



# Response to the interim report of the Australian Universities Accord

The Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) welcomes the release of the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report. The ambitious targets for increased participation in the tertiary education system will serve future generations well, however the appropriate supports for students are required to ensure successful long-term outcomes.

## Executive summary

VTAC's response to the interim report emphasises the support and infrastructure required to achieve the goals and ambitions expressed in the report. Specifically, the increased targets for participation and equity group parity will need comprehensive and integrated student support infrastructure to ensure positive long-term outcomes for students newly accessing higher education. VTAC affirms the interim report's view that an aligned tertiary system is vital for enabling optimal outcomes and meeting skills needs, and provides the Victorian system as an exemplar of integrating higher education and vocational studies from the student experience perspective. Finally, VTAC recommends significant strengthening of the national skills passport proposed in the interim report to enable recognition of students' broader capabilities and better facilitate lifelong learning.

## Increased participation in higher education means transition supports are vital

The interim report notes that “around 60% of the additional students in the system will need to be from low SES backgrounds, around 53% from regional and remote areas, and around 11% would need to be First Nations students.”

Students from communities who are currently underrepresented in higher education have fewer peer and family support mechanisms available, so appropriate infrastructure needs to be established to set these students up to thrive in tertiary study.

Tertiary admissions centres act as the nexus between school leavers and tertiary study, providing course exploration resources, promotion of further study options, and support through the application process. With an increasingly sophisticated tertiary market in operation, prospective students need this impartial support and advice.

While there are many commendable support systems for students offered by schools and tertiary providers already in place, there is a need for more coordination to eliminate gaps in coverage, and provide more comprehensive, wraparound support for students as they navigate the secondary-

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tertiary transition. Tertiary admissions centres, in bringing together a state's schools and tertiary institutions, are well-placed to provide this.

In Victoria, VTAC's programme of support and engagement activities includes specific sessions for some equity groups, providing support with tertiary entry that applies across the whole sector, rather than being specific to a particular institution or course. VTAC has recently provided in-person or webinar sessions for groups including those seeking asylum, the Pasifika community, and young people with chronic or long-term health conditions at Ronald McDonald House, Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne.

Integrated data collection on student applications, achievement, and study patterns will also be essential in optimising the design of the tertiary system, improving the student experience, and analysing the long-term success of initiatives designed to increase participation.

**Recommendations:**

- **Establish a coordinated framework for the provision of transition and related support to students, building on the tertiary admissions centres' existing programs and networks.**
- **Explore extending the role and funding of tertiary admissions centres in providing course and careers support, in close association with careers advisers and practitioners networks, particularly for non-year 12 applicants.**
- **Consider a framework for collection and provision of pathways information and advice by tertiary admissions centres for students and providers.**
- **Uplift real-time data sharing from the Australian Government (TCSI) to and from tertiary admissions centres to provide timely information and insights into higher education student admissions, enrolment, and completions.**

## A networked tertiary admissions system allows learners to pick the right course at the right time

Section 2.2.3 of the interim report discusses the importance of aligning the sectors within Australia's tertiary education system, ensuring that student movement between VET and higher education is as seamless as possible.

To successfully achieve this goal, the integration needs to start at the point of course discovery. Victoria's system, for applications received via VTAC, provides a useful exemplar of how providing prospective students with multi-sector options at the time of course research and application enables students' access to pathways.

The VTAC application system provides a single interface for applications to higher education and VET courses, with options from all sectors displayed in search results in VTAC CourseSearch, and students able to enter and update eight preferences in any combination of sectors.

VTAC strongly believes that this integration best serves students in discovering and identifying the most suitable tertiary study options. The ability to list courses from all sectors also enables students to consider and plan pathways at the time of application, and 13.35% of VTAC applicants in the 2022-2023 application period included preferences for a mix of higher education and VET courses.

This percentage, reflecting student awareness of and access to pathways, could be raised through increased VET participation within tertiary admissions centres. While all universities and most non-university higher education providers in Victoria list courses through VTAC, not all TAFE institutes do. TAFE institutes and other providers of VET courses should be encouraged to list courses with tertiary admissions centres to provide prospective VET students with the same access to centralised course discovery and application that is available for prospective higher education students.

The centralised application and preference system also means that students are exposed to impartial and general information about study options provided by a tertiary admissions centre, rather than relying on information that is specific to a single provider or course. The change of preference process provided by tertiary admissions centres also provides easy mobility between course options for students who might otherwise be 'locked in' to a single provider, or subject to the administrative burden of completing an entirely new application if their interests or decisions change.

Students are best served when the system enables them to consider the right tertiary course options in general, without needing to consider sector or institution as an early decision point.

Dual-sector providers are generally able to articulate clear and specific pathways between VET and higher education to prospective students, increasing student confidence in the use and accessibility of pathways. There are opportunities to assist all providers to develop such pathways, increasing student access and mobility.

Internationally, tertiary admissions centres play a greater role in promoting vocational pathways, with UCAS in the United Kingdom offering apprenticeships via their portal, allowing prospective students to see apprenticeships alongside other potential study options. There are opportunities within Australia to implement this international best practice to enhance student opportunity.

#### **Recommendations:**

- **Support tertiary admissions centres to develop and implement resources and systems**

**for prospective students which integrate higher education and vocational education as much as possible.**

- **Support TAFE institutes and other VET providers to engage with tertiary admissions centres to extend the benefits of the centralised higher education marketplace to all tertiary education options.**
- **Provide tertiary admissions centres with support and funding to develop and present pathway information between VET and higher education courses at a multi-provider level.**
- **Support the integration of apprenticeships within the tertiary admissions centres' tools used for student discovery of post-school options.**

## Strengthen the national skills passport to provide meaningful value for self-development, tertiary admissions, lifelong learning and employment

The national skills passport discussion in section 2.2.7 of the interim report proposes a “portfolio of credentials” focused on demonstrating qualifications to employers and supporting career progression. While these are important aims, the scope of the passport should be broadened to support a wider range of data and activities with the aim of supporting lifelong learning, student understanding and development of capabilities, as well as the use of stackable qualifications and credentials.

Specifically, the national skills passport should provide a framework for reflecting student capabilities in line with emerging global recognition of the need to broaden measures of success within schools beyond traditional assessment and recognition systems. Recognition of these capabilities (such as communication, collaboration, agency, ethics, and enterprise) equips young people with a fuller picture of themselves, and embedding this within a consistent national passport brings this recognition to a community level.

Multiple tertiary admissions centres are engaged in exploratory collaborations with schools and programmes already producing capability assessments to determine whether learner profiles can provide benefit in improving tertiary entrance or matching students to courses. This likely outcome increases the importance of having a consistent and nationally recognised framework for storage and use of this data, for example via a national skills passport.

Bringing together capabilities, formal learning, work experience, and other qualifications or credentials in a national skills passport will be of great benefit in enabling lifelong learning and self-development for Australians at all ages and stages of life.

There are lessons to be learned from, and opportunities for integration with existing platforms, such as secondary school results services provided by curriculum authorities and tertiary admissions centres, tertiary education credentials such as My eQuals, the digital tertiary credentials service for the higher education sector. Additionally, the Course Seeker website, delivered as a collaboration between government and all tertiary admissions centres, provides a possible model for co-development of the national skills passport.

**Recommendations:**

- **Strengthen the national skills passport proposed in the interim report to encompass lifelong learning and student capabilities.**
- **Design a collaborative development framework for the national skills passport which brings together government, schools, tertiary institutions, employers and tertiary admissions centres.**
- **Promote integration between existing portfolio, results and passport platforms to enable enhanced student opportunities.**