



WHITE PAPER SERIES

Reinventing Tertiary Admissions Centres: QTAC's evolution from selection to recruitment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC) has been in business for more than 40 years. That's a long time in admissions years and an even longer time when measured against the rapidly evolving digital and technological world in which we do business.

When QTAC opened its doors in 1975, a lot was happening in Queensland.

Joh Bjelke-Peterson was Premier, the first formal State of Origin match was still five years away, 'Mamma Mia' was climbing the singles charts and movie goers were hearing about a galaxy far, far away.

About the same time, University of Queensland and Griffith University had an idea to create a single admissions centre where potential students could get information about study and lodge applications. UQ and GU were soon joined by James Cook University and ten colleges of advanced education, and in our first year of operation, 18,600 applicants were considered for 200 courses.

Fast forward 40 years and the only constant for QTAC has been change. The shift away from paper applications and fixed offers to electronic submission and leading the way with daily offers has been a significant mindset change for both QTAC and its partner institutions.

Staying innovative and responsive in what is now a buyers' market requires persistence, forethought and the ability to think outside the box when creating value added solutions.



QTAC chose to widen its strategic view of the admissions world and join our partner institutions as they shifted from selection of students into the space of actively recruiting students. By doing this, we have remained a vibrant and successful business because we continue to refine our services to meet the market, and strive to ensure those services are better than any available alternatives.

This white paper discusses why a tertiary admissions centre should reinvent itself and offer meaningful and value-added expertise for both its customers and stakeholders.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

It may seem alien to speak of a tertiary admissions centre as a business with products, services, customers and markets. Traditionally admissions centres in Australia have been somewhat immune to market influences, but this insulation is eroding as the needs of students and universities change and state borders no longer present a barrier to student mobility.

Higher education has long been recognised as a strong revenue industry for the country. Australia has 43 universities and 130 other higher education providers. In 2014, University revenues added an estimated \$140 billion to the economy, with 50 percent of cashflow coming from government grants and loans.¹ Higher education enrolments have been increasing year on year, and have shown rapid growth since QTAC commenced in 1974. By 2015, there were over 1 million domestic students enrolled in university study.²

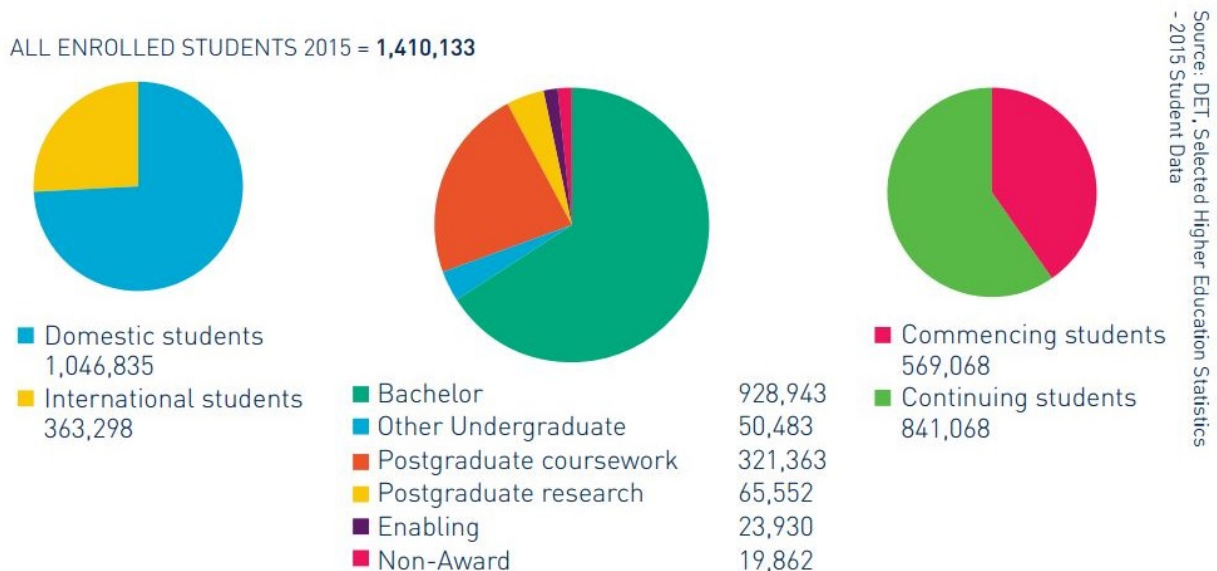


Figure 1: All enrolled students in universities in 2015 (Robinson 2017)

Education is big business. And where there is big business, there is competition.

Since the uncapping of university places and the implementation of a demand-driven system for domestic students in response to the 2008 Bradley Review, universities have been actively competing for students and the accompanying revenue.

¹ Robinson B, Universities Australia Data Snapshot 2017, https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/australias-universities/key-facts-and-data#.Wf-X_GiCyUm

² Ibid

That strategic shift from the competitive selection of students to the active recruitment of students has influenced the provision of admissions services QTAC provides to its customers and stakeholders, and how it is now engaging in the recruitment space.

EVOLUTION OR EXTINCTION

In 2017, in a publication titled Visions for Australian Tertiary Education, Professor Geoff Sharrock commented on the vision for the future of Australian universities:

“for Australian universities, more rapid and more disruptive change is in prospect. As knowledge becomes more digitised, learning becomes more globalised. Massive growth in student access, new knowledge production and new transmission channels signify success for the Western university’s traditional ‘enlightenment’ mission...the quasi-monastic idea of the university as a ‘community of scholars’ is being recast as a multi-professional community of experts, more connected than ever before to other social sectors and enterprises.”³

Higher education providers are evolving as their mission, vision and values shift from a traditional place of learning to a multi layered research, engagement and knowledge transfer environment. The “chalk and talk” model is being slowly replaced with a more dynamic, flexible and customer centric model of education delivery.

Tertiary admissions centres must also evolve, or risk becoming extinct and irrelevant to the very stakeholders they were established to serve. The evolutionary journey will see the admissions centres transforming from gatekeepers who keep prospective students out, to strategic partners for our partner institutions who help them recruit the students that they want in their communities.

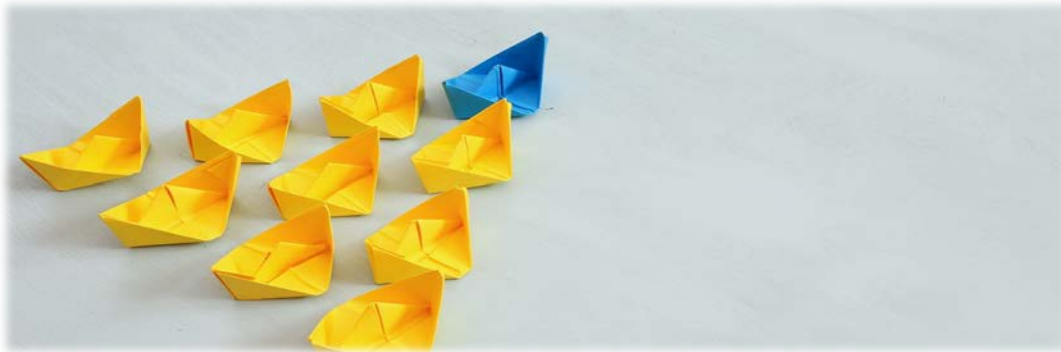
To be strategic partners, admissions centres must understand the challenges our institutions face. If we understand these challenges – not in a superficial way but deeply and based on true sector awareness and sustained engagement – then we can be part of the solution for our institutions.

In recent years, QTAC has listened closely to its partner institutions when they have been discussing the challenges they face. We have identified the circumstances where we can add value and we have chosen to do more than merely respond to requests for help. QTAC has chosen to step up and work to design solutions, suggest alternatives and initiate change agendas.

Here are three examples spanning three years where QTAC has suggested, designed or initiated solutions in response to some of the challenges our partner institutions have been faced with.

³ James, R et al (2017) Visions for Australian Tertiary Education. http://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/2263137/MCSHE-Visions-for-Aust-Ter-Ed-web2.pdf

EXAMPLE ONE – THE INTRODUCTION OF DAILY OFFERS



In 2016, QTAC recognised that because of the impact of the demand driven model, fewer partner institutions were looking for a traditional admissions gatekeeper tasked with selecting the chosen few for entry into the hallowed halls of academia.

In fact, for most Queensland institutions, demand was not exceeding supply so QTAC's role needed to adapt accordingly. To support our institutions, QTAC needed to become market responsive, more flexible and timelier.

This was achieved by creating a process which allowed for daily offers to be issued to prospective students. QTAC was the first admissions centre in Australia to innovate in this space, which enabled partner institutions to make offers continuously, rather than being constrained by a traditional offer timetable.

Since our launch in 2016, daily offers are now commonplace for other tertiary admissions centres, which is great news for institutions and students alike.

At the heart of daily offers was the realisation that competitive offer rounds were not necessary for every course. By separating the concept of an 'offer' from the requirement for a competitive 'offer round', QTAC could invite students into courses as soon as it could be established that the student met the minimum eligibility requirements set by the institution.

Ask Yourself This Question...



QTAC asked the question that many institutions were thinking – why should Sarah, a 35-year-old wanting to study wait for months to be placed in a queue with school leavers to be assessed for an offer to study a Bachelor of Business?

If Sarah met the entry requirements for the course, why not make her an offer immediately, enabling the institution to start talking to Sarah about the great experience coming her way?

Conversely, if Sarah didn't meet the entry requirements for a Bachelor of Business, let's have that conversation with her early and start the discussion about bridging or preparatory studies.

Staying with the traditional offer round model just didn't make good business sense for QTAC or our institutions in this new environment.

Of course, QTAC retains the expertise to perform the close assessment required to differentiate between applicants for limited entry courses such as medicine and veterinary science. Maintaining complementary but distinct admissions streams allows QTAC to tailor services to the uniqueness of each course at each campus, for each partner institution.

Because QTAC asked questions, challenged the norm and thought outside the square, daily offers are now commonplace in Queensland.

QTAC is very proud of the launch of daily offers. It was revolutionary, and it significantly improved our ability to respond to the needs of our partner institutions. The bar was set high after daily offers and we needed to rise to the next challenge.

Which we did.

EXAMPLE TWO - TRANSPARENCY

Yes, we hear the rumblings from our readers:

“but transparency isn’t ground breaking, why are you claiming this as an innovation?”

Why? Because transparency matters.

Firstly, it should be the minimum threshold that institutions aspire to measure themselves against to in an age of full disclosure with a discerning and vocal market. Secondly because the Federal government has indicated that 2.5 per cent of institution funding will depend on institutions meeting compliance timeframes for transparency guidelines.

QTAC’s innovation in the transparency space was to innovate with a proposal to have a common approach for Queensland institutions, confirm that proposal with Federal and State authorities, create solutions for our partner institutions and then deliver data sets that met reporting requirements as well as adding value for our stakeholders.

QTAC recognised that its position in the Queensland higher education community meant it was uniquely placed to provide knowledge, leadership and guidance in a space where these business attributes added value for our partner institutions.

With 40 years under our belt, QTAC understands the data, perhaps better than any partner institution. We have done the hard yards necessary to ensure that we truly understand the transparency landscape, to wrap our heads around what data already exists, what is missing and what hasn’t even been thought of yet.

We knew QTAC staff had the skills to bring the missing data sets into existence.

And we did.

By developing a Queensland solution, QTAC provided our partner institutions with a strong platform when the Federal regulator reviewed institution efforts in the transparency space.

As QTAC finalises the transparency effort for 2018, there is another HESP driven challenge on the horizon - to improve student retention.

EXAMPLE THREE - RETENTION

All higher education policy pundits indicate that future institution performance funding will be increasingly tied to retention. This indicates a significant shift from labelling the challenge of retention as a problem sitting with applicants and firmly places the challenge of student retention with institutions.

It is important to note that institutions identified student retention and completion as a pedagogical priority several years ago, however the recent government priority of implementing a demand driven higher education system created priority shift which may have shifted priorities.

Australia has shifted from an elite higher education system to mass participation environment, meeting the initial objective of the Bradley Review.

In doing so, it may have created a student cohort which will struggle to meet the requirements for course completion.



The conventional approach to improving retention is to increase the 'quality' of students admitted to courses – raise the cut off and the result will be a greater proportion of students likely to graduate. This is a conventionally sound strategy. Research confirms that evidence of prior academic achievement such as high ATAR is a good predictor of both performance and perseverance in higher education. Institutions may benefit in terms of retention by '*raising the drawbridge*' and restricting access to students with high levels of performance.

Importantly, the same research concludes that prior academic performance is not the only factor strongly correlated with tertiary success.

In a sector where most institutions cannot afford to restrict themselves to the top 25 percent of students, we need to develop ways to assess the likelihood of success based on factors other than traditional academic performance.

QTAC is working with several institutions to develop more flexible admissions criteria which look at attitudinal factors and their impact on student retention. In 2011, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council funded a Whole of University Experience research project across six Australian universities. The project determined that factors relating to attrition are university specific and

reflect the students' responses to the institution culture and environment – specifically a lack of clear reason for being at university and a feeling of having insufficient ability to succeed.⁴

Through this research and other projects like it, QTAC has embraced the viewpoint that commencing students know that the course they are starting is a good fit for their interests and abilities and they can draw a direct line between their field of study and their long-term ambitions.

QTAC believes that the best way to support students to tackle the challenge of what is an unimagined future in terms of career opportunities is to encourage students to think in terms of capabilities rather than in terms of traditional career paths.

While we may not know what the careers of the future may look like, we do have some idea of the capabilities will be in demand. Based on current research, we know that capabilities such as problem solving, critical thinking and innovation will remain relevant regardless of the impact of technology and changing career paths.

QTAC wants to help students think in terms of these capabilities of the future rather than focussing on traditional careers that may not exist in 10 years.

My Path – A Tool to Improve Student Retention

At present, QTAC asks applicants to select the courses they want to study in an information vacuum. We assume that applicants have a clear idea what they want to apply for, and how it relates to their skills and life goals. From 2018, QTAC will give applicants an innovative, online resource to help with exploring capabilities and options in more depth.

Prospective students will be able to identify their existing capabilities, as well as identifying new ones they can develop through further study.

Rather than only asking applicants to select their preferred courses, QTAC will provide an opportunity for them to reflect on what they enjoy doing, what they are good at and how they think. A series of stepped questions will be asked to guide applicants through the discovery process.

The suite of questions has been developed by leading psychologists from the Centre for Leadership Advantage and senior academics at the Institute for Working Futures. QTAC, in partnership with these industry leaders, has designed **My Path** which lets students explore key employability capabilities such as their ability to empower others, to be creative or to adapt and change.

⁴ Willcoxson, L et al (2011), *The Whole of University Experience: Retention, attrition, learning and personal support interventions during undergraduate business studies*

By offering this reflection tool, QTAC will assist institutions to tackle the challenge of improving student retention by enabling prospective students to understand that the course they are selecting is closely aligned with their personal preferences, abilities and ambitions. QTAC hopes that by offering **My Path** to the student market, it will yield students who are more committed, from the beginning, to the course they have chosen.

SUMMARY

Tertiary admissions centres are at a crossroads. They can continue to provide a traditional admissions service for their institutions, or they can choose to become a more engaged and solutions driven partner in the student recruitment and retention space.

QTAC has identified the need to shift into a solutions driven space so we can work more productively with our partner institutions. QTAC staff are incredibly talented and can provide significant value-added services across a range of specialised portfolios.

Admissions centres are uniquely placed to provide a range of innovative services due to the nature of our business and the volume of information held, and if the step isn't taken into this brand-new world of innovation and service provision, then admissions centres sadly will become a relic of times past.

About QTAC and Dr John Griffiths

QTAC offers a centralized tertiary education application and information service for a range of partner institutions across Queensland and Australia. We have been industry leaders in this space for over 40 years, managing over 75,000 applications a year across 1,600 undergraduate courses.

Further information can be found at www.qtac.edu.au



Dr John Griffiths has been the CEO of QTAC since 2011. John has led sector wide initiatives including the introduction of daily offers, Queensland's response to the Federal Government's transparency of higher education admissions and initial teacher education. As a thought leader in the higher education admissions space, John continues to engage and innovate as Australia navigates new waters in education.

His previous roles as Assistant Vice-Chancellor at Massey University and General Manager Corporate for the New Zealand Army ensure John is uniquely positioned to provide in depth and meaningful commentary on utilizing innovation in education.

You can follow John on Twitter (@DrJohnGriffiths) or on LinkedIn for regular updates.