC websites include information outlining various non-ATAR entry options, such as enabling programs, VET pathways, foundation studies, university preparation programs, and the Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT). Beyond online resources, TACs actively engage with schools by offering targeted presentations, webinars, and direct communication with both students and career advisers.

### **Making admissions practices more equitable for students from low SES backgrounds, regional and remote areas, students with disability and First Nations students**

Admissions practices can be made more equitable by building on and expanding the robust equity schemes already offered through tertiary admissions centres. TACs are well positioned to support government initiatives that target specific equity groups, and further funding could enable extended reach to Accord priority groups, including students from low SES backgrounds, regional and remote areas, students with disabilities, and First Nations communities.

Many TACs currently provide a level of special consideration for eligible students through educational access schemes including EAS and SEAS. TACs are working together on a national level to explore increased national consistency and the potential to increase automated consideration for applicants from equity groups. Strengthening support at the school level is also important, particularly in areas where career advice resources are limited. Consistent messaging about university pathways can help these students navigate the complex admissions process more effectively.

Expanding financial assistance programs, such as government support to cover TAC application processing fees and other transition expenses, could remove financial barriers for low-SES applicants. A multi-pronged approach is key in addressing equity for applicants facing barriers to accessing tertiary education.

### **Other admissions considerations**

**Tertiary harmonisation:** With the Accord's strong focus on tertiary harmonisation, ACTAC recommends that this review include a focus on improving access to VET courses as well as higher education. While some TAFE institutes and other VET providers accept applications via tertiary admissions centres, not all participate, denying prospective VET students the benefits of simple, preference-based applications for their tertiary study journey.

**The ATAR remains relevant:** While alternative pathways exist, the ATAR remains a fair and transparent tool for entry to some university courses, particularly high-demand courses, with research indicating that the ATAR is a strong predictor of first-year university performance<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Manny, A., Tam, H. & Lipka, R. *The Usefulness of the ATAR as a Measure of Academic Achievement and Potential*. Universities Admissions Centre; 2019. Available at: <https://www.uac.edu.au/assets/documents/submissions/usefulness-of-the-atar-report.pdf>



The ATAR is often used in combination with other admissions criteria to select applicants with the potential for success in a particular course, and the mix of admissions tools is likely to keep evolving over coming years. Tertiary admissions centres will continue to work together to provide the consistent, transparent, and nationally-portable ATAR as a measure of academic achievement in senior secondary schooling, while also working to ensure consistency and transparency for new admissions tools.

**Data-informed policy is vital:** It is crucial that policy settings for tertiary admissions are based on evidence to support positive outcomes for students and the sector. Tertiary admissions centres are well-placed to coordinate collation and analysis of early offers and student outcomes in each state and territory.

### **Next steps**

ACTAC appreciates the opportunity to provide input into this process. As the critical link between learners and tertiary providers, tertiary admissions centres are pleased to support the research team and Australian Government with the later stages of this project. Please contact ACTAC Convenor and VTAC CEO Teresa Tjia <[CEO@vtac.edu.au](mailto:CEO@vtac.edu.au)> or ACTAC Co-Convenor and UAC Interim Managing Director Kim Paino <[kim.paino@uac.edu.au](mailto:kim.paino@uac.edu.au)> for further information and follow-up discussion.