Keynote speech: Ensuring Transparent ATAR and Alternative Entry Admissions

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Good morning.

I am very pleased to be here and thank you for inviting me to speak.

I know that the 101 of delivering a speech suggests you must start with a joke, especially if it’s a morning speech.

Just to wake everyone up.

Sorry, but I totally lucked out on finding one that could accompany this subject matter.

Maybe there isn’t much to laugh about. Or, alternatively, note to self: try harder next time!

The title of the conference “Re-defining University Admissions Strategies” is, of course, very pertinent, even controversial, which I hope makes up for the missing joke in terms of holding your interest.

It has certainly become prime media fodder, especially over the past two years.

Now that hasn’t been particularly helpful, because the headlines have not been able to unpack the complexities of the situation successfully.

Too often the sector has looked as if we toss bonus points around like confetti.

And too often what is overlooked is the fact that we genuinely seek to ensure student capabilities and equity are always aligned in our entry processes.

But the muddied image the public has been left with has hardly been conducive to trusting the sector.

That is to be regretted.
Yet, we have learned from the lack of positive reporting that we must be even more transparent about our offers and admissions criteria.

Only total transparency can reassure potential students and their families that the system is just.

Indeed - as our Federal Education Minister, Simon Birmingham said in a speech last week ‘we must put the individual student front and centre in higher education......Greater transparency on student satisfaction and employment outcomes will also allow students to make more informed choices about their study options and career prospects.’

It’s a sentiment the Go8 not only agrees with but is acting upon.

As UWA Vice Chancellor, Professor Paul Johnson remarked last week ‘students are deeply sensitive to the ATAR and won’t apply for courses if they don’t think they will get in.’ That being the case he said – ‘students needed to be armed with correct and clear information when taking on such a big — and expensive — life decision.’

For that reason many of you would be aware that Go8 members committed in early May to making their offer/acceptance data publicly available and online by 1 September.

This move by the Go8 was led in June by UNSW; and UWA publishing their information two weeks ago.

As a group, Go8 universities will deliver enhanced transparency in admissions, consistent with the commitment we made earlier this year, demonstrating we are at the forefront in this area.

We hope this access to information will allay the concerns of students and their families, and put to bed the suggestions the bonus point system was being used wrongly and flagrantly.

The Go8’s positioning on transparency surrounding offers and acceptances, has been made very clear.

To give you a profile as context:

The majority of our undergraduate students – approaching 70 per cent - come to us based on ATAR results. For the rest of the sector, this proportion is only 31 per cent of entry based on ATAR.

Collectively, the Go8 currently has 23 per cent of Australia’s domestic undergraduate students.

In 2015, fewer than 10 per cent of Go8 offers were made to applicants with an ATAR below 78 and the median offer ATAR was 92.
As a group, our focus is on retention and therefore completions, rather than enrolments.

Our concern is to enrol students who will succeed and thrive.

Hence, we also have a relatively low attrition rate of first year students at 7.1 per cent which is roughly half the national rate of 14.8 per cent.

We contend that focusing on enrolments is short-sighted and in any case a poor business model to follow.

At Go8 institutions, the high ATAR attained by a student is a reliable predictor of successful outcome in their degree program.

Of course, we recognise that students are more than their ATAR, and we also look at additional criteria through flexible pathways that deliver opportunity and we are open and transparent about that too.

Ensuring we are clear and open with our prospective students and their families on the requirements for entry is a fundamental part of ensuring we have the best – and the right- students.

There are essentially three pathways of entry to Go8 institutions

**The ATAR-only pathway - which I have just discussed.**

**ATAR + other criteria pathways:**
Here students are admitted on the basis of their ATAR achievement plus additional information.

This could include, for example

- indicators of personal or educational disadvantage
- additional selection tests such as standardised tests, or auditions and portfolios.

**And finally - Other pathways:**
These may be students who are admitted to Go8 institutions independently from their ATAR achievement. They may be mature age students or students admitted on the basis of a portfolio only.

All Go8 institutions have committed to the ongoing monitoring of the progress and success of students admitted under each of these pathways.

This way, we can ensure that the admission pathways that are set remain appropriate and that relevant and appropriate students support services are in place.
As an aside – the Go8 does have concerns about less rigorous admission criteria which can enable a potential student with a low ATAR to consider university is necessarily for them.

There appears to be some cringe factor in stating openly that University may not be for everyone.

I am not sure why. It is simply fact that people are different and that their education needs also vary.

The Go8 is very concerned that half of all students with an ATAR of 59 or below will not complete their degrees.

That outcome represents a great cost to the student and the taxpayer; both of whom are left with a large financial debt for no result.

And that is even before you take into consideration the emotional cost to the student.

The Go8 contends that if students with a low ATAR are to be accepted then somehow it is incumbent on the sector and the Government to develop processes to ensure they are prepared and capable of undertaking that study and successfully complete it.

And, if not, someone needs to make pathways or sub-degree courses available to them, importantly within the HELP student loan system, as an alternative entry mechanism.

If the Go8 has a plea, it is don’t set students up to fail.

Ensuring transparency of admission criteria and offers across the sector is something we are confident will be a recommendation of the Higher Education Standards Panel chaired by Professor Peter Shergold, and currently undertaking a review of “transparency of higher education admissions processes”.

Having transparency in place will also better illuminate for the public where low ATAR students are being accepted and the support, or lack thereof, these students will receive.

However, behind this obvious area of how admissions can be better managed lies a series of even more complex questions.

The first involves the risk of admitting students who, even if they do complete, will have little chance of finding employment in their chosen career.

Should we be admitting them when we know at that time the graduate will be faced with that potential unfortunate outcome?
Go8 Vice Chancellor Professor Glyn Davis of the University of Melbourne has most definitely served food for thought on that subject in his recent article in “The Australian”.

To quote Professor Davis:

“Degree programs have expanded greatly. There are 111,000 more people under 24 now in higher education programs then in 2008......That would be fine if most university graduates could look forward to meaningful employment. Yet there are areas of significant oversupply.

“There are more than 400 courses offered in aspects of teacher training across the nation, attracting some 80,000 students. In any given year however, only 7000 full time teaching positions are available.

“At a minimum we need a way to ensure potential students are aware of the risks of undertaking a degree, since they and the taxpayer will together cover the cost of their training. We may even question the wisdom of funding further expansion in fields of known over supply”.

This is what sits behind the Go8 calling for a reshaping of the demand driven system.

It is the Go8’s view - encapsulated in the words of Professor Davis - that the sector owes far more to a potential student at admission than simply the transparent methodology by which they have been accepted.

We owe them some transparency regarding their career choice at the end of their study period.

After all, for teaching graduates we have the sobering data that NSW alone has a teaching oversupply of some 47,000 searching for full time teacher employment.

Incredibly, that figure almost matches the 48,000 total number of teachers currently employed by the NSW Department of Education.

In other words, Australia would have to replicate almost the entire school system of NSW to place these graduates in teaching roles. Surely, Australia can do a better job in directing and enabling the skills and talents of our future workforce?

Last week saw the release of the Graduate Destination Survey.

From the Go8’s perspective - its 2015 findings did not make us feel more comfortable about current graduate outcomes.

There is no doubt that unemployment rates for graduates sit lower than unemployment of non-graduates.
However we cannot ignore the fact that whilst the short term employment and salary outcomes were better in 2015 than in 2014 - they are still below 2009 levels - when the full time employment rates of our graduates was nearly 80 percent.

As I stated at the time to The Australian - the demand driven system began in 2012 so only the very first of those extra graduates can have appeared in the survey.

It therefore remains to be seen what impact the year-on year addition of those graduates will have on employment outcomes moving forward.

The returned Turnbull Federal Government most certainly has some decisions to make in relation to the demand driven system. The Go8 has signified such a rethink in our “Priority Directions”, a document we released during the election campaign.

As we stated then - the demand driven system in its current form has successfully increased participation in Australia’s university system.

However, if strong growth continues there is a risk that the system will not be financially sustainable in the long term, given the priority placed on overall Budget repair.

It is time to move on to a new model - better supporting opportunity, student choice and diversity across the tertiary education sector. At its heart this must provide access and equity for all who are capable, while maintaining quality.

We also need to look at our admission roadmap for students.

Australia remains bogged down in an old-fashioned study model that students go to the nearest local University.

I know of examples in South Australia where potential engineering students discounted UniSA for engineering and chose Flinders uni – simply because Mawson Lakes was too far away - it’s 12’ks from the centre of Adelaide!

What are the chances that, for every student in Australia, the university closest to home also just happens to be the same University that can best suit their needs and drive their dreams?

Why is it that, in a world that is becoming more mobile and interconnected than ever, a world that will increasingly cry out for people skilled at managing diversity and handling change, our students are choosing to spend some of their most formative years in environments already over-familiar?

In Australia, 88 per cent of metropolitan based students apply to a University within their home city.
Of those who apply interstate the Department of Education suggests many of these are the higher ATAR students chasing high demand / limited supply courses such as medicine.

Internationally, it is the opposite. The average UK student studies some 150 kilometres away from home and in the US some two-thirds of college students study more than 80 kilometres away from home.

When you try to ascertain what keeps our students so close to home you come across an admissions bureaucracy that is user unfriendly.

The Go8 contends that it is in the best interest of our students for this to be changed, and as soon as possible.

Currently, students who want to apply in other States need to apply multiple times. And while this behaviour is readily apparent for some programs, such as medicine or veterinary sciences, it is seldom observed for others.

Importantly, students have to complete separate and different admissions forms and make separate payments, after purchasing separate University course books.

Why are students who seek mobility being penalised for exercising choice?

Why can’t students receive information they need on all available universities and apply through one single system?

Quite simply, because in Australia there are five separate TACs.

Five different systems, with various degree of consumer orientation or disorientation!

They reflect historical approaches, created by secondary education systems that appear incompatible, and assess according to different rules.

Incredibly, in a country of only 25 million, we cannot agree on the learning outcome that should define a year 12 student.

Without a national curriculum and with widely variant ways to determine the HSC threshold or component, we allow various States to rely on separate and at times incompatible structures to determine university offers.

The Go8 is willing to challenge this legacy.
We support the principle of a national TAC on the basis that prospective students and their families must always be placed at the centre of any university admissions process.

A national TAC could deliver better access to more information - this would improve student mobility within Australia.

A national TAC could also greatly assist with improving transparency in university admissions for prospective students.

A national TAC could offer benefits to students from regional areas if existing State-based TACs are not serving that cohort well.

And a national TAC could remove duplicative—and costly—arrangements for universities that operate across jurisdictions and remove arrangements that may act as a barrier or disincentive for some universities to recruit students across jurisdictions.

There is no doubt that a transition to a national TAC would involve challenges which are both real and significant.

However - we do not accept that because something is hard to manage and deliver at the back end - which is what we keep being told – it is a reason not to do it.

Our responsibility is to our students and what is currently in place does not work as well as it should.

When it isn’t working, it must be changed. It’s that simple.

As a first step in that direction, the Go8 is advocating a single national admissions form that embraces all universities and enables a student to complete one admissions process, with one cost - regardless of the location and number of choices they seek to pursue.

Once we have a single admission process in place – we open up the possibilities - and choice – available to prospective students.

We will lobby hard for that to occur and to occur in the not too distant future.

Another admissions area to be addressed is equity.

As I have earlier mentioned - less than 10 per cent of the Go8 student cohort are accepted with an ATAR under 78.

These admissions, which take into account bonus points are typically related to any of a number of our equity processes for defined equity groups.
These include indigenous, the disabled, and low SES.

There is no doubt that the freeing up of entry to university bachelor programs through the demand driven system has enabled Australia to make outstanding progress in higher education participation.

As a nation, we are well on the way to achieving national attainment targets that help to set us up for the global knowledge economy.

Within this overall growth in participation there has been an upwards trend in participation by students from low SES backgrounds, although as the Go8 has noted previously - the increase of 1.5% in low SES enrolments at undergraduate level still sees the majority of the growth come from medium and high SES students and lags against the aspirational target of a 20% low SES participation rate by 2020.

This is unacceptable.

This is why the Go8 members, independently and collectively, distribute generous scholarship to students of disadvantage. We want to play our part in ensuring that any student with the capacity for learning can thrive at university.

A university education should be accessible to all qualified people who choose it regardless of background or circumstance.

Barriers to entry are complex and policies need to be embedded in comprehensive support systems to attract, retain and graduate students from financially and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.

We need to work to build aspiration for university – and this starts in primary school.

The University of Adelaide is leading the way in this area.

After the successful pilot - then expansion - of a program called Compass – designed to provide innovative ways to engage potential future students at a much younger age – the University became the only Australian licence holder for Children’s University.

This initiative originated in the UK and is delivered in the most disadvantaged schools to students aged 7-14 years.

It focusses on rewarding and acknowledging the learning that children participate in beyond the classroom.
That program now reaches more than 4,600 children a year from schools across South Australia and gives them a taste of university.

This has a profound effect on those prospective students and their families.

The program started with the initiative of the University and was supported by funding through the HEPPP Program.

A reduction in HEPPP funding will likely mean the reduction in funds these programs receive; meaning fewer students from disadvantaged backgrounds being offered an experience like Children’s University.

In closing I feel it is important that I go back to one of the recurring themes of my speech.

Offers and admissions are not standalone.

They are the vital first steps in a process to deliver completion – a successful graduate.

We must approach them as such.

As a sector we owe it to the students we accept not to set them up to fail, nor to channel them in directions for which there can be no positive outcome for them.

The taxpayer and our students need to trust us and our methods.

Transparency is crucial.

Thankyou.

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