

# Senior Secondary Studies in the ACT

## A Guide for Parents

Many parents find Years 11 and 12 of schooling — the years of senior secondary studies — something of a mystery. This is especially true for those parents whose children are yet to begin Year 11.

**However, it is important for parents to have at least a basic understanding of the main features of the last two years of formal schooling for their children.**

This document aims to help parents by providing information about schooling in Years 11 and 12. It concentrates on the government college system although, in many respects, the independent and Catholic schools follow the same policies and procedures.

Following a question and answer section, more details are given in the appendix. Further information can be found at the website of the ACT Board of Senior Secondary Studies (<http://www.decs.act.gov.au/bsss/welcome.htm>).

### **Q: Which school should my child attend?**

A: Results obtained by students show that all students have an equal opportunity of succeeding in their senior secondary studies, irrespective of the school they attend. **Choice of school, per se, has no influence on results** — of course, students may wish to attend particular schools to be with their friends, to study particular subjects and so on. (In government colleges, priority enrolment applies and not all students may be able to attend their college of first choice.)

### **Q: What certificates can my child obtain?**

A: Students can obtain a range of certificates including the Secondary College Record, the ACT Year 12 Certificate, a range of Vocational Certificates and a Tertiary Entrance Statement.

### **Q: What are the differences between these certificates?**

A: A Secondary College Record is made available on request to students who leave college without achieving the requirements of a Year 12 Certificate. The certificate shows the units studied, grouped in courses, and, where appropriate, the unit grades.

The Year 12 Certificate is awarded to students who complete at least 17 standard units in a period not exceeding 5 years. Normally, a student completing the two year college program will achieve a Year 12 Certificate. This also shows units, courses and grades.

Vocational Certificates bear the Nationally Recognised Training Logo and are achieved by students meeting the requirements of the relevant VET (vocational education and training) course.

Students seeking tertiary entrance should structure their studies so that they will be eligible for a Tertiary Entrance Statement as well as a Year 12 Certificate. This statement records the percentile rank of the student based on the UAI (see below).

**Q: What subjects should my child study?**

A: Generally, government colleges allow all students a free choice of subjects, although they encourage students to study at least some English and Mathematics. Students should study what they are good at and most interested in, taking account of any specific prerequisites that their further education (after college) will require.

**Q: What types of course are available?**

A: Courses which have been deemed as educationally sound and appropriate for students in Years 11 and 12 are designated as 'A' courses. A course intended as preparation for tertiary entrance is designated 'T'. VET courses are designated 'V' — many VET courses have also been given a 'T' classification, recognising them as suitable to prepare students for tertiary entry. Some short courses, intended to provide personal development, recreation or community service activities, are designated 'R'.

**Q: What VET courses are available?**

A: ACT colleges are currently Registered Training Organisations in the national system of VET training. Schools encourage students to consider the benefit of VET courses, some of which are also recognised as suitable to prepare students for tertiary entrance.

**Q: How are my child's studies assessed?**

A: Students' achievements are assessed by teachers against specified criteria in terms of defined standards of achievement. Moderation procedures aim to achieve consistency between different colleges.

Different ways of reporting assessed achievements may be used. In 'A' and 'T' courses, grades of 'A' to 'E' are given. Marks as well as grades are given in T courses. Many VET courses are competency based and 'competent' or 'not yet competent' may be given. Assessment for 'R' courses may be shown as 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory'.

**Q: Are there external exams?**

A: The only external exam is the AST (Australian Scaling Test). All students aiming to achieve a Tertiary Entrance Statement must sit this test. Its purpose is to measure scholastic aptitude and to enable students to be compared equitably in the calculation of the UAI, regardless of the college they attend or the courses they study.

**Q: What is the UAI?**

A: This is the Universities Admissions Index. It is a percentile ranking of all ACT students, in a given year, based on their college results and taking into account the results of the AST.

The UAI is recorded on the Tertiary Entrance Statement. UAIs are also supplied to the Universities Admissions Centre for the purposes of making offers of university entrance. Other tertiary institutions, such as CIT, may also take account of a student's UAI in making entrance offers.

## **APPENDIX: A more detailed explanation of the features of senior secondary studies in the ACT**

### **Summary of main features**

- The ACT has its own system of senior secondary studies. (This is operated by the ACT Board of Senior Secondary Studies (BSSS), a statutory body whose members are appointed by the ACT Minister for Education.) With just one exception, all ACT schools — government and non-government — offering Years 11 and 12 are part of that system.
- Students can obtain certificates setting out their results: Secondary College Record, ACT Year 12 Certificate, VET (vocational education and training) certificates, Tertiary Entrance Statement.
- Curriculum is largely school based, within the broad parameters set by system wide frameworks, although VET courses draw on externally developed training packages.
- Distinction is made between courses studied in preparation for university entrance and other courses. Many subjects, including some VET subjects, can be studied on either basis.
- The system does not specify any compulsory courses that students must study.
- Assessment of results is school based. Grades awarded are reviewed to promote consistency between schools.
- In Year 12, students seeking a Tertiary Entrance Statement must sit the Australian Scaling Test (AST). This external test is used as an aid in the moderation of their school based results as part of the process of calculating their Universities Admissions Index (UAI).

### **Introduction**

In Australia, each state and territory is responsible for school education within its own borders. Accordingly, each jurisdiction operates its own government school system. As well, each (except the NT which adopts the SA system) assesses the work of students in the senior years in both the government and non-government school sectors — including, where appropriate, assessing students' claims for university entry — and awards appropriate certificates. In recent years, greater emphasis has been given to the role of VET in school systems across Australia.

Each jurisdiction is somewhat different in its approach to senior secondary education, ie Years 11 and 12. Different emphasis is given to the role of centrally determined or school based curriculum, internal and external assessment, and to assessment tasks. Different systems of moderation are used and suitability for university entry is determined differently.

The ACT system is under the general control of the ACT BSSS, a statutory body whose members are appointed by the ACT Minister for Education. With the exception of Canberra Boys Grammar School, all ACT schools offering

senior secondary education, both government and non-government, participate in the arrangements controlled by the BSSS. As well, some overseas schools have joined our system.

Much of the work of the BSSS is undertaken by sub-committees and panels, with some paid input, but much unpaid. Indeed, much of the success of the ACT senior secondary system can be attributed to the commitment and willing cooperation of the different school systems, their schools and teachers.

Despite our small size (just over 4000 students in each of Years 11 and 12), our Year 12 certificates and tertiary entrance ranks are well accepted, both nationally and internationally. (As explicitly part of a national system, our VET outcomes are also accepted Australia-wide.) One reason for the greater centralisation of some aspects of schooling in Years 11 and 12 (colleges) than in other years (primary and high schools) is to ensure that this situation continues. Nevertheless, the ACT senior secondary system is less centralised than any other in Australia.

### **Certificates**

#### **The final two years of schooling are very important for students.**

Students often bring a greater sense of purpose to their studies in those two years as they know that the results they achieve, recorded on the certificates they are awarded, can have an important influence on their future learning and job opportunities.

Several different certificates are awarded by the BSSS:

- Secondary College Record (SCR). This reports the units studied by a student, grouped in courses, and, where appropriate, the unit grades. The SCR can be made available on request to students who are leaving college, seeking employment, changing colleges or moving interstate, as an up to date record of their current studies. Where applicable, VET units and courses are also included.
- ACT Year 12 Certificate. This is awarded to students who have completed the equivalent of at least 17 standard units (at the A, T or V level — see below) in a period not exceeding five years (each standard unit is generally delivered for a minimum of 55 hours over one semester). The certificate records the courses and units studied, together with the unit grades achieved. Where applicable, VET units and courses are also included.
- Vocational Certificates. These bear the Nationally Recognised Training Logo and are achieved by students meeting the requirements of the relevant VET course.
- Tertiary Entrance Statement. This is produced for each student who qualifies for a UAI by studying a required number of T courses and sits for the AST (see below). It records the percentile rank of the student based on the UAI.

## Curriculum

The BSSS publishes Course Frameworks to guide individual colleges in the development of subject courses. These frameworks provide a rationale for the place of the subject in the curriculum, a statement of intended learning outcomes, information about key content, concepts and processes, and guidance on assessment criteria and assessment tasks.

Within the constraints of the frameworks, each college is free to develop its own curriculum, and to adopt or adapt curriculum developed by other colleges. BSSS accreditation panels assess each proposed new or revised course to see whether it meets the requirements of the applicable framework and the general principles for the development and accreditation of curriculum.

Courses consist of a number of semester (or half semester) units. Depending on the number of units and the timetabled class time involved, courses may be designated minor, major, major minor or double major. As well, courses may be designated as A, T, V or R:

- A courses have been deemed by the BSSS to be educationally sound and appropriate for students in Years 11 and 12.
- T classification is given to an accredited course which is considered by the BSSS to prepare students for higher education. (University representatives participate in the accreditation panels for T courses.)
- V courses — see below.
- R units or courses. These are generally units of courses designed to provide personal development, recreational or community service activities. These courses are merely registered by the BSSS, rather than assessed by an accreditation panel.
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Students seeking a Tertiary Entrance Statement must study an appropriate number of major and minor courses, including a specified number of T courses, and must sit for the AST (see below). (The workload is equivalent to four majors and one minor course, with at least three majors and one minor course classified T, completed over a minimum of three and a half semesters and a maximum of five years.)

### **The BSSS does not compel students to study any particular subjects.**

Generally, government colleges allow all students a free choice of subjects, although they encourage students to study at least some English and Mathematics. **Students should study what they are good at and most interested in, bearing in mind any specific prerequisites their further education (after college) will require.**

The procedures for recognising VET courses are somewhat different to those described above. All schools in the ACT under the BSSS are currently Registered Training Organisations in the national system of VET training. As such, all V courses must be written to the relevant Training Package and be supported by industry.

In some cases, colleges may be able to adopt Training Packages within the scope of their RTO accreditation — the adopted package would then be given a V status and considered, in terms of a student's overall package of units and courses, to be the equivalent of an A course. In addition, a V course can also qualify as an A or T course if relevant components of the course are written to the course framework guidelines and the course is so assessed by accreditation panels. (Thus, some VET courses are assessed as suitable to prepare students for higher education.)

Many VET courses incorporate Structured Workplace Learning as a vital component. The BSSS has guidelines in place to ensure that, as far as possible, SWL is integrated with learning taking place in the college.

### **Assessment**

Assessment in the ACT is criterion and standards referenced. Thus students' achievements are assessed against specified criteria in terms of a defined standard of achievement. This means, for example, that all students should be awarded an 'A' grade for a unit if their work is of a high enough standard.

Essentially, assessment relies on teacher professional judgment. There are no compulsory assessment tasks, no external subject exams and no direct way of comparing students between schools. However, some moderation is undertaken to promote consistency (see below).

Different ways of reported assessed achievements may be used:

- Grades are awarded for individual units at the A or T level based on the scale 'A' to 'E' with 'A' being the highest grade. Each grade has a standardised description of achievement. (Different grades are 'awarded' for unsatisfactory performance.)
- Assessment for R courses may be shown as 'P' (satisfactory) or 'U' (unsatisfactory).
- For V courses, students are assessed as 'Competent' or 'Not yet competent' against a number of competencies. In addition, 'A' to 'E' grades are awarded for V courses also classified as A or T courses.
- In the case of T courses and units (including V courses also classified as T), schools award marks as well as grades. In contrast to grades and competencies, these marks are not recorded on the Year 12 certificate. The purpose of these marks is to provide a relative ranking of students in each course at each school, rather than to record their achievements. For this reason, marks are scaled on the basis of a mean of 70 and standard deviation of 12. These scaled marks are then fed in to the calculation of the UAI (see below).

Students studying tertiary courses, and their parents, need to be aware of this marking system. In particular, they need to know that the average mark for a course will be about 70, not 50. **Unless a student's average scaled mark**

**for all courses is around 70 or more, the student may not qualify for university entrance.**

### **Moderation of grades**

Moderation of grades (and course scores, see below) is a process designed to enhance system wide comparability of results.

Commencing in 2001, the BSSS has instituted revised procedures for the moderation of grade standards across the senior secondary system. These procedures supplement school based procedures for the moderation of the results of their own students within and between courses.

Grades are moderated through structured, consensus based, peer review at moderation days held twice per year. At these days, teachers across the system from the various subject areas meet together to discuss moderation standards based on sample portfolios of student work. Advice is then given to schools to assist them with, and/or reassure them on, their judgments about standards.

### **Universities Admissions Index**

Moderation of course scores (for T courses) is an essential component of the calculation of the UAI for qualifying students. Such moderation is assisted by the results of the Australian Scaling Test.

#### *Australian Scaling Test*

Despite its name, the AST applies only in the ACT system. All students aiming to achieve a Tertiary Entrance Statement must sit this test (with some exceptions in special circumstances). It consists of a three hour multiple choice test, generally conducted over two sessions, and a writing test. The test is designed to measure scholastic aptitude and to enable students to be compared equitably, regardless of the college they attend or the courses they study.

#### *Universities Admission Index*

Results of the AST are used, together with the course scores supplied by colleges, to calculate an Aggregate Score for each student — this moderation process aims to result in scores which are comparable across the system. Results from Year 11 and Year 12 count equally in the calculation of course scores (by the colleges) and the Aggregate Score (by the BSSS). (A student's lowest marks are discarded in the calculation of these scores: first, only the top 80 per cent of each student's unit scores is used in the calculation of her/his course score; second, the Aggregate Score is the sum of the best three T major scaled scores plus 0.6 of the next best scaled score in a T course.)

The moderation process (essentially, a sophisticated statistically valid transformation process) does not change the rank order of students in a particular course at a particular school — however, it can realign the relative ranking of students in different courses and at different schools. Nevertheless, the most important factor in the calculation of the Aggregate Score for a

student remains the assessment of teachers about the performance of that student.

The UAI is based on the set of Aggregate Scores obtained by all students across the system. It is the percentile ranking of each student relative to the full age cohort (ie relative to the total number of students there would be if all students had stayed on and completed Year 12). UAIs awarded range from 100.00 down to about 30.00, with a mean of about 72 or 73.

Both the Aggregate Score and the UAI are recorded on the Tertiary Entrance Statement given to students. UAIs are also supplied to the Universities Admissions Centre for the purposes of making offers of university entrance. ACT UAIs are directly comparable with university entrance scores calculated in NSW and a number of other jurisdictions. Other tertiary institutions, such as CIT, may also take account of a student's UAI in making entrance offers.