Australian Universities Accord

Response to Discussion Paper

April 2023

Introduction

The Universities Admissions Centre (NSW & ACT) Pty Ltd (UAC) was established in 1995 and is the largest tertiary admissions centre in Australia. Owned by universities in NSW and the ACT, our mission is to provide excellence in admissions services and promote equity of access to tertiary education. Central to that mission is a strong culture of servicing the needs of all our stakeholders, in particular our institutions and applicants.

UAC has a trusted and valuable position in the higher education sector. Applicants, in particular Year 12 students, turn to UAC for unbiased and authoritative information about university admissions and courses and for an easy interface with which to apply. Institutions rely upon UAC services to handle the bulk of the admissions process, allowing them to focus on their core capabilities of learning and teaching, research, and community engagement. Parents, schools, the media, and the public know UAC as their first point of reference for university admissions in NSW and the ACT.

In recent years UAC has developed a credit management system and a suite of products and services using verifiable credentials technology. We have been very proud to work with the Australian Government to establish the Course Seeker website, the National Credentials Platform and the microcredentials marketplace MicroCred Seeker.

As a not-for-profit working in the broad interests of the education sector, UAC is well-placed to provide objective and neutral advice to government.

UAC is therefore pleased to provide the following response to selected questions from the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper.

Summary of UAC response

1. Improve consistency and transparency of credit recognition to reduce barriers between education pathways and improve transferability and recognition of skills and learning, leading to greater mobility and productivity.

2. Establish a national framework and standards for the recognition of a broader collection of credentials than currently encompassed by the AQF to ensure systemic interoperability between major elements of lifelong learning, leading to higher productivity.

3. Better matching of courses with the employment ambitions of prospective students, leading to higher productivity and more efficient use of public resources.

4. Greater use of pathway education and microcredentials to reduce higher education attrition rates and improve success rates, leading to lower public and individual debt.

UAC response to selected questions

Q4 Looking from now to 2030 and 2040, what major national challenges and opportunities should Australian higher education be focused on meeting?

One of the major opportunities for Australia in the next two decades is to build seamless connections between education, training, and employment through common standards for skills and credentials recognition.

A relatively low-cost means to achieve these connections is to establish a national approach for the development of common standards for skills and credentials recognition. This could be through the establishment of an advisory/reference group or through existing organisations with appropriate and relevant representation of the stakeholder groups across education, training, and employment. This would provide a mechanism to develop the framework through which lifelong learning can become truly embedded in the community and produce a highly skilled and agile workforce.

Verifiable credentials technology platforms and digital learner profiles can provide learners, education institutions and employers with the necessary tools to make these connections.

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?

Cohesive and interoperable information systems running from early childhood through all phases of the lifelong learning journey would allow for increasingly non-linear approaches to higher education. Much work has been done that shows growth in education and employment broadly is correlated with a population that is better able to move between and across education, training, and employment through improved recognition of a wide range of skills, learning and experience.

Prior to consideration of the appropriate information system(s), it is imperative that a framework and standards for recognition of credentials (from both learning and experience) are developed, as per our response to Q4.

Q8 What reforms are needed to promote a quality learning environment and to ensure graduates are entering the labour market with the skills and knowledge they need?

There needs to be closer alignment of employment and career needs with the education experience, and this could be achieved in several ways such as making interdisciplinary industry projects a required component of a range of degrees or increasing the number of internships available to students in areas of skills shortage.

Another complementary approach is the establishment of a means by which people could search, understand, and match what type of learning (for example, which course) would provide the skills and knowledge they need to undertake a particular type of employment. In this way, people would identify what education would be an appropriate approach for a given type of employment. The technology required to make this matching work already exists. What is needed is the establishment of a coordinated approach to assembling data and information from multiple sources, including from employers, education institutions and individuals.

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

Currently, students choose from among the large range of university courses available those that best meet their individual needs, which may or may not have any correlation with the needs of the Australian economy and society. Optimising that correlation can occur through:

- ensuring the courses available reflect the social and economic needs of Australia through increased collaboration between government, industry and institutions in the design and offer of courses,

- better matching of students with an education (for example, through specific courses) that best reflects Australia's social and economic needs (this is also covered in our response to Q8), or
- both of these options.

The above options would ideally be supported through financial or other incentives for the parties involved.

It's important to note the role that microcredentials can and will play in ensuring that the Australian workforce has the skills necessary for the future of work. The establishment of MicroCred Seeker nationally is an important foundation from which further efforts to increase the uptake of microcredentials can be built, supported by formal and consistent national recognition of microcredential study through the AQF.

Q10 What role should higher education play in helping to develop high quality general learning capabilities across all age groups and industries?

Optimisation of general learning capabilities needs to occur not only through their development, but also their recognition. As universities continue to broaden the range of criteria on which admission is based, important work is now occurring to ensure that general learning capabilities can be rigorously and equitably assessed as part of the admissions process. This then provides a strong signal to learners, schools, and the community of the importance of these skills and the need to embed their development in all stages of the education system in Australia, including universities as an important part of this virtuous circle.

Q15 What changes are needed to grow a culture of lifelong learning in Australia?

More seamless connections between education, training, and employment are needed. Technology can assist, through the adoption of verifiable credentials and digital learner passports using common standards.

A broader concept of learning outcomes that incorporates general capabilities is also required, as is expanding the AQF to include microcredentials.

Q16 What practical barriers are inhibiting lifelong learning, and how can they be fixed?

Lack of funding for and recognition of microcredentials is a significant barrier, which could be addressed by including these courses in the HELP program and including in the AQF. Over time there may also be an opportunity for greater nuance in microcredential recognition, with multiple qualification levels described within the broad umbrella of microcredentials. In addition, there needs to be a formal recognition of general capabilities in higher education admissions, along with transparent and standardised credit recognition (the current lack of which is a major barrier to transition between education sectors). Another current barrier is the narrow way in which university graduate outcomes are represented in the credentials themselves; inclusion of a general capabilities assessments along with existing academic assessments would further embed lifelong learning and transfer of skills.

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

Transparent and consistent credit recognition between VET and higher education would significantly increase student mobility. Students can be further supported through the recognition of a broader range of their skills, knowledge, and experience and by providing them with the ability to own and share all their credentials through a holistic digital learner profile.

Centralised information tools are also very helpful in allowing students to understand the range of options available to them.

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?

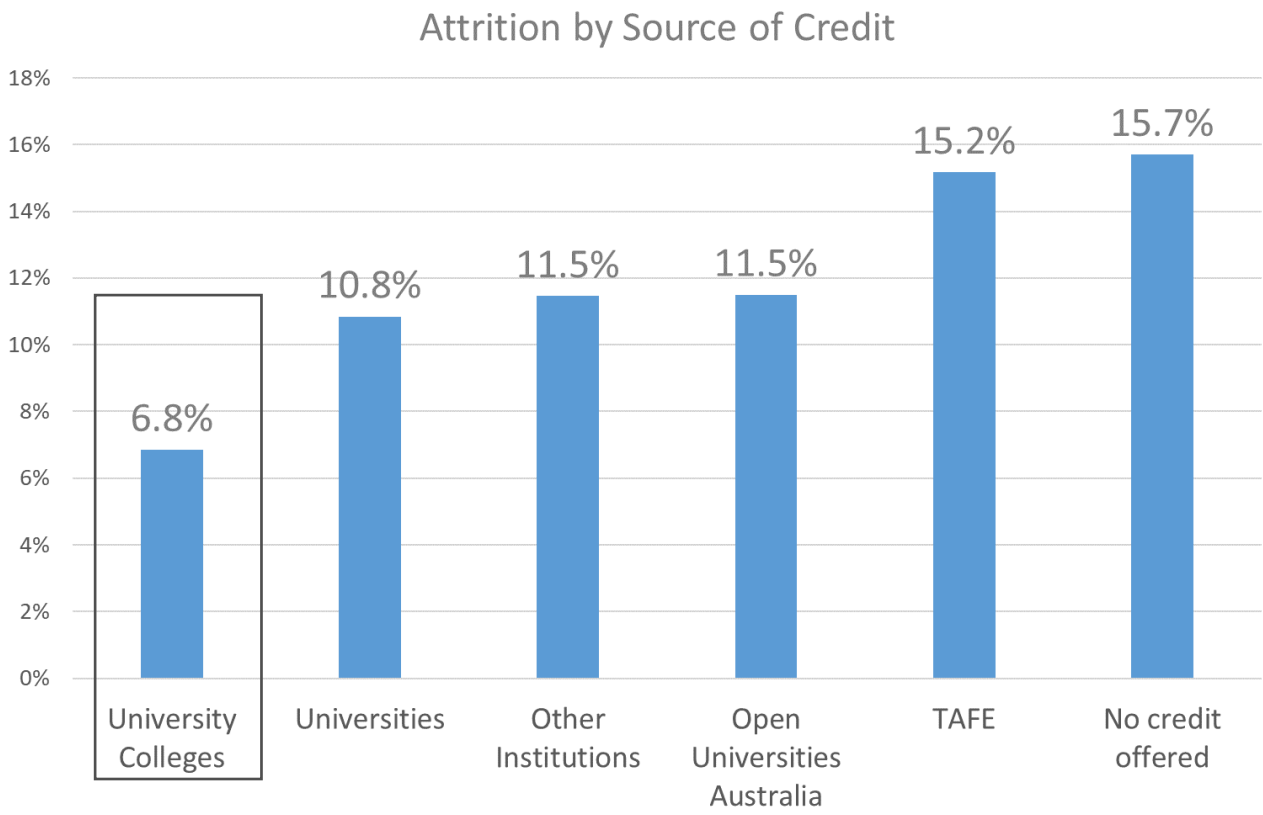
Current admissions systems primarily match learners and courses based on academic qualifications. Those that do not meet the minimum admission requirements are offered a lower-level pathway course.

Internal research conducted by UAC has shown that pathway or foundation programs are a highly effective start to higher education for many students (see Figure 1 below). We also know that Year 12 students with ATARs between 70 and 80 who go straight to university from school have an attrition rate of 6.8%.

There may be an opportunity for government and the sector to consider more formal arrangements with respect to a foundation year of university study, with the costs involved potentially offset by reduction in the costs (to both the individual and the community more broadly) of attrition.

More research into this area may be beneficial.

Figure 1: Attrition by source of credit for commencing bachelor students 2014 (Select Higher Education Student Statistics, Dept. of Education and Training).



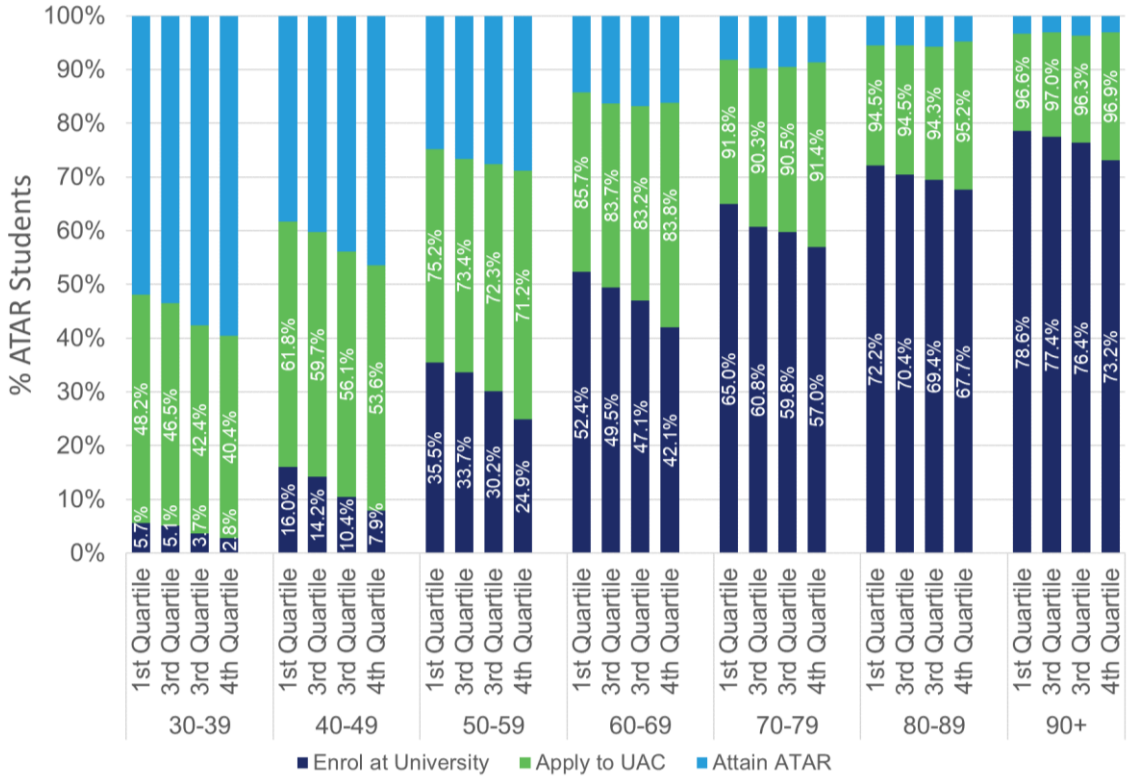
To further improve matching of students and courses, a future admissions state must incorporate recognition of general capabilities and a more holistic learner profile that learners can maintain and share across different education providers, employers and other systems using common data standards.

Work can also be done to better communicate to learners the complex and extensive array of entry and transfer points into tertiary education.

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?

While higher SES students enrol in university at higher rates, when ATAR is taken into consideration, the university sector does a good job of enabling the participation of lower SES students as shown below in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Cumulative progression by IEO quartile and ATAR (per cent ATAR students 2013 to 2017, ATAR <30 not shown).



Published research conducted by UAC* has further demonstrated the importance of early intervention and targeted support for equity groups to widen participation.

* see https://www.uac.edu.au/assets/documents/submissions/student-disadvantage-and-success-at-university.pdf

Q33 What changes to funding and regulatory settings would enable providers to better support students from under-represented groups in higher education?

Given the efficacy of pathway or foundation programs in preparing students (especially those from under-represented groups) for higher education (see Figure 1 above), increasing the availability of CSPs and HELP loans for these programs would better support both providers and students.

Q42 What settings are needed to ensure academic integrity, and how can new technologies and innovative assessment practices be leveraged to improve academic integrity?

On the admissions side, adoption of verifiable digital credentials (utilising cryptographic proof of issuance) eliminates fraud. In 2022 UAC used this technology to issue ATARs to NSW HSC students into a digital learner passport. Broader adoption of these types of platforms would be beneficial in supporting other approaches to improve academic integrity. This is especially the case with the rise of AI-based tools that have the potential to circumvent existing detection approaches.