



UAC



# Joint Select Committee on Arts and Music Education and Training in NSW

UAC submission

August 2024

UAC acknowledges and pays respect to the past, present and future custodians and elders of this nation. We honour the continuation of and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pe

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## About UAC

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 university admissions services and promote equity of access to tertiary education.

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 to apply for those courses. For NSW HSC students UAC calculates and provides information about the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). Parents, schools, the media, and the public know UAC as their first point of reference for the ATAR and university admissions in NSW and the ACT.

UAC is therefore pleased to be invited to give evidence to the Joint Select Committee on Arts and Music Education and Training in NSW and to provide this supporting information.

## Executive summary

- UAC calculates the ATAR for NSW HSC students and processes applications for universities in NSW and the ACT.
- As far as ATAR calculation is concerned, all HSC courses are treated equally in the scaling process. The purpose of scaling is to ensure that students are neither advantaged nor disadvantaged in their choice of HSC courses.
- In addition, admission to most arts and music courses at university involve additional selection criteria beyond the ATAR (eg audition, portfolio).
- UAC's advice to schools, parents and senior secondary students is for students to choose HSC courses that they are good at, enjoy doing and which will best prepare them for their plans after school. However, myths about scaling persist, with certain courses labelled as always being "scaled down", and these myths may to a greater or lesser extent influence HSC course choices.
- What the UAC data shows is that there has been a great deal of stability over the past decade in the number of students taking arts and music courses in the HSC.
- As far as entry to university is concerned, UAC handles applications for a wide range of courses and students receive offer to their highest eligible preference regardless of the field of study.
- What the UAC data shows is that there has been a steady decline in applications through UAC for arts and music courses over the past decade.
- However, it's important to note that applications for many arts and music courses at the tertiary study level are handled outside UAC.

## Introduction

UAC's role in arts and music education and training in NSW relates to the following from the Committee's Terms of Reference:

1. (a) (xi) factors influencing student decisions to pursue further arts education, including but not limited to course choice, course location and the method of study and
1. (b) (x) factors influencing student decisions to pursue further music education, including but not limited to course choice, course location and the method of study.

In particular, UAC:

- calculates the ATAR for NSW HSC students
- provides information to students in Years 10-12 about HSC subject selection and ATAR calculation and
- provides information to Year 12 students about the university courses available and helps them apply for and receive an offer to their chosen course/s
- maintains data relating to the above that can help illustrate the choices made by students in both senior secondary and post-secondary settings.

## The ATAR

UAC publishes detailed information and videos relating to the ATAR, including how the ATAR is calculated. Information is available via UAC's website<sup>1</sup>, including the booklet: *ATAR Essentials*.<sup>2</sup>

### ATAR courses

ATAR courses are HSC Board Developed courses formally examined by NESA. These Board Developed courses are the only courses that can be included in ATAR calculations. (For the purposes of this inquiry those courses are Dance, Drama, Music 1, Music 2, Music Extension and Visual Arts).

### What is the ATAR and why do we need it?

The ATAR is a rank, not a mark.

It is a number between 0 and 99.95 with increments of 0.05. It enables the comparison of overall achievement of students who have completed thousands of different combinations of HSC courses. An ATAR of 80.00 places students in the top 20% of their age cohort. It is important to note that their ranking depends solely on their performance in the HSC.

The ATAR enables universities to rank applicants for selection in an objective and equitable way. It is designed to be used as an indicator of readiness for university study: there is no notion of pass or fail. UAC calculates the ATAR for HSC students on behalf of universities. Depending on the course, universities also use other selection tools, such as interviews, portfolios, auditions, personal statements and questionnaires. While the ATAR is an effective tool for allocating university places to Year 12 applicants, it's not designed to be used for any other purpose. For example, it does not reflect a student's full range of capabilities and skills, or the many attributes they will draw on as they navigate life after school.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uac.edu.au/future-applicants/atar>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.uac.edu.au/assets/documents/atar/atar-essentials.pdf>

It's important to note that ATAR is often used in conjunction with other criteria when deciding whether to make a student an offer to a university course. This is particularly true for arts and music courses, which typically include additional criteria such as an audition and submission of a portfolio.

## HSC vs ATAR

'Why is my ATAR low compared to my Year 12 marks?' This is the most common question posed by Year 12 students when receiving their results.

The answer is that they are different measures of achievement: HSC marks tell you about your performance in the HSC, whereas your ATAR tells you about your position, or ranking, in the HSC.

This table summarises the main differences between HSC and ATAR.

Your HSC marks	Your ATAR
Are presented as marks out of 100 (for each 2-unit course)	Is a rank, not a mark or percentage. It is based on scaled marks so we can compare results across different courses.
Tell you how well you've performed in each of your courses, according to standards set by NESA	Tells you where you're positioned overall in relation to other students
Can only be compared to the marks of students who completed the same HSC courses	Tells you how you compare with other students who have done different combinations of HSC courses
Are provided by NESA	Is provided by UAC

## ATAR calculation

There are rules around the calculation of the ATAR that are different to the HSC rules.

To be eligible for an ATAR in NSW you must have satisfactorily completed at least 10 units of HSC Board developed courses, including at least:

- 2 units of English
- three Board Developed courses of 2 units or greater
- four subject areas.

The ATAR is then calculated using the sum of your **scaled** marks in 10 units using:

- your best 2 units of English and
- your best 8 units from the remaining units.

It's important to note that more than 50% of HSC students study only 10 units in their Year 12 year, which means that all their units will be included in their ATAR.

## Why are marks scaled for the ATAR?

There are over 25,000 different patterns of study completed by ATAR students. Given the choice available, the rank in different courses will not necessarily have the same meaning. A good rank is more difficult to obtain when competing against students of higher academic ability.

The underlying principle of scaling is that students should be neither advantaged nor disadvantaged by choosing one pattern of study over another. The scaling algorithm estimates what a student's marks would have been if all courses had been studied by all students and all courses had the same mark distribution.








The HSC mark for a course is scaled according to that course's scaled mean. The scaled mean indicates the academic ability of students taking the course, not the perceived difficulty of the course.

Students who have chosen courses that have low scaled means still achieve high ATARs. Equally, students who have chosen courses with high scaled means can below median ATARs. This is because their scaled marks consider both the scaled means and their positions in their courses.

### Myths about the ATAR and scaling

It is a myth that choosing certain courses will automatically increase a students' ATAR. There is no magic formula for getting a good ATAR. It all depends on how well Year 12 students perform in all their chosen courses in comparison to other students.

As students hear a lot of confusing messages about the ATAR, UAC has worked with NESAs and the media in order to get the correct information to students, schools and parents. Extensive information is available on UAC's website, which includes UAC's ATAR expert, Dr Helen Tam, providing ATAR myth-busting video advice to the class of 2023 (featured in *The Sydney Morning Herald HSC Study Guide 2023*).<sup>3</sup> This table illustrates the most common myths:

Myth	Fact
 <p>Some courses are always 'scaled up', therefore I should study those.</p>  <p>Some courses are always 'scaled down', therefore I should avoid those.</p>	 <p>The way a course is scaled depends entirely on the average academic performance of all the students doing that course that year - and it can change from year to year. For most courses, your scaled mark will be lower than your HSC mark. To get the best possible position and maximise your scaled marks, select the courses you'll do best in.</p>
 <p>I need to study 'hard' subjects to get high scaled marks.</p>	 <p>'Hard' is a subjective term. Everyone has different strengths and interests. Students who achieve an ATAR of 99.95 study a large variety of subjects.</p>
 <p>I should study Mathematics Standard 2 rather than Mathematics Advanced to get a better ATAR.</p>	 <p>It's very difficult to predict which course will lead to a higher scaled mark. Your scaled mark depends on the average academic ability of the students studying that course and your position in the course. When considering which maths course to study, remember that some university courses have prerequisites or assumed knowledge of Mathematics Advanced. It's important to choose the level of maths that best suits your plans for further study.</p>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.uac.edu.au/media-centre/news/atar-myths-busted>

## Year 10 subject selection

UAC has a range of resources available for schools, parents and Year 10 students to help them when students are selecting their courses for the HSC. Our free online tool, *Subject Compass*<sup>4</sup> provides course advice to students based on their interests, skills, personality traits, intended career path or tertiary study plans.

In addition, the *Steps to Uni for Year 10 Students*<sup>5</sup> booklet is distributed free-of-charge to every Year 10 student in NSW and contains comprehensive information about university prerequisites and assumed knowledge and the important things to consider when choosing HSC courses.

UAC advice is that students "shouldn't choose courses based on what you believe are the likely effects of scaling on your ATAR. Your course choices should be based on your interests, demonstrated abilities and future career plans. Studying courses that you are not good at or happy with may mean you won't do your best or achieve good marks. Choosing courses you are good at and do well in will give you the best chance of maximising your ATAR".

However, students may to a greater or lesser extent be influenced by things such as persistent myths about scaling, the availability of courses at their school, the nature of the course curriculum (eg does it involve a major work), and advice from their school, friends and family.

## UAC data

### Arts and music courses in the HSC

The Key Learning Area of Creative Arts in the NSW HSC includes:

- Dance
- Drama
- Music 1
- Music 2
- Music Extension
- Visual Arts.

Visual Arts remains the most popular HSC arts course, consistently enrolling about 7,000 ATAR-eligible students annually over the past 11 years. This figure is around 13-14% of all ATAR-eligible students.

Music 1 and Drama each attract between 3,000 and 4,000 ATAR-eligible students per year. However, the percentage of ATAR-eligible students taking each of these courses has declined slightly from around 7-8% in 2013 to 5-6% in 2023.

Dance, Music 2 and Music Extension are each taken by around 1% of all ATAR-eligible students. The numbers have been stable over the past decade.

The gender distribution in these courses has also remained stable between 2013 and 2023:

- Dance: 95-96% female
- Drama: 66-67% female

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.uac.edu.au/subject-compass/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.uac.edu.au/assets/documents/year-10/year-10-booklet-2027.pdf>

- Visual Arts: 71-74% female
- Music 2 and Music Extension: 50-51% female
- Music 1: 47-50% female, making it the only course with slightly lower than expected female representation (around 54% of ATAR students are female)

The data shows some differences in academic performance across these courses:

- The average ATAR for Music 2 and Music Extension students ranges between the mid to high-80s, around 15-20 points higher than the overall median ATAR (which is around 70).
- The average ATAR for students in Music 1, Dance, Drama, and Visual Arts is in the low to mid-60s, below the median of 70. In recent years, the average ATAR of Drama students has increased slightly from the mid-60s to high-60s.
- The differences between Music 2 and Music Extension students on the one hand, and Dance, Drama, Music 1 and Visual Arts students on the other, are also reflected in the average scaled marks for these courses. The average scaled mark for Music 2 and Music Extension is in the mid-30s (out of 50), while the other courses is around the low-20s (out of 50).
- It is notable, however, that the average ATARs and scaled means have been remarkably consistent within each of the courses over the last decade.

## Admission to university arts and music courses through UAC

Admission to university arts courses through UAC have shown a steady decline between 2013 and 2023 as follows:

- Applications (expressed as first preferences) have decreased from about 8,000 to 5,000 annually over the last decade. In terms of the percentage of applicants having an arts course as their first preference, this translates to a decrease from 5-6% to 4%.
- About 64% of applicants are female.
- While offers to arts courses have remained relatively stable (7,000-8,000 per year), confirmed enrolments have declined substantially from around 5,000 in 2013 to just over 2,000 in 2024.
- Approximately 67% of offers go to female applicants.

Admission to university music courses through UAC have also declined between 2013 and 2023 as follows:

- In 2013, 91 offers were made for these courses, dropping to only 20 in 2023.
- The University of Sydney has been the primary and consistent provider of these courses.
- UNSW offered courses until 2022 but has since discontinued them.
- Regional universities have sporadically offered these courses but have limited uptake.

The overall trend at UAC shows a declining interest in post-school arts and music education, despite relatively stable enrolments in HSC arts and music courses.

Further data would be required to determine the cause of this decline. Noting that admission to many tertiary arts and music courses is handled outside the UAC system, it could be that students have received offers to and enrolled in non-UAC courses or have decided not to pursue further study in arts and music at all.