

UNSW Submission – Developments in Higher Education Admission Practices

Introduction

UNSW Sydney welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *Discussion Paper: Developments in Higher Education Admission Practices*.

UNSW recognises there have been developments relating to the tertiary admissions system, particularly the use of ‘at-school’ offers. We want to ensure any changes to admission practices do not adversely impact the accessibility of education at UNSW.

Key Message

UNSW is committed to ensuring admission processes are transparent and equitable. We are committed to increasing the number of students from diverse backgrounds attending UNSW. In August 2022, UNSW announced our Gateway Equity target, an ambitious target to ensure 25 per cent of our commencing undergraduate domestic students come from low-SES backgrounds and/or socio-educationally disadvantaged schools by 2027.

UNSW’s targeted admissions program – the Gateway Admission Pathway – is our primary mechanism for addressing underrepresentation of students from low-SES and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds at UNSW.

This submission will respond to the Discussion Paper and provide a detailed case study on the Gateway Admission Pathway, as it provides an example of concerns regarding the ‘at-school’ admission pathway and how they can be addressed while targeting specific cohorts of future students.

Executive Summary

In summary, UNSW acknowledges that there are concerns across the sector about ‘at-school’ admission practices, as outlined in the Discussion Paper, but that there are practical, targeted measures that can be taken to ensure that ‘at-school’ offers can be administered effectively. UNSW does this through our Gateway Admission Pathway.

UNSW’s Gateway Admission Pathway conducts outreach to schools with low rates of university attendance, and makes ‘at-school’ offers, but seeks to address some of the concerns of the at-school offer system by:

- Making conditional offers, requiring the student to pass the HSC and attain an ATAR to ensure the student does not decrease efforts as a result of the offer;
- Deliberately targeting low-SES students and providing them information and targeted assistance to navigate the admission process (and support with their university experience);
- Enabling students to change their minds regarding program choices to avoid being “locked in” to their first choice course;
- Using personal statements, but not relying on them.

UNSW continues to make adjustments to this program based on evidence and feedback. We are always looking forward to improve our processes and practices to ensure our admission processes are accessible, transparent, and equitable.

UNSW notes however that ongoing programs and support are also required to ensure that students from low-SES not only enrol in university but continue, and have successful outcomes from their studies.

About UNSW Sydney

UNSW is one of the world's leading research and teaching-intensive universities, known for innovative, pioneering research and high-quality education with a global impact. Since our foundation in 1949, our aim has been to improve and transform lives through excellence in research, outstanding teaching, and a commitment to advancing a just society.

UNSW is ranked in the top 50 universities globally with more than 65,000 students and 7,000 staff. Our *2025 Strategy* commits the University to 'Academic Excellence', 'Social Impact' and 'Innovation and Engagement', ensuring that our work supports improved quality of life for people in Australia and around the world, training students to meet the needs of the workforce of tomorrow, while also supporting the exchange of knowledge with the broader community, in turn opening up new economic opportunities.

Broad Feedback on Admissions

There is strong evidence that students from under-represented backgrounds aspire to attend university, but often require assistance in navigating educational pathways and bolstering their expectations that higher education is an accessible, worthwhile and financially viable option.¹ In addition to managing expectations, the achievement of a sufficient ATAR to enter their desired course is for many students a further barrier, given the challenges often faced by students from low-SES backgrounds in achieving higher ATAR scores.² Therefore, the creation of entry pathways outside of ATAR scores has been developed to make university more accessible to under-represented cohorts in higher education. While the ATAR should remain a feature of university admissions, alternative entry pathways should also be acknowledged as appropriate and valuable, and are now operating widely.

Many universities, including UNSW, have developed outreach programs such as our *Gateway Admissions Pathway Program*, that work with secondary school students from under-represented backgrounds to build their aspirations, and then include entry pathways to university that include At-school conditional offers, as well as supporting these students to succeed once at university. Importantly, these are measures that increase the overall cohort of students from under-represented backgrounds attending university, rather than simply attracting students who might otherwise attend another university.

University-led outreach programs will remain a critical tool to overcoming entry barriers to university. However, there are opportunities for government to complement and support these efforts. For example, government could support efforts to define and identify different equity categories used to target prospective students.

¹ Bok, J. (2010) The capacity to aspire to higher education: 'It's like making them do a play without a script', *Critical Studies in Education*, 51(2), 163-178

² See for example Harvey, A., Brett, M., Cardak, B., Sheridan, A., Stratford, J., Tootell, N., McAllister, R., Spicer, R. (2016). *The adaptation of tertiary admissions practices to growth and diversity*. Retrieved from https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/51_LaTrobe_AndrewHarvey_Accessible_PDF.pdf

Response to consultation questions

Drivers

1. What outcomes, characteristic of an effective system for the transition into higher education, can be used to assess the impact of changing admission practices?

At its core, an effective system for the transition into higher education should be:

- clear and accessible for prospective students and key influencers;
- fair and transparent in the assessment and admissions processes which are applied; and
- equitable in the processes, assessment, and admissions determinations.

This is to ensure no student is adversely impacted and that any acute or historic disadvantages a student may have experienced have been remedied as part of the admissions procedure.

There are several potential outcomes and metrics that can be used to assess the impact of changing admissions practices, including:

- i) Changes in the volume and quality of applications, offers, and enrolments across each institution and across the sector.
- ii) Quality can be measured through a number of related metrics, including an institution's median ATAR, student retention and completion rates, and student performance in their degree (i.e. a Weighted Average Mark (WAM) or equivalent).
- iii) Cost per enrolment and return on investment, particularly in relation to increased offer volumes through TACs and greater resourcing to support in-house processing for institutions offering direct applications.
- iv) Changes in diversity of the overall student population, particularly in the form of increased enrolments and retention of underrepresented cohorts (e.g. low-SES, regional and remote, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students). These changes can be measured at a whole of sector level and at an institutional level, tracking changes in the diversity of undergraduate student populations over time.

It is also important in assessing the impact of changing admissions practices that quantitative and qualitative insights from prospective students and key influencers (e.g. parents/caregivers, careers advisers, high school principals) are taken into account. While often anecdotal in nature, these provide critical insights into student decision-making processes, including perceived benefits and challenges of existing and changing admissions practices, the accessibility and clarity of admissions information, and insights into the effectiveness of government, school and institutional support mechanisms in place during the transition to higher education.

2. What are the external factors and provider intentions driving changes in domestic undergraduate admission practices?

a) Competition between institutions

The domestic undergraduate market is relatively flat with capped growth opportunities. In 2023, the Universities Admission Centre (UAC) reported that the total number of students receiving an ATAR in NSW/ACT dropped by 533 year-on-year to 54,308, and the pool of UAC preferences shrunk by 7.1 per cent, most likely driven by direct entry schemes.

As noted in the Discussion Paper, changes to admission processes include increased At-school offer activity, in the form of At-school entry schemes (where offers are issued through Tertiary Admissions Centre (TACs) such as UAC) and direct offer schemes (At-school or unconditional offers issued directly by an institution).

This increased At-school offer activity has led to a self-fulfilling proliferation of At-school offer schemes from institutions across the board in an attempt to provide increased certainty for applicants while bolstering application and offer volumes to drive increased conversion.

Within a capped market, this has led to increased competition between institutions as individual students amass a number of At-school offers to give themselves 'options' even though they ultimately only enrol in one institution.

b) Diversifying student cohorts

One of the key drivers behind At-school offer schemes is institutions' strong focus on the importance of diversifying the student population to increase the volume of underrepresented cohorts (e.g. low-SES, regional and remote, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students), bringing this in-line with, or exceeding, current Australian demographic trends.

This has led to a greater range of admissions pathways and support services (including financial support) on offer for these disadvantaged students. However, it is critical that these admission pathways are applied in a fair and equitable manner across institutions and that student success, including welfare and educational outcomes, are central to any policies or assessment procedures introduced.

The Discussion Paper notes some concerns raised that widening access to education will alter standards of higher education overall. There is no evidence to support this statement. On the contrary, increased diversity helps students develop a more nuanced understanding of the world and become more empathetic and open-minded, all skills that will assist their participation in the workplace and society more broadly. Our experience at UNSW is that with the right support, the success rate of students from disadvantaged backgrounds is similar to that of the broader student cohort. For example, in 2021, students enrolled via the Gateway Admission Program collectively passed 93 per cent of their subjects – the same rate as that year's broader domestic undergraduate cohort.

c) Recognition of aptitude beyond the ATAR

There is also a greater understanding across institutions that an ATAR is not the sole indicator of future academic success, and this has led to an increased number of programs with additional selection criteria (e.g. interviews, auditions, additional assessments/exams) and an expansion of alternative admissions schemes to admit quality students who may be able to demonstrate their aptitude to succeed in a manner which complements their ATAR.

Domestic undergraduate admission practices

3. What are the impact and implications of 'at-school' offers? Are there ways to mitigate concerns?

Impact and implications of 'at-school' offers

The volume of 'at-school' schemes, and the variation in how they are applied, has impacted transparency and increased market confusion. This has implications for student wellbeing and the equity of these admissions processes.

Specific impacts and implications of these 'at-school' offer schemes include:

- At-school offers limit the visibility of application to enrolment conversion rates for universities, impacting student load/course planning and making ATAR selections for programs with limited capacity challenging to predict and administer.
- The introduction of At-school and direct offer schemes has resulted in a proliferation of similar schemes being introduced by other institutions to enable them to engage with students early and secure their interest, diluting the impact of At-school and direct offer schemes through the increased volume of schemes on offer and the confusion this generates for applicants.

- Anecdotal feedback from students, parents and careers advisers is mixed, with many citing the increased anxiety, stress, and confusion caused by 'at-school' offer schemes, while others indicate having an 'at-school' offer in hand reduces HSC performance anxiety for students.
- Potential informational advantages favouring students from certain backgrounds or high schools as the volume of schemes can be overwhelming and impact the visibility of those schemes a student may be eligible to apply for.
- It is critical that these admissions schemes are equitable in their access, promotion, and processes. They also should ensure that they minimise any informational disadvantages which may impact access for students, particularly those from underrepresented audiences.

There is evidence of increased student confusion around how 'at-school' offer schemes interact with other At-school offer schemes and with 'regular offers' through the UAC offer round process.

In particular, students cite confusion around whether they can hold multiple offers, whether multiple in-school offers will exclude them from receiving a 'regular offer' through UAC, and how they should order their UAC preferences if multiple institutions' 'at-school' offer schemes have stipulated that they must list them as their highest eligible preference in a given offer round.

Noting the impacts of At-school offers listed here, it is therefore important that higher education providers and regulators mitigate these effects. Some options are listed below.

Mitigation strategies

Strategies to mitigate some of these potential impacts include:

- Clear and aligned underlying principles from institutions to provide more consistency in the manner in which 'at-school' offer schemes are applied and to create greater transparency and trust. This has been evidenced through the NSW Vice-Chancellor's Committee's introduction of a set of underlying principles for 2024 'at-school' offer admissions. Notably these principles state that 'at-school' offers will not be issued before September and that 'at-school' offers must be conditional on completion of the HSC.
- Consistent and comparable presentation of institutional admissions data so that it provides an accurate representation of the impact of 'at-school' and direct offer schemes, including the volume of students admitted through these pathways and transparent ATAR profiles for each program.
- Clear promotion and visibility of schemes and eligibility criteria, and ongoing agreement to using standardised admissions terminology with students and key influencers (e.g. parents/caregivers and careers advisers) to enable comparison of offerings between institutions.

4. In what systemic ways are higher education providers improving the admission experience for applicants:

For secondary school students, some of the systemic ways institutions are improving the admissions experience for applicants are through:

- The diversification of admissions pathways available, including an expanded focus on admissions pathways for students from underrepresented backgrounds such as low-SES backgrounds, regional and remote, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- Greater clarity of admissions pathways through dedicated promotional and recruitment resources and collateral (e.g. websites, brochures, articles) which emphasise the diverse range of avenues to higher education.
- Enhanced promotional and recruitment events to provide students with extensive opportunities to engage first-hand with university staff and current students to discover admissions pathways, understand courses and student experience opportunities, and get their questions answered.

Institutions are improving the admission experience for students with previous higher education experience, VET qualifications, or post-school work and life experiences, through an expansion of concerted pathways for these students and more clearly displaying recognised qualifications and experiences.

As an example, close collaboration with TAFE NSW has seen UNSW expand its range of programs which have dedicated TAFE credit transfer pathways that recognise prior learning and provide students with course credit.

Universities are also targeting this cohort of students through dedicated websites, targeted phone calling campaigns and specific tailored events such as Open/Info Days. Institutions have also critically invested in a greater provision of transition and support services to aid these cohorts, including through academic skills workshops, networking and cohort-building opportunities, and health and wellbeing services.

5. Are there elements of developing admission practices that risk further disadvantage to applicants from underrepresented groups?

As noted in the Discussion Paper and above, there is a risk that students may possess an advantage over others simply by having knowledge of, or access to, information about 'at-school' offers and direct entry schemes where their peers do not have that same knowledge or access.

Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds, and schools with greater access to resources and support, may be able to disproportionately benefit from being able to access these schemes due to an informational advantage over potentially underrepresented cohorts.

Educating prospective students on the variety of schemes available and their potential eligibility is a critical role which all institutions, TACs, high schools and government bodies must continue to play in order to ensure these schemes are equitable in both their accessibility and application.

6. What other undergraduate admission practices in countries around the world could be of value in Australia?

Potential additional admission practices utilised in other countries which may be of value in Australia include:

- For programs with high demand and limited places, a greater utilisation of interviews (online or face-to-face) as an additional selection criteria to provide more information about an applicant's suitability to succeed in a given course.
- Supplementary admissions tests which are utilised separately or alongside secondary schooling results such as the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test (SweSAT).

However, it is important to consider the impact of additional selection criteria or assessment procedures on students, particularly disadvantaged or historical underrepresented student cohorts. Additional criteria or assessment processes may lead to additional preparation by students which may impact their secondary schooling and could potentially contribute to higher levels of stress and anxiety, not to mention additional cost.

The benefits of additional selection criteria or testing requirements need to be carefully considered to ensure they provide a real and tangible benefit to equitably assess and distinguish applicants, while not adversely impacting students or further exacerbating existing systemic disadvantages for underrepresented cohorts.

Admissions infrastructure

7. What are the major areas for improvement in the national Higher Education information websites?

Clear and accessible sources of accurate and timely information are critical for prospective students and key influencers such as parents/caregivers and careers advisers to enable informed decision making and the ability to directly compare courses and institutions.

In light of this, areas for continued improvement across the national higher education websites include:

- A reduction in the duplication of provider information across multiple websites (such as course information only being displayed on a TAC website and the higher education institution's website). This will enable improved accuracy of information through streamlined upkeep and management by institutions, ensuring prospective students always have access to the latest degree and admissions information.
- Continued education for students and key influencers around admissions language (such as Lowest Selection Rank) to empower them to make informed decisions and understand their likely competitiveness and eligibility for programs. It is important that standardised language is used across higher education institutions' websites and that legends/references are clearly available to clarify the terminology and data used.

8. How can Tertiary Admission Centres (TACs) best support developments in admission practices?

TACs play an important role in representing the interests of both institutions and prospective students. It is crucial that they recommit to setting and upholding standards of impartiality and transparency in the admissions processes they enact and the information they publish on their websites.

TACs' continued close collaboration with institutions and government will continue to be critical to:

- reduce market confusion over at-school offer schemes;
- build institutional trust with prospective student audiences and key influencers;
- support institutions as they educate potential students on how admissions processes work and the breadth of pathways available.

Case study: UNSW's Gateway Admission Pathway

About the Gateway Admission Pathway

The Gateway Admission Pathway is UNSW's primary mechanism for addressing underrepresentation of students from low-SES and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds at our institution. The Gateway Admission Pathway is currently in its fourth year of operation and administers 'at-school' conditional offers with downward adjusted ATAR cut-offs for converting conditional offers into firm offers in UACs December/January offer rounds. In 2023, UNSW plans to introduce its first 'at-school' offers without the condition of achieving a particular ATAR as part of the Gateway Admission Pathway. Converting these offers will still be conditional on completing the HSC and receiving an ATAR.

The design and implantation of the Gateway Admission Pathways seeks to address some of the concerns with 'at-school' offers raised in the Discussion Paper.

1. Addressing the concern that 'at-school' offer will reduce student efforts

Conditional offers are central to the Gateway Admission Pathway. Given that this pathway is targeted exclusively at raising the representation of socio-educationally disadvantaged students, it also delivers school outreach which engages students in developing skills that prepare them for university while supporting their HSC success. Consistent messaging around such pathways being conditional upon completing the HSC counters concerns that 'at-school' offers disincentivise student performance and should therefore be central to sector-wide discussions regarding admission practices.

2. Addressing the concern about limiting student choice

The concern that 'at-school' offers "lock" students into their offered course is legitimate. Longitudinal evidence shows that first-year university students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, often report in hindsight that they were unprepared to make choices about higher education by the end of high school.³ Indeed, UNSW data from the Gateway Admission Pathway demonstrates that students regularly change their mind about their preferred course between 'at-school' offers being administered in September and firm offers being administered in December. As such, students accessing 'at-school' offers should be afforded the ability to change their mind about their preferred degree wherever possible and supported by institutions as they make their decision.

In 2023, the Gateway Admission Pathway will move from being administered through UAC's Schools Recommendation Scheme to being administered via a direct application portal. A key advantage of this will be that offers can be made in two rounds, giving students the option to change their degree preference between round 1 (September) and round 2 (November) should they develop different interests and wish to pursue different degree options accordingly. Adopted sector-wide, this approach will ease concern that 'at-school' offers narrow the study options of prospective students.

3. Addressing concerns that 'at-school' offers further disadvantage applicants from underrepresented backgrounds

The concern that an increasingly complex admission system will negatively impact disadvantaged students is valid. Students from first-in-family backgrounds face significant challenges navigating university environments and processes given they typically have less exposure to higher education through family and other networks.

Acknowledging relatively lower levels of such social capital is in-built to the Gateway Admission Pathway, as it actively engages the students eligible for 'at-school' offers on the grounds of social-educational disadvantage via linked school outreach (the Gateway programs). Areas of focus during Gateway programs for senior high school students are the development of familiarity with the university environment, opportunities to engage with students who have come through the pathway and ask them questions, as well as multiple sessions explaining how to navigate the Gateway Admissions Pathway and how to align learning strengths and interests with specific post-school options.

Students from equity backgrounds have immediate access to the Gateway Admission Pathway given it is aimed squarely at disadvantaged schools (Gateway schools) and students from low-SES areas. This level of support to help students navigate the process of 'at-school' offers is not uniquely applicable to UNSW but would benefit students applying through similar pathways sector-wide and address concerns regarding equity student disadvantage.

4. Addressing concerns about personal statements as admission criteria

UNSW's Gateway Admission Pathway requires submission of a personal statement which responds to three questions similar to the set of questions cited by the Discussion Paper in the context of UCAS in the UK which demand greater precision than open-ended responses. To address variation in the level of confidence of students who apply, the Gateway Admission Pathway offers free-to-access online sessions for year 11 and 12 students which build capacity and confidence to write their personal statements and a digital application that offers further scaffolded support (Nailit). Evaluation of these sessions demonstrates that students who attend write personal statements with significantly higher scores than those who do not and, as a result, are more likely to receive an offer.

The discussion paper does not address the recent development of natural language AI technology which drastically alters the conversation about using personal statements for university admissions. Testing various free-to-access natural language AI platforms such as ChatGPT reveals their capacity to write responses to these questions which would undoubtedly attract high marks.

As such, UNSW made the decision in 2023 to move away from marking personal statements. Students are still required to submit a personal statement with their application, but they are not formally

³ Bok, J. (2010) The capacity to aspire to higher education: 'It's like making them do a play without a script', *Critical Studies in Education*, 51(2), 163-178

assessed as part of criteria for offers. Instead, university ambassadors from underrepresented backgrounds who are studying in the faculty students have applied to will call the students to discuss their personal statement. This is framed not as an interview, but as an opportunity to connect with current students, discuss future study and have their questions answered. In this way, the calls do not replicate equity concerns with admissions interviews.

Given the valid concern that personal statements are not well implemented in the context of Australian university admission practices and the rapid development of AI technologies, the above interventions present an opportunity for sector-wide collaboration on the challenges that non-numeric eligibility criteria pose to students and institutions.

5. Addressing concerns about predicting students' capacity for success at university before HSC results

As the Discussion Paper notes, higher ATARs on average are correlated with more positive first year higher education outcomes.⁴ However, internal UNSW data pertaining to students from economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds and conclusions reached by other independent studies indicate that the correlation between ATAR and performance at university is not definitive.⁵

Determining the optimal way to predict a student's potential for success at university for administering 'at-school' offers has been a central challenge in the delivery of UNSW's Gateway Admission Pathway. Adding to this challenge in 2023 is the Pathways inclusion of offers that are not contingent upon eligible students achieving a specific ATAR (i.e. unconditional).

While the ATAR might be the best existing measure for predicting success at university, it should not negate the importance of having sector-wide conversations about what measures might provide a more exhaustive prediction of student potential to succeed at university.

As our submission has outlined, student success relies on a range of support measures that extend beyond admission pathways for disadvantaged students. At UNSW, we have seen a strong rate of student success from equity cohorts, supported by a range of measures such as targeted academic support, preparatory course offerings, affordable on-campus accommodation, mentoring, and supporting their efforts to find meaningful employment in their chosen career upon graduation.

Conclusion

Thank you once again for the opportunity to comment on the Developments in Higher Education Admission Practices discussion paper. We look forward to working with the Department of Education to ensure that we continue to provide the optimal admissions options to prospective students.

Should you wish to discuss any issue raised in this submission, please do not hesitate to contact our Head of Admissions and Scholarships, Ms Raey Jasinski, (02) 9065 8727 or r.jasinski@unsw.edu.au.

⁴ Bok, J. (2010) The capacity to aspire to higher education: 'It's like making them do a play without a script', *Critical Studies in Education*, 51(2), 163-178

⁵ Li, I. & Dockery, M. (2014) Socio-economic status of schools and academic performance: implications for Australia's higher education expansion. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Perth: Curtin University.