

All about your ATAR



JUNE 2009

FOR 2009 NSW HSC STUDENTS

In June 2009 the Universities Admission Index (UAI) is changing to the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). This booklet provides information about the calculation of the ATAR for 2009 NSW HSC students. More information about the ATAR, and about the change from UAI to ATAR, is available on UAC's website at www.uac.edu.au/atar/.

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Prepared by UAC. The assistance of the Technical Committee on Scaling and the Board of Studies NSW is gratefully acknowledged.

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Common terms and abbreviations

Board/Board of Studies

NSW Board of Studies.

Board Developed courses

A Board Developed course is one in which the syllabus has been developed by the Board of Studies.

ATAR

Australian Tertiary Admission Rank.

ATAR courses

ATAR courses are Board Developed courses for which there are formal examinations conducted by the Board of Studies that yield a graded assessment. These are the only courses that can be included in the ATAR calculations. ATAR courses are classified as either Category A courses or Category B courses.

Category A courses

These courses have the academic rigour and depth of knowledge to provide an adequate background for tertiary studies.

Category B courses

These courses do not have the academic rigour and depth of knowledge to provide an adequate background for tertiary studies in themselves, but their contribution to the ATAR is regarded as adequate if the other courses included in the ATAR are more academically demanding.

In 2009 the Category B courses are:

- Accounting
- Automotive Examination
- Business Services Examination
- Construction Examination
- Electrotechnology Examination
- Entertainment Industry Examination
- Hospitality Examination
- Industrial Technology Examination
- Information Technology Examination
- Metal and Engineering Examination
- Primary Industries Examination
- Retail Services Examination
- Tourism Examination.

Percentile

A percentile indicates your position in a course against other students. The top percentile is 100 and the bottom percentile is 0. If your percentile in a course is 73, you are placed 27% from the top of the students in that course.

UAC

The Universities Admissions Centre (NSW & ACT) Pty Ltd is the central office which receives and processes applications for admission to most undergraduate courses offered by universities in NSW and the ACT.

TERTIARY SELECTION AND THE ATAR

Each year approximately 40 000 current school leavers apply through UAC for admission to courses offered by NSW and ACT universities. For the majority of courses there are more applicants than places. Applicants must be ranked to allow selection to take place.

The first step in the selection process is to check whether applicants have satisfied any and all prerequisites specified for the courses for which they have applied. For example, a Bachelor of Software Engineering at the Australian National University specifies ACT Mathematical Methods major or NSW Mathematics as a prerequisite. If you have not met this prerequisite you will not be considered for the course, regardless of your ATAR.

The second step is to rank all applicants who satisfy the prerequisites for that course. For most courses, applicants who are current school leavers are ranked using the ATAR.

Some courses have additional selection criteria, such as a portfolio, interview, audition, questionnaire or test. You can find more details about additional selection criteria and the selection process in the *UAC 2010 Guide*.

THE ATAR – WHAT IS IT?

The ATAR is a number between 0 and 99.95 with increments of 0.05. It provides a measure of your overall academic achievement in the NSW HSC in relation to that of other students, and it helps universities rank applicants for selection. It is calculated on behalf of the universities and released by UAC. **The ATAR is a rank, not a mark.**

Your ATAR indicates your position relative to the students who started Year 7 high school with you. An ATAR of 80.00 indicates that you have performed well enough in the HSC to place you 20% from the top of your Year 7 group, had all students in this group completed Year 12 and been eligible for the ATAR.

It is important to note that your ranking depends solely on your performance in the HSC.

ATARs are calculated for all ATAR-eligible students, but not all students are notified. Only NSW HSC students who indicate on their HSC entry forms that they wish to be notified of their ATAR will receive an ATAR Advice Notice from UAC in the mail at about the same time they receive their HSC results from the Board of Studies.

You can access your ATAR on UAC's website from 9am on Thursday 17 December 2009.

Are you eligible for an ATAR?

To be eligible for an ATAR in 2009 you must satisfactorily complete at least 10 units of ATAR courses. These ATAR courses must include at least:

- eight units from Category A courses
- two units of English
- three Board Developed courses of two units
- four subjects.

How is your ATAR calculated?

Your ATAR is based on an aggregate of **scaled marks*** in 10 units of ATAR courses comprising:

- your best two units of English and
- your best eight units from the remaining units.

No more than two units of Category B courses can be included.

* see page 3, Step 2 for information about scaling. Scaled marks are **not** Board of Studies HSC marks.

More information on the calculation of the ATAR can be found in the *UAC 2010 Guide* or on UAC's website at www.uac.edu.au/atar/.

Courses completed in previous years

Scaled marks are calculated in the year that you complete the course. If you accumulate courses towards your HSC, your marks are not re-scaled each year that you are eligible for a ATAR.

YOUR HSC MARKS AND YOUR ATAR

A common question is how your ATAR is related to your HSC marks. The relationship is somewhat complex because your ATAR serves a different purpose from your HSC marks.

Your HSC marks

Your HSC marks provide information about how well you have achieved in **each** of the courses you have completed.

Your HSC Record of Achievement provides a profile of your performance in the different courses you have studied.

Your HSC marks are reported against standards.

Your HSC marks are provided by the Board of Studies.

Your ATAR

Your ATAR provides information about how well you have performed **overall** against other students.

Your ATAR allows you to be compared with students who have completed different combinations of courses.

Your ATAR is a **rank**, not a mark.

Your ATAR is provided by UAC.

Your HSC marks and your ATAR are derived in different ways from the same data: your raw examination marks and your school assessment marks. You do not see these marks.

Your HSC marks

The Board of Studies describes the standards for a course using a performance scale; for 2-unit courses there are six performance bands and for extension courses there are four performance bands. For each course, the Board of Studies' standards setting procedure determines which raw examination marks on this year's examination correspond to the performance band cut-off marks, so that every raw examination mark is aligned to a performance band.

To enable school assessments from different schools to be compared, assessment marks submitted by schools are moderated using the raw examination marks. These moderated school assessment marks are also aligned to performance bands.

It is these aligned marks, together with an HSC mark, that you receive from the Board of Studies.

Your HSC mark is the average of your aligned examination mark and your aligned school assessment, and determines your performance band for the course.

Your HSC results

Your HSC results present a profile of your HSC achievement.

For example, here are Elizabeth's 2008 HSC results:

	Units	Examination mark	Assessment mark	HSC mark	Performance band
Business Studies	2	83/100	77/100	80	5
English Advanced	2	77/100	73/100	75	4
Mathematics	2	75/100	83/100	79	4
Modern History	2	84/100	80/100	82	5
Visual Arts	2	85/100	83/100	84	5
French Continuers	2	89/100	85/100	87	5

CALCULATING YOUR ATAR

The purpose of the ATAR is to provide a measure of your overall performance compared with other students, so it is based on the marks you receive in your HSC courses. Your position in your courses is just as important as the actual mark you receive.

Let's calculate the ATAR for Elizabeth who received the HSC marks shown on the previous page.

There are several steps in the process.

Step 1 The first step is to calculate the average of the raw examination mark and the moderated school assessment mark for each of Elizabeth's courses.

These averages are called *raw* HSC marks and these are the marks that are scaled.

Step 2 It is not possible to simply add either the raw HSC marks or the HSC marks Elizabeth received from the Board of Studies to calculate an overall measure of achievement. Similar HSC marks do not necessarily indicate similar positions in different courses.

	Units	HSC mark/100	Percentile
Business Studies	2	80	71
English Advanced	2	75	31
Mathematics	2	79	55
Modern History	2	82	70
Visual Arts	2	84	63
French Continuers	2	87	63

A table (Table A3) showing the distribution in each course of both the Board's HSC marks (as reported to students) and the scaled marks (as used in the 2008 UAI calculation) at specific percentiles is available in the *Report on the Scaling of the 2008 NSW HSC* on UAC's website at www.uac.edu.au/publications/undergraduate/.

This table also includes information on means, standard deviations and maximum marks.

Table A3 from the 2009 HSC will be available when ATARs are released on 17 December 2009.

From the table above you can see that although Elizabeth's HSC marks in English Advanced and Mathematics differ by 4, the percentiles are very different. In English Advanced she has performed better than 31% of other students in that course whereas in Mathematics she has performed better than 55%.

Your position and your mark in a course depend on how good **you** are in that course **and** how good **other students** are in that course.

Therefore your marks in different courses are not comparable. They cannot just be added together to derive your ATAR. Some form of adjustment must be carried out before an **overall** measure of achievement can be determined. This is called scaling.

Scaling is needed to compare students properly and fairly who have studied different courses. Scaling therefore determines what your marks would have been if **all** students attempted **all** courses.

For each course, the strength of competition is calculated first, then the scaled mean, the spread of scaled marks and the maximum scaled mark.

The scaled mean for a course is based on the average academic achievement of the course candidature, which is determined by the marks the students in that course achieve in **all** their courses.

The average scaled mean is 50 for 2-unit courses. If a course candidature is strong academically, the scaled mean will be higher than the average scaled mean.

In the scaling process courses dominated by high-achieving students, who do well in all their subjects, will be scaled positively. Courses with many students who do not perform well in all their subjects will be scaled negatively.

From the table of scaled means below you can see that most of the courses Elizabeth completed have included many high-achieving students. The scaled means of most of her courses are greater than 50.

	Units	Scaled mean
Business Studies	2	47.6
English Advanced	2	62.6
Mathematics	2	60.8
Modern History	2	54.4
Visual Arts	2	46.0
French Continuers	2	68.6

Step 3 Elizabeth's raw HSC marks are then scaled. As you can see from the table below, Elizabeth's scaled marks are different from the HSC marks she received from the Board.

	Units	HSC mark/100	Scaled mark/100
Business Studies	2	80	61.6
English Advanced	2	75	54.3
Mathematics	2	79	65.0
Modern History	2	82	67.1
Visual Arts	2	84	53.0
French Continuers	2	87	76.5

As with Elizabeth, your scaled marks are likely to be different to, and lower than, your corresponding HSC marks. This is not surprising. Your HSC marks and scaled marks are meant to be different. HSC marks are aligned to standards whereas scaled marks are the marks you would have received if all course candidatures were the same.

Note that your position in a course is not altered by scaling.

Step 4 The next step is to calculate Elizabeth's aggregate of scaled marks. Two units of English must be included, then the best eight units from her remaining courses according to the ATAR rules.

From the table of Elizabeth's scaled marks you can see that Visual Arts has the lowest scaled mark, so both units of Visual Arts are omitted.

Elizabeth's aggregate is 324.5.

Step 5 Elizabeth's aggregate is used to determine what her position is compared with other students, including all students who entered Year 7 with her. This position will be expressed as a percentile in an interim phase of the ATAR calculation.

Step 6 The last step is to truncate the percentile to the nearest 0.05. This is Elizabeth's ATAR.

Elizabeth's ATAR is 82.20.

This means that Elizabeth did well enough overall to perform better than 82.20% of her Year 7 cohort.

Remember!

The ATAR is a measure of overall academic achievement in the HSC. It enables universities to rank applicants for selection in a fair and equitable way.

The ATAR is designed only to be used as a possible indicator of readiness for university study. There is no notion of pass or fail.

YOUR ATAR ADVICE NOTICE

Your ATAR Advice Notice includes, in addition to your ATAR, a list of your ATAR courses and the number of units of each course that were actually included in your ATAR calculation.

All HSC students who ask for an ATAR receive an ATAR Advice Notice.

An ATAR, however, is not shown on all ATAR Advice Notices. This could be because:

- you achieve an ATAR between 0.00 and 30.00. In this case, your ATAR will be reported as '30.00 or less' or
- you do not satisfy the requirements for a ATAR. In this case, the statement 'Not eligible' will appear on your ATAR Advice Notice.

A candidate who took courses like Elizabeth in 2009 and had similar outcomes would receive an ATAR Advice Notice that looks like this:

Course name	Category	Year completed	Unit value	Units included in calculation of ATAR
Business Studies	A	2009	2	2
English Advanced	A	2009	2	2
Mathematics	A	2009	2	2
Modern History	A	2009	2	2
Visual Arts	A	2009	2	0
French Continuers	A	2009	2	2

Here is another example of what an ATAR Advice Notice might look like:

Course name	Category	Year completed	Unit value	Units included in calculation of ATAR
English Standard	A	2009	2	2
Geography	A	2009	2	2
Industrial Technology Examination	B	2009	2	2
Legal Studies	A	2009	2	1
Mathematics	A	2009	2	2
Studies of Religion I	A	2009	1	1

In this example, the ATAR Advice Notice shows that:

- all courses were completed in 2009
- all courses are Category A courses except Industrial Technology
- both units of English were included, as is required
- all units of Geography, Industrial Technology, Mathematics and Studies of Religion 1 were included
- one unit of Legal Studies was included.

The scaled mark in Legal Studies was lower than the scaled marks in the other courses so only one unit was included to make up the required 10 units in total.

Information about which courses were included in your ATAR calculation will appear only on the official ATAR Advice Notice. UAC's website will provide your ATAR only.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE ATAR AND THE UAI?

In June 2009 the Universities Admission Index (UAI) is changing to the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR).

The change in reporting student ranks via the ATAR rather than the UAI can be compared to the change in temperature scales; where once we recorded a temperature as degrees Fahrenheit, we now record it as degrees Celsius: the actual temperature has not changed, just the name and scale have been changed.

For students the change will have no practical consequences. The scaling process will be the same, the rank order of students will be the same, and the same applicants will be selected for the same courses. Any change in an ATAR compared to a UAI will see an equivalent change in the course cut-off.

The rules for the ATAR are exactly the same as for the UAI.

The changes have been introduced to achieve consistency across states. The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is the common name all states (except Queensland) have agreed to use for their university selection indices.

The number given to the maximum rank in NSW will also be changing this year. The highest rank will now be an ATAR of 99.95, as opposed to a UAI of 100. This means that NSW students will now be in line with their interstate peers, whose maximum reported index is currently 99.95. Achieving an ATAR of 99.95 is like achieving a UAI of 100 – you are in the top group of students. There are likely to be 45-50 students with an ATAR of 99.95, whereas in past years there have been only 18-23 with a UAI of 100. This is due to NSW changing from rounding ranks to truncating – a UAI of 100 meant that you were in the top 0.025% of all students, while an ATAR of 99.95 means that you are in the top 0.05% of all students.

In addition, while the UAI provided a ranking of students in relation to their School Certificate (Year 10) cohort, the ATAR will rank students against their Year 7 cohort, to take account of students who left school before completing Year 10. As a consequence, most ATARs will be higher than the corresponding UAIs.

Tables comparing ATARs and UAIs based on the 2008 UAI data are available on UAC's website.

Although the changes will be introduced this year, they will have no bearing on your current studies or your potential for acceptance to university. Any change in the distribution of ATARs will be compensated for by corresponding changes in university cut-offs.

More information about the change from UAI to ATAR can be found on UAC's website at www.uac.edu.au/atar.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q1 Why is my ATAR low in comparison to my HSC marks?

Your ATAR depends upon your position in your courses **and** the ability of the other students in your courses (reflected in the scaled means of your courses).

Let's look at Elizabeth's results from the previous pages.

You will see that her position in some of her courses was high. The lowest position was in English Advanced where her percentile was 31. In her other courses her position was higher. In addition, the courses she completed had many high achieving students with whom she was competing. This is indicated by the high scaled means of her courses. Elizabeth's achievement profile (as indicated by her HSC marks and her position in her courses) indicates that overall she will be highly placed in relation to other students, which indeed she was – her ATAR was 82.20.

In Elizabeth's case her ATAR was similar to her HSC marks, but this is not always the case. For example, HSC marks in the 60s can lead to ATARs in the 40s and lower and HSC marks in the 70s can lead to ATARs in the 50s.

Consider the following two students who completed the same courses.

Fred received an HSC mark of 70 in each course, while Laura received an HSC mark of 80 in each course.

	Units	Fred		Laura	
		HSC mark/ 100	Percentile	HSC mark/ 100	Percentile
Biology	2	70	38	80	71
Business Studies	2	70	42	80	71
English Advanced	2	70	13	80	55
Mathematics	2	70	30	80	58
Modern History	2	70	25	80	62
Visual Arts	2	70	10	80	44
ATAR		59.05		82.25	

Their HSC marks in each course differ by only 10, yet their ATARs differ by 23.20. Laura's ATAR is similar to her HSC marks while Fred's ATAR is much lower than his HSC marks.

The reason for the large difference in the ATARs can be found in the differences in the percentiles. The percentiles are much higher for Laura than for Fred. Laura's lowest percentile is higher than Fred's highest.

From the table you can also see that in each course at least 25% of the course candidature has marks in the range 70 to 80. For example, in English Advanced 42% of the candidature has marks in this range.

Given the differences in their course percentiles it is not surprising that Fred's and Laura's ATARs are very different.

The ATAR is all about position, whereas HSC marks indicate standards achieved in individual courses.

Remember that ATARs are calculated afresh each year and are based on position – the same marks in the same courses in two different years will not necessarily produce the same ATARs.

Q2 Is there a general rule when comparing HSC marks and ATARS?

Some students ask if there is a general rule they can use to understand the relationship between their ATAR and their HSC marks. There is no general rule because the pattern of HSC marks varies across courses and each course has a different scaled mean.

However, it can be said that, in general, if you are in the middle group of students enrolled in your courses (with marks typically in the 70s), you are likely to get an ATAR in the high-60s. But sometimes marks in the 70s can mean a much lower ATAR depending on your courses and your position in your courses.

The middle ATAR using 2008 UAI data was 70.80.

Below are examples of students with ATARs of 65.00, 75.00 and 85.00 using 2008 UAI data.

Chris		Alex		Mitch	
HSC mark		HSC mark		HSC mark	
English Standard	82	English Advanced	74	Ancient History	83
General Mathematics	75	General Mathematics	82	Biology	88
Legal Studies	77	Geography	80	Chemistry	79
Music I	76	Modern History	79	English Advanced	78
Visual Arts	83	PDH&PE	81	Mathematics	78
ATAR	65.00	ATAR	75.00	ATAR	85.00

Q3 Which courses count towards my ATAR?

Your ATAR is calculated from your aggregate of scaled marks, including two units of English and your best eight units from the remaining courses, according to the ATAR rules.

Your ATAR Advice Notice tells you which of your courses were actually included in the calculation of your ATAR. Just by looking at your HSC marks, it is not possible to tell which courses will be included in your ATAR. Sometimes the course with the lowest HSC mark will not count, **but this is not always the case.**

Q4 Why is one course counted towards my ATAR when another course where I received a higher HSC mark does not count?

This is because your scaled marks are the marks included in your ATAR calculation and a higher HSC mark does not always mean a higher scaled mark.

To illustrate this point, let's look at Elizabeth's marks in more detail.

Her lowest HSC mark is in English Advanced, but since two units of English must be included the scaled mark for English Advanced will contribute to the ATAR. Of her remaining courses you might expect Mathematics to have the lowest scaled mark as it has the lowest HSC mark and lowest percentile. Visual Arts, however, has the lowest scaled mark because it has a lower scaled mean.

Q5 If I get the same HSC mark in two different courses, will the one with the higher scaled mean count towards my ATAR?

Not necessarily. It's important to remember that the scaled mean indicates the average academic achievement of the students in that course. When you look at your results, you also have to consider **your** position in the course. A higher position in a course with a lower scaled mean may be enough to warrant its inclusion in your ATAR calculation.

Both your position in the course **and** the scaled mean are important in determining which of your courses contribute towards your ATAR.

Consider the following example of Jane who sat the HSC in 2008 and completed 11 units.

Jane's HSC mark for both Geography and Latin Continuers was 95. Despite the fact that the scaled mean for Geography was much lower than the scaled mean for Latin Continuers, her Latin mark did not count towards her ATAR. Why?

If we look at the following table (an extract from Table A3 of the *Report on the Scaling of the 2008 NSW HSC*) we can see that Jane's HSC mark of 95 for Latin places her at the 75th percentile for that course so that her scaled mark is 89. However, her HSC mark of 95 for Geography places her on the 99th percentile for that course and gives her a scaled mark of 90.6. Consequently Geography was included before Latin Continuers.

Course	No. of students		Mean	S.D.	Max.	P ₉₉	P ₉₀	P ₇₅	P ₅₀	P ₂₅
Geography	4 299	HSC mark	38.4	6.4	49.5	47.5	45.5	43.5	39.5	34.5
		scaled mark	26.0	10.3	50.0	45.3	39.0	34.2	26.7	18.6
Latin Continuers	217	HSC mark	45.1	3.6	49.5	49.5	48.5	47.5	46.0	43.5
		scaled mark	39.4	7.1	50.0	49.4	47.7	44.5	40.7	35.6

Note: The marks in this table are marks per unit

Jane's higher position in Geography, compared with her position in Latin Continuers, was enough to compensate for the lower scaled mean in Geography.

Q6 I have similar HSC marks to my friend, but we don't have similar ATARs. Why not?

Your ATARs will only be similar if your courses are the same. If your courses are different and your courses have different scaled means, your ATARs may be very different. Looking at the example in question 2, we can see that Chris, Alex and Mitch had most of their HSC marks in the 70s and 80s. But those marks were in different courses and their ATARs were very different.

Q7 Does the school I attend matter?

No. The school attended does not feature in the ATAR calculation. The ATAR calculation is based only on marks provided by the Board; no other information is used.

Q8 Are certain courses always 'scaled up' or always 'scaled down'?

No. Scaling is carried out afresh each year. If the quality of the candidature changes, the scaled mean will also change. It is a myth that choosing certain courses will maximise your ATAR. Your position in your courses is just as important as the scaled means of your courses in determining your ATAR.

Q9 In some courses more students are in performance band 6 than in other courses. Does this affect the scaled mark for the course?

No. It is the raw HSC marks that are scaled, not the HSC marks that you receive. The percentage of students placed in performance band 6 differs across courses, but this has no effect on the calculation of the ATAR.

Q10 In some courses more students get high HSC marks than in other courses. Does this affect the ATAR calculation?

No. Raw HSC marks are scaled and used in the ATAR calculation.

Q11 How are extension courses scaled?

For most extension courses the scaled means and standard deviations are determined by the performance of the extension students on the corresponding 2-unit course.

Q12 How is English scaled?

English Standard and English Advanced are scaled as a single group.

Q13 Why can't I use my HSC marks to check the calculation of my ATAR?

There are two reasons. The first is that **scaled** marks are used in the calculation of the ATAR, and the second is that the ATAR is not an average mark. It is a rank that indicates your **position**.

Q14 Can I find out what my scaled marks are?

No. Scaled marks are not reported to students. They are determined during an interim phase in the calculation of the ATAR.

Q15 Can I have my ATAR recalculated?

No. If, however, the Board of Studies provides amended HSC results, your ATAR is recalculated and you are notified immediately.

Q16 Where can I get a copy of last year's Report on Scaling?

The *Report on The Scaling of the 2008 NSW HSC* is available on UAC's website at www.uac.edu.au/publications/undergraduate/. The *Report on The Scaling of the 2009 NSW HSC* will be available early in 2010.

Q17 If I'm eligible to get bonus points, does my ATAR change?

No. If universities allocate bonus points they are not added to your ATAR. Bonus points are not ATAR points, they are just that – bonus points. Bonus points don't change your ATAR; bonus points change your selection rank for a particular course you have listed as a preference.

Q18 If bonus points don't increase my ATAR, then how do they work?

Universities allocate bonus points for different circumstances. Examples include students with strong performance in specified HSC subjects, students who live in or attend school in an area defined by the university, and students who have applied for consideration through Educational Access Schemes. As the bonus points schemes for each university, and often for each course at the same university, are different then your selection rank can be different for each course you list in your course preferences. For most Year 12 applicants, their selection rank for each preference is their ATAR. However, if universities allocate bonus points to you, then your selection rank for a preference = ATAR+bonus points.

Where to next?

Questions about your ATAR

If you have further questions about your ATAR after reading this booklet, you can find lots of information on UAC's website, or you can call UAC on (02) 9752 0200 or visit UAC, Quad 2, 8 Parkview Drive, Homebush Bay, between 8.30am and 4.30pm Monday to Friday (Sydney time).

Visit www.uac.edu.au for more information.

