



Connecting learners and providers into the future: VTAC submission to the Australian Universities Accord Panel

VTAC: the interface to tertiary education in Victoria

The Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) welcomes the establishment of the Australian Universities Accord and the opportunity to provide comment on the Accord Panel's discussion paper. As a tertiary admissions centre, VTAC plays a key role in connecting learners and tertiary education providers, especially in guiding students through the transition from secondary to tertiary education.

We aim to inspire, empower and connect learners and providers to enable transparent and inclusive access to education. Our strategic plan puts stakeholders at the centre of what we do, supporting universities, TAFE institutes, independent tertiary colleges and their prospective students, and engaging with emerging forms of teaching and learning. We advocate to achieve the best outcomes for learners and providers.

In the detailed recommendations throughout this document, VTAC recommends:

- Building on the success of current equity schemes for year 12 students to provide more support to other prospective student cohorts
- Exploration of the role and funding of tertiary admissions centres in providing course and careers support, as well as the establishment of a framework for collection and provision of pathways information and advice
- Providing support and funding for activities to promote tertiary education and assist students in identifying the most suitable pathways
- Bringing together skills requirement and workforce projections with course and career exploration activities, and developing engagement strategies in relation to jobs and skills



- Enabling prospective VET students to access the same benefits of a centralised marketplace and application as currently provided to higher education students, while also increasing the robustness and availability of pathways information and integrating apprenticeships
- Taking action to enable a data-informed approach to future admissions developments including emerging assessments of student capability and providing enhanced career support offerings to all cohorts

State-based admissions centres: a fit for purpose approach which supports local needs

While admissions centres operate in some international environments, Australia is unique in having a consistent national admissions system operated by state-based admissions centres. This model ensures national consistency where it is useful, such as ensuring the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is consistent between states and provides a portable academic credential to enable interstate mobility, while allowing individual state admissions centres to work closely with their respective state/territory curriculum authority to best meet the specific local needs of learners and providers, for example VTAC's response to the 2019/2020 Black Summer bushfires in Victoria.

All Australian tertiary admissions centres collaborate via the Australasian Conference of Tertiary Admissions Centres (ACTAC), providing the infrastructure to support interstate mobility while allowing each state and territory to meet the different approaches and priorities of each curriculum body, and provide personalised support to students, schools, and tertiary providers.

The opportunities afforded by the Accord to reimagine the future of Australia's tertiary education system should build on the success of the tertiary admissions centres model, and extend the shared service model to provide greater benefit for students and providers in each state and territory and across Australia.



Building on success: extending and refining equity admissions schemes

Q28 What is needed to increase the number of people from under-represented groups applying to and prepared for higher education, both from school and from other pathways?

VTAC operates the Special Entry Access Scheme (SEAS), a wide-ranging equity scheme used by all Victorian universities and most other Victorian tertiary providers in the VTAC system.

The SEAS process, an optional application completed via a student's VTAC account after course preferences are entered, is highly successful at engaging with current year 12 students. For the 2021-2022 application period, more than four in five year 12 students submitted a SEAS application for at least one category (82.48%).

An application for special consideration via SEAS can be submitted in as many of the four categories as are relevant:

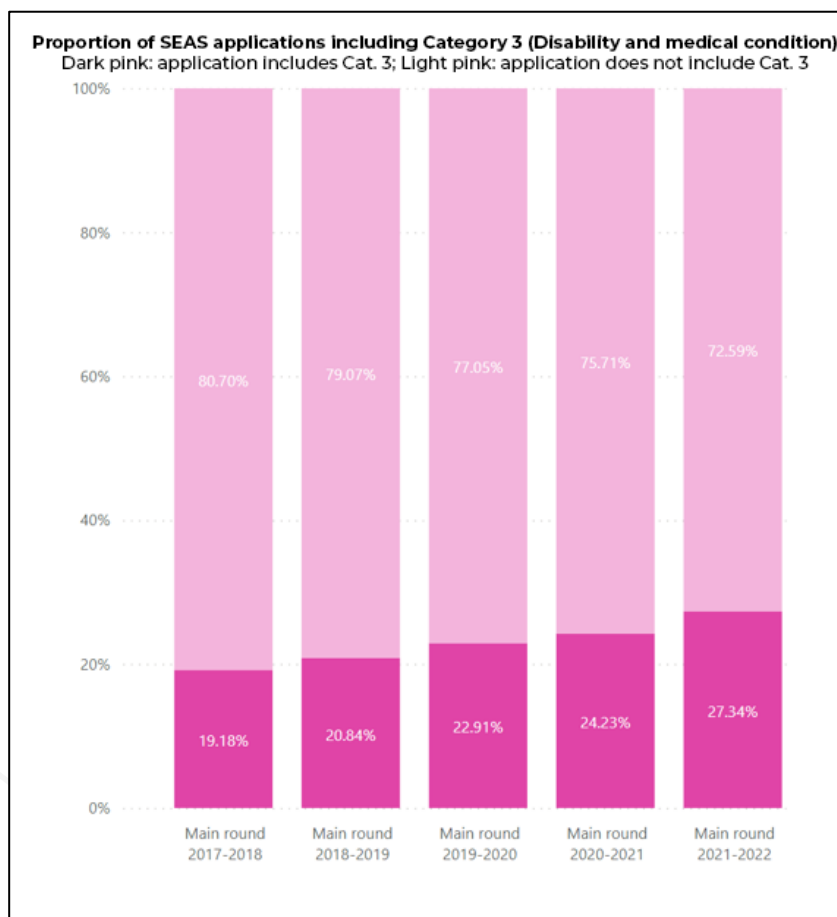
1. Personal information and location (provides permission for adjustments based on personal information held by VTAC, including rural and remote location, mature age, under-represented school, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, SEIFA percentile, non-English-speaking background)
2. Disadvantaged financial background (considers receipt of Centrelink and Family Tax Benefit payments, as well as any other financial circumstances affecting education or daily life)
3. Disability and medical condition
4. Difficult circumstances (covers any other circumstances beyond the applicant's control which have had education impact; included streamlined process for remote learning consideration from 2020-2022)

All year 12 applicants are encouraged by VTAC and careers practitioners to apply for Category 1 (consideration of personal information and location), so the number of SEAS applications in this cohort was already high prior to the pandemic (31,440 applications in 2019-2020, with 47.98% of these for Category 1 exclusively).



The onset of the pandemic saw a modest rise in SEAS applications (up 15% overall), but a significant rise in applications for Category 4 (difficult circumstances), with the most common combination of categories becoming 1 and 4: 39.94% of SEAS applications in 2020-2021 were for categories 1 and 4 only.

The increased engagement with the special consideration process as a result of the pandemic also led to an increase in disclosures unrelated to covid-19, especially in the disability and medical condition category, which has been growing at a steady rate over the last five years.



VTAC's view is that the increased application numbers for this category reflect an increased willingness to disclose medical conditions and disabilities, especially mental health



conditions, rather than significantly increased prevalence. We expect this number will reach a natural plateau in the medium-term.

It is worthwhile exploring ways that stigma around special consideration can be further reduced, and applicants encouraged to share all factors which can be useful in providing a fuller picture of potential for success despite immediate circumstances.

While VTAC and schools provide support and guidance to year 12 students in completing the SEAS process, differential resourcing and levels of advantage within schools mean that some applicants do not have access to the level of support required to have their circumstances fully reflected in the process.

While take-up of SEAS within the current year 12 cohort is high, non-year 12 (mature age) applicants are much less likely to apply for special consideration, with this cohort comprising just 12% of all SEAS applications. The non-year 12 cohort is generally navigating the application process outside the school support environment, and generally less exposed to information about the application process.

The non-year 12 cohort includes many applicants who have already dropped out of a tertiary course, and therefore are most in need of support. More work can be done to increase equity in applications from this cohort.

Recommendations:

- **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**
- **Publish and promote the exemplar equity schemes conducted by some tertiary admissions centres, and build on the successful year 12 schemes for non-year 12 applicants**



Promoting tertiary education: tertiary admissions centres as impartial champions of post-school study

Q6 What are the best ways to achieve and sustain future growth in Australian higher education, given the changing needs of the population and the current pressures on public funding?

Q11 How should Australia boost demand from people to study in the higher education system?

Navigating post-school options can be challenging for young people, who are engaging in course exploration in a crowded tertiary education marketplace. Many very useful resources are provided by universities, TAFE institutes, and independent tertiary colleges, however these are often focused specifically on an individual institution or course.

Government and tertiary admissions centres have a role to play in promoting the benefits of tertiary and higher education more specifically, and assisting prospective learners in identifying the most suitable courses and pathways for their aspirations and abilities.

VTAC currently provides general information about tertiary study as part of its community engagement program, which includes online and in-person delivery throughout Melbourne and regional Victoria, but limited resources means that visits are not possible to all areas.

Recommendations:

- **Support and fund tertiary admissions centre activities to promote tertiary education and assist students in identifying the most suitable pathways**



Making the connection: Linking workforce and labour market information with course exploration

Q9 How should Australia ensure enough students are studying courses that align with the changing needs of the economy and society?

As discussed in VTAC's submission on priorities for the Accord, tertiary admissions centres play a key role in course and career discovery for prospective students. Between the opening of VTAC applications on 1 August and 16 December, 458,449 individual searches were recorded on VTAC CourseSearch, with additional activity on other school-focused planning tools like the VTAC Prerequisite and Course Explorer.

Labour market data is currently provided through a variety of Australian Government websites, and there is an opportunity for government to work with tertiary admissions centres to integrate employment projection data with course offerings from tertiary institutions at the point of student discovery. This integration would benefit both secondary students and older adults exploring tertiary study.

Course and career decisions reflect a summation of influences and decisions from very early in a student's schooling, and are not made in a vacuum when it is time for students to apply for tertiary study. Students often identify and are geared towards their strengths quite early. It is therefore important to provide more information about future labour markets and future skill requirements to support career development in younger students.

Recommendations:

- **Encourage integration between government labour market and workforce projection data providers and tertiary admissions centres to provide more targeted guidance to students**
- **Integrate future skill requirements projections into careers education and exploration from younger year levels**
- **Develop, with tertiary admissions centres, communications and engagement strategies and campaigns for students and communities at all levels of education regarding jobs and skills**

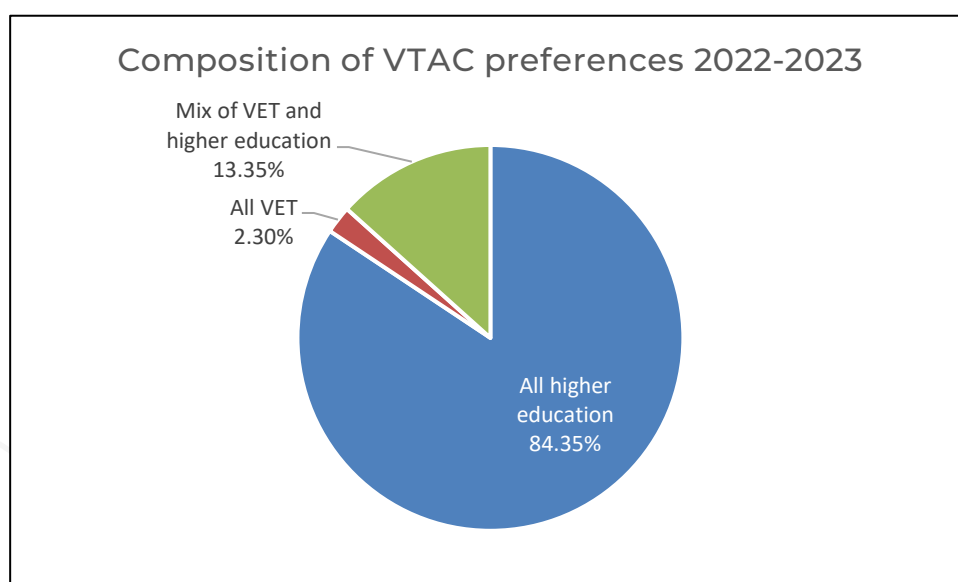
Extending the centralised application process to more VET courses improves access and equity

Q20 How can pathways between VET and higher education be improved, and how can students be helped to navigate these pathways?

Q21 How can current examples of successful linkages between VET and higher education be integrated across the tertiary education system?

The VTAC application system provides a single interface for HE and VET applications, with courses 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 option. 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 both higher education and VET courses.



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

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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 centralised 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**

The perfect match: seeing the whole student likely to help with participation and retention

Q22 What role do tertiary entrance and admissions systems play in matching learners to pathways and supporting a sustained increase in participation and tertiary success?

Effective admissions systems go beyond the immediate match of students with courses, and deliver outcomes which lead to student success in the longer term. Currently VTAC does not have widespread access to student outcome data beyond course enrolment. There is an opportunity to use achievement and retention data on a sector-wide basis to inform and refine the admissions process.

There is also a role for tertiary admissions centres to facilitate a more connected approach to the secondary-tertiary transition, with partnerships between schools and tertiary providers required to provide students with support for this transition.

With increasing sophistication in student assessment and increased complexity in the labour market, there will be opportunities to match prospective students with courses in a highly targeted manner. Emerging work from multiple research groups is focused on new ways to recognise student capabilities which will supplement or replace the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). VTAC is already engaging with some of these groups to explore the future of admissions processes, which can provide benefit to students by allowing access to the most suitable courses, and benefit providers by selecting students with the most suitable capabilities for each specific course.

Additionally, trends in all states show an increase in students opting for alternative assessment, such as the unscored VCE in Victoria, and an increase in school refusal following the Covid-19 pandemic. Discussion of increased participation and tertiary success must go beyond a focus on year 12 graduates and include those who do not complete a scored year 12 program (or any year 12 program at all), as well as prospective learners of any



age who are not currently studying. It is vital that the tertiary education system provide entry points for students to re-engage with education at all stages of life.

These cohorts, in addition to those at under-resourced schools, do not always have access to quality and impartial career support, and there is an opportunity for government to fund more agile career support which meets prospective students' need for quality advice and is likely to improve participation and success outcomes.

Recommendations:

- **Facilitate data-sharing between government, providers, and tertiary admissions centres to provide a broader evidence base for student success and admissions outcome evaluation**
- **Support tertiary admissions centres to facilitate partnerships between schools and tertiary providers to provide more comprehensive support for the transition between secondary and tertiary study**
- **Explore whether enhanced assessment of student capability, alongside academic assessment and the ATAR, can contribute to matching students and courses in a way that best supports student and community needs**
- **Consider how tertiary admissions centres can best empower, connect and facilitate participation from prospective learners at all stages of life**
- **Establish enhanced career support offerings through tertiary admissions centres for all prospective learners, especially those outside existing school support infrastructure**

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Supporting students from all backgrounds through the transition from secondary study or work to tertiary education has been a core part of VTAC's mission for over fifty years. In recent years this has expanded to services for postgraduate study, graduate-entry programs, tertiary education pathways and professional programs.

VTAC welcomes the Accord process as an opportunity to build on current successes while creating a vision for a sustainable and comprehensive tertiary education system that will meet Australia's needs in the short- and long-term. As a central body with activities across secondary schools, tertiary institutions and more broadly in the community, VTAC has a keen interest in improving outcomes for all stakeholders and is happy to engage with the Accord Panel to provide any further information required. Please contact VTAC CEO Teresa Tjia <CEO@vtac.edu.au> to discuss further support.