



Australian Council of State School Organisations Limited

Submission

to the

Developments in higher education admission practices  
Discussion Paper

Sharron Healy  
**President**  
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*One voice for every child in government education*

PO Box 8221 Werrington County NSW 2747

☎ 0418 470 604 | ✉ [ceo@acsso.org.au](mailto:ceo@acsso.org.au) | 🌐 [acsso.org.au](http://acsso.org.au) | ACN: 611 783 218



Please indicate your name if an individual, or your organisation name if you are responding on behalf of an organisation.

Australian Council of State School Organisations  
PO Box 8221  
Werrington County NSW 2747

Contact: Dianne Giblin AM  
Chief Executive Officer  
0418 470 604

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*One voice for every child in government education.*

Do you wish your submission to be treated as confidential?

No



## Australian Council of State School Organisations

### Response to Developments in higher education admission practices Discussion Paper

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#### Introduction

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) is the voice for the families and communities of Australia's 2.6 million government school students. We are one of Australia's oldest continuously operating national parent organisations and possibly the world's oldest. We were established in 1947 to bring together various state and territory parent organisations and other families interested in public education to develop national policies that reflect how families want public education to be provided for all children. Membership varies due to differences in how our members in state and territory peak parent organisations have addressed national issues over time; however, our commitment to promoting equality and access for all young people attending government schools in Australia remains consistent.

- We believe that the primary responsibility of governments, federal, state and territory is to establish and maintain government education systems that:
- Positively engage with family and community at all levels of education;
- are of the highest calibre and open to all, regardless of race, gender, religion, social/economic status, geographic location, or ability; and
- can respond to changing educational landscapes by developing flexible and diverse programmes to meet all student needs.

All Australians want a fair and transparent university admissions system. Higher education (HE) can impact earnings, employment stability, and societal influence. Overall, the advantages of HE are substantial. However, they differ significantly from course to course and between institutions in terms of both the learning experience and the graduate outcomes. The university sector is diverse, and the choice of course and institution is important. As a result, it is critical that all stakeholders in the admissions process, including applicants, parents, schools, universities, teaching, and admissions staff, believe the system is fair.

Although the student body in HE is diverse, certain groups remain under-represented. Admissions is one of many factors that can influence who participates in higher education.

Numerous changes in the admissions process in recent years necessitate a reconsideration (or reaffirmation) of what 'fairness' and 'transparency' in admissions look like in theory and in practice.



ACSSO believes that there is room for improvement and that a number of issues must be addressed as we strive for an admissions system that is both fair and perceived to be fair:

- There are various definitions of merit and fairness.
- It can be difficult for applicants to predict how they will be evaluated.
- The data used to evaluate applicants may not be equally reliable and consistent.
- Some courses have a high drop-out rate, which could be related to admissions procedures.
- Oversubscribed courses could make it difficult for admissions staff to choose from a growing pool of applicants.
- Some applicants must undergo additional testing.
- There is a lack of awareness of, and response to, the growing diversity of applicants, qualifications, and pathways to higher education.
- The Senior curriculum is not always relevant or interesting, and students struggle to demonstrate their knowledge and strengths as a result.

ACSSO believes that a fair admissions system is one that provides equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of background, to gain admission to a course that is suited to their abilities and aspirations. Everyone agrees that applicants should be chosen based on merit; the issue arises when we attempt to define it. Merit may imply admitting applicants with the highest examination scores or taking a broader view of each applicant's accomplishments, strengths, and potential.

Prior educational attainment data still remains the main predictor of undergraduate success and remains central to the admissions process. However, equal examination grades do not always represent equal potential. By the age of two, the effect of social background on achievement begins to emerge. Many applicants have responsibilities at home or at work, or have had their education interrupted, which can have an impact on their academic performance. Furthermore, we understand that research has identified that all else being equal, students from public schools outperform students from independent schools and colleges at the undergraduate level.

We recognise that it is not the responsibility of higher education admissions to make up for educational or social disadvantages. However, identifying latent talent and potential that may not be fully demonstrated by examination results is a legitimate goal for admission centres and universities seeking to recruit the best students possible regardless of background.

ACSSO does not want to favour applicants from specific backgrounds or schools. However, given the diversity of learners' opportunities and circumstances, some priority populations may experience higher rates of discrimination, isolation, and other forms of social exclusion; we believe it is fair and appropriate to consider contextual factors in addition to formal educational achievement. We believe that admission centres must ensure that the factors considered in the assessment process are accurate and relevant and that all applicants are given an equal opportunity to demonstrate their strengths and achievements. This could be made possible by 'holistic assessment,' or by considering all relevant factors, such as the context of applicants' achievements, backgrounds, and relevant skills. 'Broad brush' approaches are generally ineffective; applicants must be evaluated as individuals. Learner profiles could be a way of projecting student aptitude, interest, strengths, and reliability.



We know the work of 'Learning Creates'<sup>1</sup> is looking at this approach and recognise that such a comprehensive approach currently has practical limitations. In the short term we recommend that, at least initially, universities and admission centres apply holistic assessment to borderline applicants and applicants for over-subscribed courses. Even the first filter, we believe, should take contextual factors into account in some way, but this would necessitate the national standardised provision of agreed information on application forms.

ACSSO believes that a university's consideration of an applicant's contribution to the learning environment is justifiable; and that institutions and courses that confer particular benefits on their graduates have an obligation to make reasonable efforts to recruit a diverse student community. We believe that a variety of experiences in the laboratory or seminar room enriches the learning environment for all students. A diverse student community is likely to improve all students' critical reasoning, teamwork, and communication skills, resulting in graduates who are better able to contribute to a diverse Australian society.

*Other admissions issues that must be addressed include:*

### Immediacy

Students today expect immediate responses and assistance. However, most institutions are not set up to be personally responsive right away. Immediacy means being able to provide information or assistance without delay, and admission centres and universities would need to set up a system where someone is available 24/7 to answer questions and provide assistance to meet this need. Most universities and admission centres would find this a very costly and difficult undertaking. As a result, many students are frustrated and disappointed when they do not receive the assistance and information they require.

### Student Mental Wellbeing

Student preparation is one aspect that influences whether a person views the shift to higher education positively or negatively. Indeed, the opportunity to build social and navigational capital allows young people to integrate rapidly into their new surroundings.

ACSSO recognises that research has shown psychological discomfort increases when students start university, but little seems to be known about first-year student perspectives on stresses in university settings, and what approaches could better support student mental health and well-being during the admissions and transition period.

### Access and Anxiety

There appears to be a constant tension in universities and admissions offices between reaching out to students who may not believe a university degree is for them and those who are obsessed with "getting in" to the most selective university possible. Students who are underrepresented, and socio-economically disadvantaged we believe suffer significant challenges in applying to and attending university. They frequently lack access to the same counselling resources as more affluent applicants, which naturally causes confusion and anxiety. Due to funding pressures, universities understandably want to reach out to and support these students during the admissions process, but this push for awareness may have the unintended consequence of fanning the flames of apprehension.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.learningcreates.org.au/>



## Chasing Volume

Tertiary Admissions Centres exist to help with the admissions process, and they confront the challenge of simplifying the experience and supporting students while still being attentive to the agendas and priorities of the universities they serve. Because of the ease with which one can apply to university, these platforms have become vehicles of both access and excess. This has contributed to a vicious cycle of uncertainty and "application addiction," in which universities seek more applicants in their admission pool and students apply to more universities. Because this cycle makes enrolment more difficult to anticipate, all stakeholders in this maelstrom respond with a misguided "more is better" mindset.

## Family engagement

School decisions significantly impact young people's lives, affecting their future education, training, career, social lives, money, and health. Working in partnership, Family and school are essential in preparing students to transition into a future job path successfully. This includes giving curriculum opportunities to help students develop general abilities, support their interests and objectives, and help them make informed decisions about their subject choices and courses. Students are more engaged in school and more motivated about their future when they clearly understand who they are and how they will live and work once they graduate.

## Engaging Families During the University Search

Actively involving families when young people search for a course of study could improve university readiness. Working with the student, school counsellors, and other school staff should design university readiness programs that intentionally include understanding, input, and buy-in from families. Counsellors and staff can help inform expectations and changes through the university search process so families can anticipate the disruptions and transitions that may otherwise cause tension in existing family dynamics.

To enjoy and succeed at university, students need to know that:

- Each student's success at university is unique. The most important thing is to understand what success means to them.
- One of the most common misconceptions at university is that there is just one way to achieve. Each student determines success, their program, and their objectives.
- It is unnecessary to achieve success by receiving High Distinctions on every assignment.

Making their own goals and comparing their progress against themselves is the key to success. Students should strive to do their best, but their academic goals must be reasonable and attainable.

## Early offer schemes for Year 12 students

Many institutions have one or more early offer schemes for Year 12 students utilising the Schools Recommendation Scheme (SRS). Under this program, institutions will evaluate applicants using criteria other than (or in addition to) the ATAR and make early offers of undergraduate admission to students.

ACSSO is not concerned with the concept of the SRS provided there is clear transparency in the process and an acknowledgement that equal examination grades do not always represent equal potential, and given the diversity of learners' opportunities and circumstances, some priority



populations may experience higher rates of discrimination, isolation, and other forms of social exclusion; we believe it is fair and appropriate to consider contextual factors in addition to formal educational achievement when institutions are making SRS offers

What are universities judging access on? Is it certain types of students, then what types? Is it students from already privileged backgrounds who they think will be more cost-effective to incorporate into their processes? Until we know how and whom they select, we don't know if there isn't a bias towards the more affluent postcodes across Australia, as indicated in the Sydney Morning Herald article by Jordan Baker<sup>2</sup>.

Early university offers, according to critics of the SRS, have given rise to an alternative tertiary admissions system that lacks the transparency and impartiality of the Australian Tertiary Admissions System, or early offers allow students to slack off before their HSC exams, affecting their peers because the calculation of a student's ATAR involves an assessment of how their school cohort performed.

This begs the question, is an overhaul of the ATAR overdue?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/surge-in-early-uni-offers-comes-under-fire-from-education-experts-20220526-p5aoup.html>