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Bright students 'betrayed' by HSC

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THE HSC is a blunt instrument that leaves many of the most talented students excluded from higher education, the head of Australia's oldest university says.

The University of Sydney's vice-chancellor, Michael Spence, told the *Herald* the entry ranking system was biased towards students who attended private and selective high schools.

The Universities Admission Index - and its replacement, the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank - was a crude and one-dimensional measure of a student's track record, he said.

Asked if the system favoured elite eastern suburbs and north shore schools, Dr Spence said "serious questions" existed about the mix of the student intake at his university.

"We are thinking through questions at the moment about how you measure that potential in a high-school system which is drunk with the UAI," he said.

"What we are looking for is people who are going to grow into champions in the kind of high-quality environment we can provide for them. That is not necessarily the person who ran the fastest race."

His criticism is echoed by a number of leading academics. Macquarie University's vice-chancellor, Steven Schwartz, has long railed against using a single entry mark as a sole determinant of a student's ability, particularly those who have experienced hardship in their final year or attended disadvantaged schools.

But Larissa Treskin, the principal of James Ruse Agricultural High School, said the HSC was the best indicator of a child's potential. Her school has been the top HSC performer in the state for more than a decade.

Ms Treskin denied the system was too narrow, saying it required a broad range of abilities, including resilience and effort, from students who did well.

"How one humanises the concept of a rank, and how one explores issues of future promise and motivation, is a challenge for tertiary institutions across the world, not just Sydney University," she said.

Andrew Stanton, managing director of the Universities Admissions Centre, defended the system as a good measure of academic performance. He also supported consideration being given to other factors, including socio-economic disadvantage.

Through the UAC's special education access scheme, students who have experienced disadvantage can qualify for bonus university entry points.

Mr Stanton said the UAC would co-operate with the University of Sydney if it decided to develop an additional tool to assess university entry.

The chief executive of the Australian Tutoring Association, Mohan Dhall, said tuition was only as good as a student's ability.

"Yes, tuition can make a difference, but it won't always indicate directly the kind of thinking that is required by university," he said. "Some tuition focuses on a lot of rote-learning formulas and repetition and will inherently be limited in showing the real ability of students."

George Cooney, an expert in the calculation of university admissions rankings, has suggested the university entry system be a subject for public debate because of confusion that has surrounded it since universities began hand-picking some students on the basis of measures other than the UAI.

On Monday Dr Spence unveiled a "radical rethink" that was taking place at the 159-year-old institution, where questions are being asked about the sustainability of enrolling more than 48,000 full- and part-time students every year.

The university wants to position itself as a high-end research institution and find new ways to identify the most promising students, regardless of background or nationality.

It is negotiating with the Federal Government about mandated levels of students from poor backgrounds, with financial rewards for meeting these targets.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/bright-students-betrayed-by-hsc-20090911-fkq1.html>