

UBS Australian Bond Fund

May 2024

Fund description

The Fund is an actively managed, diversified portfolio of largely investment grade fixed income securities, cash equivalents and cash.

Target market

The Target Market Determination (TMD) for the Fund sets out the class of consumers for whom the product, including its key attributes, would likely be consistent with their likely objectives, financial situation and needs. To access to the TMD and other Fund documentation visit our website.

Investment strategy

The Fund is actively managed, based on fundamental research that draws upon the investment insights of our fixed income teams. The approach employs both "top-down" research, including analysis of economic factors, market data and macro credit themes and "bottom-up" research in respect of particular securities, including analysis of earnings and cash flow stability, balance sheet strength, industry and valuation. The Fund's investment strategy is to invest in a portfolio of largely investment grade fixed income securities, cash equivalents and cash.

Investment objective

The Fund aims to outperform (after management costs) the Bloomberg AusBond Composite 0+Yr Index over rolling three year periods.

Key statistics

	Fund	Benchmark ¹
Modified duration (yrs)	6.12	4.90
Spread duration ² (yrs)	4.02	2.28
Weighted avg maturity (yrs)	6.94	5.80
Average credit quality	AA-	AA+
Yield to maturity ³ (%)	5.03	4.56

¹ Benchmark statistics do not reflect month end rebalancing for new issues and reinvestment of coupons.

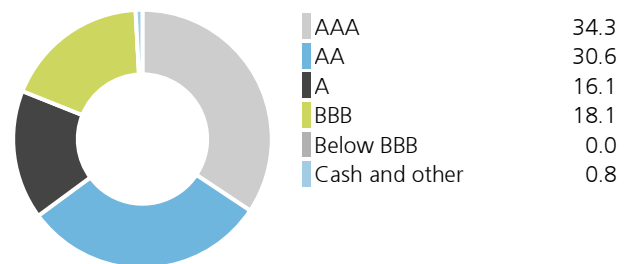
² Option adjusted spread duration ex Treasury.

³ Yield to maturity (YTM) is not a distributed yield nor reflects anticipated income to be earned by the fund. It may include the effect of some derivatives, including swaps and FX forwards, which can form a significant part of the investment strategy but do not pay a regular income. It is in the base currency of the master fund and not specific to a share class.

Fund information

Inception date	30 November 1989
Fund size	\$ 793.9m
Management fee	0.45% pa
Minimum initial investment	\$ 50,000
Distribution frequency	Quarterly
Buy/sell spread	+ 0.02% / - 0.08%
APIR code	SBC0813AU

Credit quality (%)



Note: Credit ratings for physical holdings only, 'cash and other' includes the effect of derivatives.

Fund positioning – modified duration contribution (yrs)

By sector	Fund	Benchmark
Government nominal ⁴	2.28	2.64
Government inflation-linked	0.00	0.00
Semi-government	1.84	1.64
Government related	0.38	0.36
Corporates	1.44	0.26
Financials	0.83	0.13
Industrial	0.45	0.10
Utility	0.16	0.03
Credit hedge ⁵	0.00	0.00
Securitised	0.17	0.01
Cash and cash equivalents	0.00	0.00
By tenor	Fund	Benchmark
0–3 years	0.58	0.48
3–5 years	1.93	0.80
5–7 years	0.87	0.75
7–10 years	1.02	1.58
10+ years	1.72	1.29

⁴ Includes derivatives

⁵ Spread duration contribution

Investment performance

Fund	1 month %	3 months %	1 year %	2 years % pa	3 years % pa	5 years % pa	Since inception* % pa
Total return	0.48	(0.57)	1.38	1.68	(2.04)	(0.60)	6.72
Benchmark**	0.39	(0.50)	0.87	1.30	(2.09)	(0.55)	6.70
Added Value	0.09	(0.07)	0.51	0.38	0.05	(0.05)	0.02

* Inception date: 30 November 1989.

**Bloomberg AusBond Composite 0+ Yr Index.

Performance figures are net of ongoing fees and expenses. The performance figures quoted are historical, calculated using end of month redemption prices, and do not allow for the effects of income tax or inflation. Total returns assume the reinvestment of all distributions. Performance can be volatile and future returns can vary from past returns.

Market review

- Australian sovereign bond yields ended relatively flat across the term structure over May.
- Australian credit spreads tightened over the month.
- The RBA maintained the cash rate target at 435bps.

Global market review

Global Fixed Income markets had a positive month of May as macro data supported the US soft-landing narrative. April US Consumer Price Index (CPI) data moderated to a monthly 0.3% after holding steady at 0.4% in recent months. Hopes of a soft economic landing in the US were also lifted by data on economic growth, service sector activity, retail sales, and employment. US government bond markets ended the month tighter with 5-year and the 10-year yields declining by 21 and 18 basis points, respectively. Rates markets in Europe also followed a similar pattern but with a slight twist. 10-year German Bunds were wider by 8 basis points on the back of an improving growth outlook while 10-year UK Gilts were tighter by 3 basis points given the lower inflation print. On the credit side, US and European high-grade and high yield all generated positive returns with US investment grade and European high yield outperforming. Within emerging markets, spread return for both, sovereigns and corporates, continues to be the dominant driver of year-to-date total returns with the outperformance most notable in high yield rated sovereigns.

In the US, headline and core CPI were down to 3.4% and 3.6% year on year in April, reflecting a genuine slowdown from the previous month. Softer readings were driven by a 6.9% drop in used vehicle prices. PPI on the other hand was more mixed and came in above consensus expectations driven by financial services, portfolio management and air-fares. Labor market data further dispelled inflation concerns with non-farm payrolls at 175,000 coming in significantly below consensus expectations of 240,000, while the unemployment rate ticked up to 3.9%. Growth in aggregate labor income is still running comfortably above its pre-Covid trend, supporting consumer spending. Despite that, retail sales in April were unexpectedly weak even though the 3-month trend on this is ticking up. Consumer sentiment indicators showed a mixed picture in May. While the University of Michigan indicator showed a significant worsening in consumer expectations, the gauge by the Conference

Board improved for the first time in 2024. The former is more heavily skewed towards inflation expectations and might still show a lagged effect of negative inflation surprises in Q1, which could explain recent divergence. The rise in the 30-year mortgage rate from below 7% at the start of the year to 7.6% at the peak in April and 7.4% currently, is impacting the housing market. Building permits and housing starts generally softened and the NAHB Home Builders Index declined. The Fed's Senior Loan Officer Survey for Q1 confirmed that bank lending standards continued to tighten moderately, while demand for bank loans remained weak. This can be seen as another sign that current financial conditions are in restrictive territory. At its May 1st meeting the FOMC kept interest rates on hold as expected. In his press conference, Fed Chair Powell dispelled concerns that the central bank would have to hike the policy rate further to counter sticky inflation. Minutes published later in the month showed that various Fed committee members would be open to tighten policy further if necessary but the bar for rate hikes remains high.

In the Eurozone, as expected, headline CPI held steady at 2.4% year on year. Core inflation, excluding energy, food, alcohol and tobacco, slowed down to 2.7% from 2.9% in March. Service inflation, which had been stuck at 4% for five months in a row, decelerated to 3.7%, but bounced back to 4.1% in May on preliminary data. The initial estimate for Eurozone inflation in May suggests an uptick in headline CPI to 2.6% YoY and core CPI to 2.9%, both above expectations. Growth in negotiated wages across the region unexpectedly accelerated in Q1 to 4.7% from 4.5% with one-off wage payments for German public employees in Q1 being a key contributor. Preliminary Eurozone Composite PMI for May beat expectations, rising for the fifth consecutive month driven by a further improvement in the manufacturing sector. Business sentiment and consumer confidence indicators across the board point towards a brightening outlook for the region. Germany is still the weakest among Europe's main economies but is also showing an improvement.

UK inflation for April, especially wages, proved stickier than in other regions with average weekly earnings growth remaining elevated. While headline inflation dropped to 2.3%, services inflation decelerated only marginally. Growth momentum also picked up, with Q1 GDP beating consensus expectations and making a notable rebound from the contraction in late-2023. UK's corporate earnings have also improved materially. The

momentum in growth and inflation may make the BoE hesitant to cut rates at its next meeting in June.

Recent data from Japan was a mixed bag. Headline CPI contained no real surprises but core CPI was slightly softer than expected. However, inflation expectations in the survey rose and Shunto wage hikes are now spreading to small enterprises; this is likely to keep the BoJ on its hiking path throughout summer. This month, 10yr JGB broke through 1% for the first time in 5 years.

China rolled out more national stimulus following negative credit growth data, including sales of approximately \$140 billion in long-term bonds and the allowing local governments to buy unsold homes from developers directly. After an initial bounce in investor sentiment on the back of the measures, doubts about the relatively small size of the program caused a market reversal. There is an upside case for China, if strong execution of property purchases by local governments slows the negative trend in new home sales and property prices, ultimately lifting consumer sentiment. But for now, uncertainty remains high and data relatively weak. The latest official Manufacturing PMI unexpectedly dropped below the 50 threshold and retail sales for April surprised negatively too. Additionally, US President Biden announced hikes in US tariffs on certain Chinese goods which include a 100% tariff on electric vehicles (EV), 50% on EV batteries and 25% on certain steel and aluminum products. For now, these have a limited impact on US inflation or the Chinese economy as the increases only affect 4% of US imports from China and <1% of total China exports. But they highlight the geopolitical risks of investing in China, which will likely only get more severe as we approach US presidential elections in November.

Within commodities, metals generally trended upwards with gold and copper rallying by 1.4% and 1.0% respectively and continuing their strong performance since the start of the year. Oil, however, tumbled in May and WTI declined by 6%, likely responding to the recent slowdown in US economic data.

Australia market review

Australian sovereign bond yields ended relatively flat across the term structure over the month, in contrast with US Treasury yields which had grinded lower. The fall in interest rates in the US was mainly driven by softer US economic data for April as non-farm payrolls and the headline CPI came in weaker-than-expected. The Australian 3-year Government bond yield edged higher by 1bps, ending the month at 4.05% while the 10-year Government bond yield dropped 1bps to end the month at 4.41%. Credit spreads tightened (Bloomberg AusBond Credit 0+ Index tightened from 109bps to 99bps). The Bloomberg AusBond Composite 0+ year Index returned 0.39%.

In May, the RBA kept the official cash rate target unchanged at 4.35%. The statement by the Board acknowledged that while medium-term inflation expectations have been consistent with its inflation target, inflation is currently declining only gradually and will continue to remain vigilant to upside risks. In the near-term, persistence in domestic inflation continues to be driven in large part by the services sector. In terms of the labour market, while conditions remained tight, there had been some easing over the past year against the backdrop of softer consumption and economic growth. Going forward, the Board will continue to rely upon ongoing economic data and the evolving assessment of risks.

On the domestic economic data front, Australia's headline CPI for April came in stronger-than-expected (3.6% YoY vs. C 3.4%), mainly driven by price pressures from housing and food costs and a touch above the 3.5% increase reported for March. Elsewhere, labour market conditions continue to fluctuate with a stronger-than-expected change in employment for April (38.5k vs. C 22.4k), while the unemployment rate rose to 4.1% from 3.9% the previous month.

Positioning and attribution

Duration, yield curve and inflation-linked strategies

The portfolio saw positive relative performance over May. Our long domestic duration positioning was broadly flat as Australian sovereign bond yields ended the month relatively unchanged. However, we used the intra-month volatility to add to our position.

Overall, our global rates exposure contributed in terms of relative performance. Our short Japan 10-year position was the main contributor as the benchmark yield rose above 1% for the first time since 2012 and we took profit on the position. Additionally, we also reduced some risk in our outright long New Zealand 2-year position in late May, with the position returning flat over the month.

Sector/security

Extra yields ("carry") from the portfolio's overweight position across Australian corporates contributed positively to relative performance, supported by a modest tightening in Australian credit spreads. In contrast, the portfolio's overweight position in Australian semi-government was a detractor as the additional carry was offset by a widening in spreads over the month.

During the month, we reduced risk in supranationals (8y HOUSAU, 2y KBN) and added risk into semi-governments (12y AUSCAP, 10y NTTCC) and corporates (3y ETSA).

Outlook

We continue to favour long duration strategies, using the back-up in yields over the last couple of months to tactically add risk. The resurgence of a “higher for longer” narrative runs counter to our expectations that most major central banks (ex. Bank of Japan) will start to unwind restrictive policy from mid-2024 amid ongoing disinflation, softer growth and looser labour markets.

Australia is in the “last mile” of the inflation battle with underlying inflation now trending around 3.5%. We expect the disinflation trend to resume in the second half of the year and for the RBA to gain confidence that its 2-3% inflation target will be achieved. Inflation is proving persistent in non-discretionary services such as rents and insurance whereas there has been substantial progress in curbing price increases in discretionary sectors. Meanwhile, we continue to see evidence that the labour market is gradually loosening while growth is set to stay below potential for the foreseeable future led by the consumer as the squeeze in real disposable income continues to work its way through the economy.

The RBA’s cash rate is likely at its peak based on our reading of the inflation trend and already restrictive nature of current policy settings. We believe Q4 is the earliest opportunity for the first cash rate cut. The market no longer expects rate cuts this year and continues to see a considerably shallower ~50bps easing cycle than peers such as Eurozone, US and Canada where cutting cycles of 150-200bps are priced in. Given this, current Australian bond yields look attractive, and we think 3-year bond yields can trend down towards 3% this year in anticipation of easing.

Usually, credit spreads would move wider in the latter stages of the economic and rates cycle and as recession risks linger. However, high all-in yields continue to provide strong support to the Australian and global credit markets. Market technicals have also been positive for AUD credit as cash is being deployed amid relatively low issuance.

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