

Admissions: the higher education sector's plans for change



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With the increase in student numbers and political concern to ensure fair access to higher education, universities have been reviewing their admissions processes in order to improve their transparency, efficiency and effectiveness. The process contains relatively discrete activities – applications and admissions – in which both the applicants and the institutions' perspectives need to be accommodated.

The Schwartz review, *Fair admissions to higher education*, 2004, led to the setting up of the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme (SPA), to lead on the continuing development of fair admissions in the higher education sector, in 2006. The Government also commissioned a consultation on improving the higher education applications process which led to further reforms to the current applications process and to the formation of the Delivery Partnership, a UK-wide higher education partnership of different stakeholders to implement the programme of reform.

This policy briefing focuses on several aspects of admissions policy, including:

Entry profiles: to make informed university choices, would-be applicants need comprehensive, clear, and comparable information. After research into what applicants would like, templates are being designed; September 2009 is the Delivery Partnership's target date for 100 per cent of undergraduate courses to provide entry profiles.

Admissions tests: can be used by higher education institutions as one element in decision-making on an application. Currently a relatively small proportion of institutions in the UK use admission tests. For applicants who apply to the institutions that do, however, issues of relevance, reliability and validity are particularly important. The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme reported on the tests in June 2007. It continues to analyse their use and urges institutions to be very clear about why they are deploying such tests by using a checklist of good practice.

Adjustment period: in a small number of cases an applicant may achieve better results than required for the firm offer they have accepted and may therefore wish to reconsider their choice. So, from August 2009, applicants who have achieved better results than required for the offer they have accepted will for a short time be able to look for an alternative course that has places available whilst still holding their original choice.

Feedback to unsuccessful applicants: The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme has drawn up a statement of good practice on feedback. This was issued jointly with the Delivery Partnership in February 2008 and proposed that higher education institutions provide feedback, on request, to unsuccessful applicants. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) is also considering the possibility of providing electronic delivery of feedback.

Information, advice and guidance: appropriate, high quality and timely advice about full-time higher education is essential for all applicants seeking to enter higher education. The sector's aim is to ensure that applicants make the best personal choices, reflecting their chosen subject and aspirations.

Art and design courses: part of the reform programme of the current admissions process involves simplifying the admissions process for art and design courses.

International, mature and part-time applicants: the Delivery Partnership is looking at the impact of the admissions reforms on international, mature and part-time applicants and also of the provision of information to applicants following routes to higher education other than A level.

Successive government reviews have found that current higher education admissions processes are 'generally fair'. Areas where there is scope for improvement, for the most part, pose challenging issues of both principle and practicality. The higher education sector is willing to look for solutions and, working with the Delivery Partnership and the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme, is looking for a system that demonstrates the highest standards of professionalism and the principles of transparency, fairness and equity.

1 The procedure for admitting full-time undergraduate students to higher education institutions in the United Kingdom has become a significant policy issue since the Government published a White Paper on *The future of higher education* in 2003¹. One of the paper's focal points was the need to reduce the marked difference in the proportions of applicants from middle-class and poorer backgrounds entering higher education over the last 30 years. There has also been a strong political interest in improving 'fair access' to higher education, enabling prospective students with the necessary ability to have the opportunity to attend the best and most appropriate university for them. John Denham, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, has endorsed this wider definition of fair access:

'Concern for fair access touches almost every parent who wants to know their child will get a fair opportunity. In saying that, let me make one qualifying remark. Higher education is familiar with the inseparable twins of widening participation and fair access. But our language is a problem. Fair access is about the chance of getting the best. But best can only mean best for the individual. And any one of our universities can be the best place for the right student'².

2 The numbers of full- and part-time higher education students have increased significantly over the past 40 years, and are continuing to rise. From 169,500 and 17,000 respectively in 1965/66, there are now 1,208,600 full-time undergraduate students in the UK, and a further 594,800 undergraduates studying part-time. This strong growth in student numbers, particularly in recent years, along with the higher level of qualifications held by applicants, has resulted in universities facing an increasing demand for places. Alongside this there has been a growing interest from higher education institutions themselves in increasing the numbers of students from lower socio-economic groups and areas of multiple deprivation who enter higher education. Although considerable progress has been made in this area, the gap in participation rates between socio-economic groups is still wide, reflecting a lack of improvement in the number of school leavers from these socio-economic groups with the necessary qualifications. One of the approaches suggested in the White Paper for reducing this imbalance called for better processes of university access and admissions.

3 The decision whether to admit an applicant is one of the major areas in which individual universities, as autonomous bodies, have final authority and responsibility. Universities have confidence in their admissions policies and practices and are concerned to show that they are fair and transparent. They are also concerned to ensure that they are consistent with good practice. That is why the universities contributed willingly to the independent review of admissions, *Fair admissions to higher education*³, which the Government commissioned after the 2003 White Paper, and in the initiatives and programmes that have sprung from the review: the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme (SPA); the former Department for Education and Skills' (DfES) consultation on improving the higher education applications process; and the Delivery Partnership, a sector-led body that currently leads on the reform of the applications process⁴.

4 Although the White Paper focused on issues for English higher education, the arrangements for applications and admissions to higher education for full-time undergraduates are UK-wide. The focus of this policy briefing is UK-wide unless specified otherwise.

5 This briefing explains universities' role in undergraduate admissions and outlines the main current admissions processes and issues. It discusses the action that is being undertaken by universities to reform aspects of the applications process with the aim of enhancing its transparency, efficiency and effectiveness and support its efforts to broaden the social composition of the student body. A description of current processes and arrangements is provided in Annex A together with a summary of who does what in admissions in Annex B.

6 Over the last decade there have been three higher education-led reviews and two government-led investigations into admissions. The outcome of the two most recent government reviews, which have helped to determine the current policy framework, is outlined below.

Fair admissions to higher education (the Schwartz review)

7 The springboard for the current focus on admissions issues was *Fair admissions to higher education*, undertaken by the group chaired by Professor Steven Schwartz, then vice-chancellor of Brunel University (the Schwartz review). In 2003 Professor Schwartz was invited by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills to lead an 'independent review of the options that English higher education institutions should consider when assessing the merit of applicants for their courses, and to report on the high-level principles underlying these options'. Following two consultation exercises, the final report – *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice* – was issued in September 2004. It was intended 'both as a catalyst to action, and as a practical guide to fair admissions'⁵.

8 Acknowledging that 'a large number of factors can affect who participates in higher education', Schwartz's review concluded that higher education admissions processes 'are generally fair', but said that there was room for improvement.

9 The report described five high-level principles and made a number of wider recommendations designed to produce a high-quality admissions process. The principles, which have been reaffirmed by the higher education sector as underpinning fair admissions processes, are that the system should:

- be transparent;
- enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and their potential;
- strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid;
- seek to minimise barriers for applicants; and
- be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and process.

10 Schwartz listed options for assessing applicants' merit in three categories:

- formal academic achievement;
- existing evidence of skills and criteria linked to success on higher education courses; and
- additional assessment.

He did, however, emphasise that these options were acceptable only if they were implemented in accordance with the principles and guidance set out in his report. He also acknowledged that in a diverse sector there would continue to be different views of which options were appropriate and necessary.

11 The review expressed some reservations about the current system. 'Relying on predicted grades, cannot be fair', it said, because it did not meet the recommended principles⁶. Specifically, the current system was based on data that was not reliable, it lacked transparency for both applicants and institutions, and might present barriers to applicants who lacked self-confidence.

12 One of the review's recommendations was the creation of a central source of expertise and advice on admissions issues. This led, in 2006, to the establishment of the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme (SPA), funded by the national higher education funding bodies. The programme is based at UCAS in Cheltenham, but is independent of it. Schwartz also asked the Secretary of State to establish a high-level implementation group to develop a system that would be based on post-qualification applications.

13 Schwartz also recommended that the Secretary of State for Education and Skills should commission a review of the admissions system after three years, with the aim of assessing progress in implementing his recommendations. The department accepted this recommendation and its successor, the Department of Innovation, Universities, and Skills (DIUS), has commissioned the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme to manage the review in 2008. The results of the review will be available in the summer of 2008.

Improving the higher education applications process (the DfES review)

14 In response to Schwartz's request, the former DfES established a project, headed by Sir Alan Wilson, the department's then director-general for higher education, to develop and consult on 'proposals intended to improve the efficiency and fairness of the current applications to higher education...process'⁷. An underlying principle throughout the process was to identify a system that would operate for the benefit of applicants, wherever they resided or whatever they wished to study. The project drew on the advice of a UK-wide consultation group consisting of representatives drawn from key stakeholder groups. Consultation groups were also established in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to consider the implications for each country. A consultation on proposals for change to the admissions system, including options for a post qualification applications system, was launched in September 2005⁸.

15 The DfES response to the consultation concluded, in May 2006, that there was 'a will across the sector to seek improvements to the present system' although it also acknowledged that the two proposed options for a form of post-qualification applications system were not widely supported⁹.

The Government responded with several recommendations including:

- changes to the current admissions system for implementation by academic year 2008/09;
- a further review in 2010/11 to evaluate the impact of these reforms and, in light of the experience of them, to commit to a consideration of further progress towards post qualification applications by 2012; and
- the establishment of a sector-led UK-wide delivery partnership to lead on the programme of reform.

16 Universities UK welcomed the response and the staged approach it proposed. Specifically, it agreed that further movement in the direction of post-qualification applications should depend on progress on the earlier publication of A level and vocational examination results and an assurance that any change would not disadvantage prospective students from lower socio-economic groups. It was also essential that the timing of a new system did not harm the international student market. In 2006, the higher education sector, led by Universities UK and GuildHE, established the Delivery Partnership to lead the process of improving the higher education application process. These changes are discussed in the next chapter.

The Quality Assurance Agency's code of practice

17 The Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) code of practice for the assurance of academic standards and quality in higher education, which include a section on admissions, is another important influence on the operation of the admissions process¹⁰. This supports the national arrangements for quality assurance in higher education and identifies a comprehensive series of system-wide principles covering matters relating to the management of academic quality and standards in higher education.

18 Section 10 of the code (September 2006) covers admissions to higher education and aims to help institutions to assure themselves and others that the policies and procedures they use to attract, recruit, select, admit and enrol students are clear, fair, explicit and consistently applied¹¹.

19 The admission of students to higher education is a complex process of interrelated activities. These activities typically include the:

- promotion and marketing of courses to prospective students, their parents, employers and advisers;
- identification and recruitment of prospective students to an institution and specific programmes of study through open days, recruitment fairs, taster days, and summer schools and so on;
- selection of applicants suitable for a particular programme;
- offer of a place on a programme of study;
- enrolment of students onto a programme of study;

- induction and orientation of new students to the institution, department, school or faculty and programme of study.

For the purpose of the code, 'admissions to higher education' is used as a generic term to encapsulate all activities, policies, procedures and practices involved in the process of admitting students to higher education. The code of practice is applicable to all admissions to higher education institutions, including undergraduate, postgraduate, UK and overseas applicants from both within and outside the European Union (EU).

- 20** The recent admissions reviews have led to the development of proposals for change to various aspects of the admissions process. The most significant are discussed below. Each is being actively addressed through the work of two higher education sector bodies: the Delivery Partnership: improving the higher education applications process and the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme.
- 24** At the end of 2006 the Delivery Partnership was asked to implement this recommendation, and it set up an 'entry profiles working group' together with UCAS and the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme.
- 25** The working group aims to encourage universities to provide entry profiles for 85 per cent of undergraduate courses by September 2008 and 100 per cent by September 2009. A paper, *Entry profiles – key messages and benefits for HEIs*, has been circulated to heads of institution and practitioners in the sector¹⁴. It describes the key benefits of entry profiles for applicants and for institutions. For applicants, the benefits are having clear and comprehensive information to inform their decisions – including the most fundamental decision about whether they qualify for admission – and, through the UCAS course search, the ability easily to make comparisons between courses. Among the benefits to higher education institutions are greater levels of market awareness of their courses, enabling them to reach out to prospective applicants as a first step in developing a relationship, as well as prompting a continuous review of their requirements. This is particularly important in a period when there are significant changes to the 14– 19 curriculum with the advent of new diploma qualifications and an expansion in the International and Welsh Baccalaureates.

Entry profiles

- 21** Entry profiles, developed by UCAS and produced by staff at individual institutions, aim to provide all the information an applicant needs to make informed choices about institutions and courses. They form part of the course search facility on the UCAS website and include details of the institution (such as location, size and student accommodation) and the course¹². Information about the course may include a description of its content, including options and special features, the entry qualifications, including non-academic attributes and skills, and the process for deciding on applications, which might be based on application data alone but could include an interview and tests. Universities are encouraged to include details of the relative weighting of the different factors used in making their selections of students.
- 22** The Schwartz review identified entry profiles as a significant way of demonstrating the first of his five principles of fair admissions – transparency. While recognising that many institutions were providing much useful information to prospective applicants, he saw a need for good practice in this area to be extended, particularly through the further development of entry profiles. He welcomed the progress that was being made on this front and urged all university and colleges to contribute, in particular with a view to extending the availability of entry profiles.
- 23** In his second report (*Improving the higher education applications process: government response to the consultation* [May 2006]), Sir Alan Wilson made a specific recommendation about entry profiles. He called on UCAS to continue encouraging universities to provide clear, comparable entry requirement information with the aim of it being available for all courses for students wishing to enter higher education from 2008/09¹³. Backing this recommendation, the Government also asked the sector to consider the development of entry profiles for vocational pathways and the provision of advice and guidance for both adults and young learners.
- 26** A survey carried a year ago by the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme revealed that applicants would like a standard template of core data for each course, supported by optional data on the unique features of the course and the institution in order to assist comparisons. The outcomes of the consultation confirmed the need for greater consistency, quality and coverage (for example, more on vocational qualifications) in entry profiles. UCAS has produced a draft of a standard template (which would, also help higher education institutions when compiling their entry profiles) and it is being taken forward with the Delivery Partnership working group as a longer-term development.

Predicted grades and conditional offers

- 27** Most applicants for undergraduate courses receive offers of places conditional on the achievement of specified grades or tariff points in forthcoming level 3 (for example, A-level or equivalent) examinations. The applicant's school or college adds its predictions of the likely outcome on the application before it goes to UCAS. Apart from predicted grades UCAS requests details of AS level results and optionally unit grades at this level. There is, however, no compulsion for students to take AS level examinations and if they do not do so higher education institutions will only have access to actual GCSE grades and predicted grades at A level (or equivalent) when their applications are considered.
- 28** Schwartz's review concluded that an admissions system based on predicted grades, 'cannot be fair'¹⁵. Lord Dearing reached a similar conclusion in his National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education in 1997. The Dearing committee concluded that 'it was not in the best interests of students' that they had to make their course choices on the basis of predicted rather than actual achievement¹⁶. Likewise, Sir Mike Tomlinson, in his inquiry into A level standards in 2002, recommended consideration of a post-qualification system of application (one in which applicants know their final examination results before deciding whether and where to apply for higher education) on the grounds that, among other things, it would 'increase the accuracy of the admissions system'¹⁷. Sir Alan Wilson too, in 2005, expressed the view that a post-qualification system of application offered the 'prospect of fairer and more efficient admissions'¹⁸.
- 29** Arguments against the use of predicted grades hinge on their reliability in general, and in particular for applicants from lower socio-economic groups. Research undertaken by UCAS for the DfES showed that predicted grades were 45 per cent accurate – ie less than half the time. Around 9 per cent were too pessimistic and some 47 per cent were over-optimistic. Moreover, reliability 'diminishes as you move down the socio-economic groups'¹⁹ (but see below paragraph 30). In commenting on this research, Sir Alan Wilson said that 'we do not believe that this can be fair'. He proposed that 'schools and colleges should not supply students' predicted examination results with their higher education applications and they should play no part in higher education admissions decisions'²⁰. Pending a move to a post-qualification application system, Sir Alan Wilson invited suggestions for other information that might be used instead of predicted grades. As possibilities he offered academic records, including unit grades; in England, the progress file, successor to the national record of achievement; and possibly, if further developed, e-portfolios. He also cited the national admissions test, proposed by the Schwartz review, as a possible alternative.
- 30** Further research on predicted grades, undertaken in 2005 by UCAS²¹, concluded that inaccuracies in predicted grades were virtually all within plus or minus one grade, a margin that would not materially affect an applicant's chances of gaining a place. Furthermore, less than one per cent of forecasts that were too pessimistic were inaccurate by more than one grade. There was therefore a case to be made that the accuracy of predicted grades can, and does, work to *the advantage* of applicants from non-traditional backgrounds.
- 31** As noted by the Government in its response to the consultation on improving the applications process in May 2006, 'opinion was divided' on the proposal to dispense with predicted grades²². To some they were substantively accurate, since almost all predictions were correct to within a grade; although not ideal, they remain one of the best indicators of capability – at least outside of the creative and performing arts – that are available to university admissions staff. Others made the point that predicted grades were just one piece in the jigsaw of data that informed decisions on admission. However, there was a dearth of positive suggestions for alternatives to predicted grades, although there was support for information based on fact rather than a prediction.

- 32** The Government concluded that predicted grades should remain in the short term while other proposed changes to the current admissions system were being introduced. It decided that the position should be reviewed in 2010 after the first year of operation of these reforms. Meanwhile, the Delivery Partnership was asked to undertake work to assess what other information should be included in the UCAS application. This might include further research on entry to higher education through vocational qualifications and take account of related work on admissions tests.

Post-qualification application

- 33** Post-qualification application (PQA) is a system where applicants know their final examination results before deciding whether they should progress to higher education and where they wish to study. Such a system has been recommended as a positive development in a number of recent reviews, including the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education and the Schwartz Review, 2004. For its part, Universities UK has led three sector reviews of post-qualification applications, while the former DfES pursued the issue in two successive reviews²³.
- 34** The barriers to change essentially relate to the compatibility of the university and school years and the timing of national examinations. There are practical implications for all stakeholders arising from the need to complete the applications process in a compressed period between the publication of A level results in August and the beginning of the university year in September or October. There are also concerns about the potential impact of a post-qualification application system on efforts to widen participation among non-traditional groups of applicants and also on the recruitment of international (non-EU) students.
- 35** Additional concerns for universities include the lack of time that applicants would have to access advice about their choice of course and institution or for a relationship to develop between university and applicant. The experience of applicants who apply through clearing reinforces these concerns. A higher proportion of this group – students who do not get much advice and guidance, purely because of the time pressures of clearing – drop out, compared to applicants who have visited the institution, are holding an offer and have applied for accommodation.
- 36** Published A level results are only one of the factors that universities need to consider in deciding on which applicants to admit. There needs to be enough time between the publication of results and the start of the academic year to consider applicants' potential, interests and commitment as well as their A level results. This broader review is particularly important in assessing the potential of non-traditional entrants.
- 37** The applications process also needs to provide time for interviews and, where appropriate, auditions and portfolio presentations or admissions tests, etc. Interviews are normal practice for some institutions where competition for places is intense and are used by many higher education institutions for subjects where suitability for professional practice is assessed – teacher education, social work and medicine and health care. Auditions or portfolio presentations are a standard feature of the applications process for courses in the performing arts and art and design. Interviews are also important where applicants have skills and experience but may not have formal qualifications.
- 38** The need for more time to complete a post-qualification admissions process than the summer period allows has led to suggestions that the start of the university year should be deferred until the following January. However, such a change would create significant problems of its own. All applicants would be adversely affected with many from poor socio-economic backgrounds having little or no financial support in the intervening period and perhaps losing some of their enthusiasm for higher education. Mature applicants might not wish to delay their studies; and the length of the gap itself would cause other applicants, irrespective of background or circumstances, effectively to drop out before entry. International applicants might be tempted to switch to countries where they could begin their studies in the autumn. Finally, the timing of teacher training courses would no longer be compatible with the pattern of the school year.

- 39** The practical difficulties associated with post-qualification application conditioned the sector's response to the Government's consultation on improving the applications process in 2005²⁴. Neither of the two options for a post-qualification applications system proposed in the consultation paper attracted wide support and as a result the Government decided that the reform of admissions should be staged. The first stage consists of developing proposals for changes to the current system and implanting them by 2008/09. Under current plans, their impact will be evaluated in 2010/11 with a view to considering the further steps required towards a post-qualification applications system by 2012.
- 40** There is little support for a radical change in the admissions process in Scotland as in effect it already has a post-qualification application system. In Scotland some 70 per cent of applicants applying to a higher education institution already possess the required basic entry qualifications in the form of Highers.

Admissions tests

- 41** Universities use a range of approaches to admission tests, reflecting their individual missions and subject mix. Several universities are using admissions tests in certain subject areas as part of their selection procedures. Currently around 14 per cent of UK higher education institutions use one or more tests²⁵.
- 42** In this context an admissions test is a timed, unseen written paper-based or online test, normally taken by applicants to undergraduate courses in the year before admission. This definition excludes other forms of 'testing', such as interviews, auditions, portfolios and other established selection tools. The type of admissions test used depends mainly on the course and the attributes deemed appropriate for the professional, vocational or academic discipline. The range includes aptitude tests, essay-writing exercises, problem-solving tests, critical thinking assessments, subject-specific tests, cognitive and non-cognitive tests. Many admissions tests are designed to predict potential degree success as well as testing aptitude²⁶.
- 43** Admissions tests are considered particularly useful to identify very able applicants on high-demand courses, especially those related to entry to a profession, such as medicine, dentistry, and veterinary studies. However, their use is not limited to high-demand courses. The results of such tests are normally used to support the standard evaluation of the applicant's application, which is based on their existing academic achievement and other personal factors.
- 44** Although admissions tests can be useful, many universities are concerned about the impact such tests will have on applicants. They could represent an additional financial burden on applicants, particularly those entering through non-traditional routes. However, most universities offer a test fee bursary or waiver to applicants from lower socio-economic groups. Another concern is that tests could give rise to an undesirable (and profitable) industry that would provide coaching for those who could afford it although it should be noted that Aimhigher funds have been used to pay for help for candidates in some cases. Advocates of tests argue that because all applicants sit the same test, it provides a basis for judging all applicants on an equal basis.
- 45** The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme's work involves auditing and analysing the use of admissions tests in the UK and considers issues of rationale, purpose and validity from the perspectives of universities; costs, manageability and impact on the 14-19 curriculum from the perspective of schools and colleges; and the implications for applicants in terms of timing and costs. The work has included a review of the generic tests currently being piloted (ie uniTEST and the SAT). The implications of different admissions tests for fairness, access and equality of opportunity are also being considered²⁷. At the same time, awareness of alternatives to admissions tests is being raised, and this includes asking whether, in fact, richer data might be available from existing and new qualifications. The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme is strongly recommending to institutions that they should say why and how they are using admissions tests.

Individual assessment

- 46** Universities treat each applicant as an individual and not as a member of a particular group or class. The process is largely straightforward – if applicants meet the university’s requirements and the course is not over-subscribed, they are likely to receive an offer. In borderline cases, and where there is a high demand for a course, admissions staff consider other information, in a holistic way, before making a decision. In these circumstances they might take the applicant’s personal details, personal statement or employment experience into account, as well as, for example, an admissions test result or interview outcome. They will also have additional information as to whether the applicant has been in care or has a criminal conviction and whether there is any parental experience of higher education. Higher education institutions should make it clear to applicants which, if any, of these factors they take into account as part of the admissions decision-making process. The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme is developing a number of contextual data principles and good practice to support universities in ensuring consistency in the use of contextual data²⁸.
- 47** UCAS has been reviewing the additional information that might be provided by the applicant or by a link to external databases held by bodies such as the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Scottish Government, but there are no immediate plans for further changes.
- 48** The introduction of the UCAS tariff has changed significantly the way in which achievement is recorded in terms of admission to university²⁹. The tariff is a points-based summary of examination outcomes, designed to accommodate both the traditional routes to degree study and the growing number of new and emerging routes such as diplomas and baccalaureates. It is therefore helping to stimulate greater diversity in the range and type of qualifications offered by schools and colleges. UCAS has been considering whether richer data could be generated from existing and new qualifications, through, for example, unit (UMS) marks for A levels, the A* and extended project, and more recent developments such as the Curriculum for Excellence reforms in Scotland, the Welsh Baccalaureate and the new diplomas in the English 14–19 curriculum.
- 49** These recent developments will be highly significant and, although they follow a similar grain, contain slightly different emphases in different parts of the UK. However, all will measure and record a wider range of abilities and skills than traditional entry qualifications and will therefore provide a more comprehensive picture of the candidate for universities to consider. They will help in the assessment of an applicant’s ‘fit’ with the course as well as providing a means of differentiating between the most able where this is needed. The associated student transcript will also help applicants to differentiate themselves, whether in their applications for higher education or for jobs.

Admissions decisions

- 50** Most institutions consider applications and make offers on a continuing basis through the annual admissions cycle, which generally starts in September. The rules of participation in the UCAS scheme require that, in doing this, institutions take steps to ensure that there is fair and equal consideration of all applications received by the relevant application deadline – 15 January for most courses. Most institutions achieve this by applying a model, based on experience in previous years, to determine the proportion of applicants to whom places can be offered during each phase of the application period. In this way applicants who may apply closer to the application deadline are not disadvantaged.
- 51** Most courses are not oversubscribed. Applicants who meet the criteria are likely to be eligible for an offer, whether they apply before the 15 January deadline or after it. Many applicants receive more than one offer and some will receive as many as five. At the end of the applications cycle, most applicants will have accepted and hold two conditional offers, a conditional firm and a conditional insurance offer. Once the examination results have been announced, an applicant who meets or exceeds the conditions of their offer will have their place confirmed by the institution concerned. Their status then becomes known as ‘unconditional firm’ and they are bound to that institution. In only very exceptional circumstances – family illness or bereavement affecting their plans, (or as a result of the new ‘adjustment period’ [see paragraph 56 below] from 2009 allowing movement from one institution to another), for example – can they ask to be released from their commitment. If the university does not agree the UCAS rules require the applicant to withdraw completely and reapply the following year.

The 'gathered field'

- 52** In a 'gathered field' universities would defer all decisions on applications until after the official closing date. No decisions are made or notified until all applications have been considered. In a 'gathered field' system, applicants would be able to apply, as now, at any time from the start of the application cycle in September until the agreed deadline of 15 January. Universities would be able to consider applications during the application period as they do now and would also be able to invite applicants for interview. They could also process provisional decisions internally but applicants would not be informed until an agreed date after 15 January.
- 53** Pressure to adopt a gathered field procedure has come about partly because there is a tendency for applicants from schools in the independent sector to apply earlier in the cycle than those from state schools to the apparent disadvantage of the latter. In response to this universities generally have confidence in a system that transmits offers on a rolling basis, underpinned by the fair and equal consideration principle.
- 54** There is no doubt that many applicants wish to be informed as quickly as possible of each decision so that they can start thinking about its implications without delay. The current scheme provides the maximum time for such reflection by enabling applicants to consider offers as they are made, while delaying a final decision until they have received decisions from all the institutions to which they have applied. Receiving all the decisions at the end of the process could prove to be overwhelming for some applicants. The current system enables universities to pace their workload and, crucially, to start to develop a relationship with applicants by responding promptly to their applications and following them up with regular contact during the admissions cycle.
- 55** Following a consultation on the 'gathered field', the Delivery Partnership agreed that the current dates of the UCAS scheme should be maintained. It also agreed that the principle of equal consideration should be promoted to increase wider understanding of the admissions process. This would also be assisted by commissioning a series of case studies that would demonstrate how the system is currently implemented and how fairness is achieved between applicants. Future action includes improving the transparency of the process through improvements to feedback to applicants and the increasing availability of clear and transparent entry profiles.

Adjustment period

- 56** One of the options for reform that has been explored by the Delivery Partnership is the feasibility of allowing applicants who have achieved better results than required for the firm offer they have accepted to reconsider their choice and make a fresh application. The Government asked the Delivery Partnership to consider the position of such applicants with the aim of permitting them to make a new application and having their first firm conditional offer protected while they do so. The original recommendation was based on the perception that some applicants were, for a number of reasons, not applying to institutions with high entry requirements, where perhaps they would otherwise have liked to apply. The scale of the issue is unknown, although thought to be small, but the recommendation is also seen as a stepping stone towards a full post-qualification application system, by allowing applicants to apply for courses that have requirements more closely matching their achieved grades.
- 57** A working group of the Delivery Partnership has consulted widely on a number of different methods for taking this proposal forward including a sector wide consultation in May 2007 on two possible methods. The Delivery Partnership recently considered the results of this work and agreed that (from 2009) the 'adjustment period' window will begin from the day of publication of A-level results and end on 31 August, with applicants having five days in which to find a new institution and be accepted within this period. To be eligible for consideration in this process, an applicant must have exceeded the terms of the conditional firm offer received and have been given an 'unconditional firm' offer at that institution.

Feedback to unsuccessful applicants

- 58** The need to extend the practice of providing feedback to unsuccessful applicants has been under discussion for some time. The Schwartz review referred to it in its first principle – transparency – commenting that institutions should provide feedback to unsuccessful applicants on request, a practice that was common in many institutions already. A sample feedback letter was included in Schwartz’s final report.
- 59** The issue was pursued further in the DfES consultation paper on the applications process, which was issued in September 2005. It suggested that higher education institutions should ‘develop more informative letters to feed back to students, detailing particularly why their applications have been rejected’³⁰. The sector’s reaction to this proposal was mixed, a fact that was acknowledged in the Government’s response in 2006³¹. This recognised the commitment to providing feedback but accepted that there were concerns about litigation and higher workloads, particularly where courses were substantially over-subscribed and large numbers of applicants were rejected. The Government recommended that further consideration should be given to how a consistent level of feedback could be made available on request, taking account of the provisions of the Quality Assurance Agency’s code of practice.
- 60** The Delivery Partnership was asked to take this forward and in May 2007 a draft statement of good practice on feedback was prepared by the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme for consultation with the sector³². The paper provided a definition of feedback – as distinct from complaints and appeals – and called for
- clarity about admissions criteria and processes;
 - informative, transparent and accessible profiles of the previous year or years entry cohorts;
 - systems and procedures for recording decisions within institutions; and
 - clarity in published documentation about how feedback should be sought and how it would be provided.

The draft statement was framed with an eye to providing sufficient information for an applicant while avoiding the need for follow-up correspondence and the dangers of litigation.

- 61** The draft was revised following the consultation, and the statement of good practice on feedback to unsuccessful applicants has been accepted by Universities UK, UCAS and other sector bodies. The final version of the guidance was made generally available to higher education institutions in February 2008. At the same time UCAS is considering the possibility of providing electronic delivery of feedback, which was one of the outcomes of the consultation.

Information, advice and guidance

- 62** Prospective applicants would also benefit from appropriate and timely advice and guidance about progression to full-time higher education. In addition, engagement early on in primary and secondary schools is also important in terms of increasing awareness of higher education and encouraging applicants to apply to the higher education institutions that best suit their needs and circumstances.

63 The previous section discussed the most significant of the issues being addressed by the Delivery Partnership and the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme in this first stage of the reform of the admissions process, up to 2008/09. It has also identified where matters stand with each at present. In summary:

Entry profiles	Development is being supported by a Delivery Partnership working group. At the start of the 2007/08 academic year, approximately 60 per cent of courses had entry profiles available on UCAS course search. The aim is to increase this to 85 per cent by 2008 entry and 100 per cent by 2009 entry.
Predicted grades	The Delivery Partnership is examining possible alternative indicators. These include accessing richer data from existing sources.
Admissions tests	The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme is auditing and analysing the use of admissions tests on a continuing basis. It delivered an initial report covering the incidence of, and rationale for, use of such tests in June 2007. It is also producing a checklist of good practice for higher education institutions to consider when they are thinking of introducing an admissions test.
Adjustment period	The Delivery Partnership has recently agreed that the 'adjustment period' window will begin from the day of publication of A-level results and end on 31 August. To be eligible for the process, an applicant must have exceeded the terms of the conditional firm offer made before the results were available, and then be placed unconditional firm at that institution.
Gathered field	A consultation has revealed little appetite for the proposal that no offers should be released to applicants before the 15 January deadline. As an alternative the principle of equal consideration would be promoted as an aid to widen understanding of how the application process operates. The Delivery Partnership has commissioned a series of case studies to demonstrate how institutions ensure that the principle of equal consideration applies.
Feedback to unsuccessful applicants	A statement of good practice has been accepted and the final version of the guidance was made generally available to higher education institutions in February 2008. The feasibility of providing feedback by electronic means is being explored by UCAS.
Art and design application process	The Delivery Partnership is trying to simplify the current dual route to admission to courses in art and design with proposals currently under discussion.

64 Beyond this, the Delivery Partnership has recently commenced consideration of the impact of the admissions reforms on international, mature and part-time applicants respectively, and also of the provision of information to applicants following routes to higher education other than A level.

65 Current admissions processes have been pronounced 'generally fair' by successive government reviews. At the same time, areas where there is scope for improvement have been identified. These areas are, for the most part, difficult ones that pose challenging issues for both principle and practice. Nevertheless, there is a will on the part of the higher education sector to resolve them. Working through the Delivery Partnership and the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme, it is taking concerted action to ensure a system that not only operates in accordance with the highest standards of professionalism and with the principles of transparency, fairness and equity, but is seen to do so.

Although 'admissions' is an overall process, applications and admissions are, in fact, discrete activities:

- the pre-application stage in which the applicant considers course options;
- the application stage in which a prospective student makes an application for admission to a course(s) offered at one or more institutions;
- the admissions stage during which each application is considered by the institution, and, if successful;
- the acceptance stage, in which the applicant is accepted for admission to the university.

Annexe B summarises 'who does what' in applications and admissions.

Universities' responsibility for admissions

Universities' responsibility for admissions is made explicit in the Higher Education Act 2004, which introduced variable tuition fees and associated measures including the Office of Fair Access (OFFA). In defining the duties of OFFA, which is charged with promoting and securing fair access to higher education in England, the Act states that:

'... the director [of OFFA] has a duty to protect academic freedom, including, in particular, the freedom of institutions -

- (a) to determine the contents of particular courses and the manner in which they are taught, supervised or assessed, and
- (b) to determine the criteria for the admission of students and apply those criteria in particular cases.³³

Authority and responsibility for admissions therefore clearly resides with universities and is an important dimension of the principle of academic freedom. This means that all universities set their own admissions criteria and determine their own methods of considering applications and selecting students. However, all universities and colleges, together with the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), the central admissions agency, subscribe to the principle that all applications received by the deadline should receive 'fair and equal consideration'.

Applications

UCAS, which currently processes over half a million applications a year, is the principal gateway to undergraduate study at university in the UK. It manages applications for admission to full-time undergraduate courses – first degrees, Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) and university diplomas – at UK universities and colleges. The agency also operates special services for graduate teacher training (GTTR) and the music conservatoires (CUKAS) as well as a new optional service for postgraduate taught courses, UKPASS (see below). UCAS's application processes are now almost entirely electronic.

Applicants wishing to make their applications in Welsh to universities outside Wales are asked to check beforehand with the institutions concerned that they have the facilities to translate their applications into English. Correspondence from UCAS is mainly in English, but subject to the requirements of the UCAS Welsh Language Scheme.

The UCAS application comprises six sections to be completed by the applicant and one by the applicant's referee. The applicant sections are: course/institution choices; personal details; additional information (for UK applicants only); education; personal statement; and employment. Personal details include nationality, a question regarding criminal convictions, and, from 2008, whether the applicant is a care leaver and whether their parents/guardians have participated in higher education. This personal information is forwarded to the higher education institution with the rest of the application. Additional information includes equalities data related to ethnicity and occupational background, from which the applicant's socio-economic background is derived. This information remains confidential – invisible to universities – until after a final decision has been made on the application. UCAS advises applicants to invest time in preparing their personal statement since, in most cases, it will replace a personal interview. It is the applicant's opportunity to make their case for admission and, as such, UCAS advises citing, for example, motivation, career plans; relevant work experience, including voluntary work; sponsorships; gap-year plans; and leisure activities.

UCAS tariff

The UCAS tariff was introduced in September 2002 to cope with the growing number of routes to higher education study. A points system records achievements. It establishes comparability between different types of qualifications and provides comparisons between applicants with different types and volumes of achievement. Points can be aggregated from the different qualifications included in the tariff; there is no ceiling to the number of points which can be accumulated; and double counting is not permitted.

The tariff covers A-levels, AS-levels, the new diplomas, Scottish Highers, BTEC, the Welsh Baccalaureate and the International Baccalaureate qualifications as well as many others, and new qualifications are frequently being added at the request of awarding bodies.

Application process

In its standard form the applications process operates as follows:

- The formal deadline for applications is normally 15 January although in practice applications can be – and are – made after this date. The significance of 15 January is that it is the deadline by which applications (other than those from international applicants) should be submitted in order to receive guaranteed consideration. The principle of equal consideration of all applications received by the relevant deadline applies.
- Applicants are allowed up to five choices, which they may present in any order, although UCAS will put them into alphabetical order.
- Applications are then passed to all choices simultaneously, but universities only see those applications that are for them: they do not see the applicant's other choices of university. This is the principle of invisibility.
- Universities consider the applications and either reject the applicant or make them an unconditional or a conditional offer.
- Applicants are notified of decisions as they are made but are not required to make their responses until they have a decision from all their choices. Universities are advised to notify their decisions on 15 January applications online through UCAS by the end of March.

■ Offers:

- Most offers are conditional upon the applicant obtaining specified grades and/or number of tariff points in forthcoming examinations. If the offers made by universities are conditional, an applicant may accept two offers, of which one is their firm (or first) choice, and the other, usually one with lower conditions attached, is their insurance choice. Some 8–9 per cent of applicants will go to their insurance choice.
- Applicants receiving only unconditional offers are allowed to accept only one as their firm choice and that offer is binding on them.
- Non-academic conditions may be attached to offers; for example an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau check.
- Applicants who receive no offers or who choose to decline all the offers they have received, can elect to enter the UCAS Extra system from late February. This allows them to make single, sequential, applications direct to courses with vacancies until such time as they receive an offer that they wish to accept.

Applicants who apply after 30 June, or who hold no offers after that date can enter the clearing system. This operates once examination results are known. Applicants in clearing can make direct applications to institutions for courses showing vacancies in the clearing period. Approximately 26 per cent of all applicants are eligible for clearing each year and approximately 27 per cent of those are placed.

Specialist area applications

There are separate UCAS-operated admissions arrangements for teacher-training (the Graduate Teacher Training Registry (GTTR)) and music performance (the Conservatoires UK Admissions Service (CUKAS)). These procedures take account of special features such as the need to assess suitability for practice of a profession or aptitude for performance.

In addition UCAS procedures are customised as necessary to fit the requirements of particular specialist courses. In art and design, which calls for preparation and presentation of a portfolio of work, the closing date for one of the two application routes, Route B, is 24 March in order to allow applicants from foundation courses in art and design time to select their specialism and prepare their portfolios. (The number of choices for courses using this route is limited to three, and application to the applicant's chosen institutions is sequential rather than simultaneous.) Application procedures for the other route, Route A, are identical to those for non-specialist courses. These procedures are currently under review by the Delivery Partnership.

Where competition is intense and there are considerations of suitability for professional practice – in medicine, dentistry and veterinary medicine/science, interviews and supplementary tests may be required. The closing date for these courses is 15 October and the number of choices is reduced to four.

The 15 October closing date also applies for entry to Oxford and Cambridge where competition is intense, large numbers of applicants are interviewed and admissions tests may be required for some subjects. Applicants cannot normally apply to both Oxford and Cambridge in the same year.

Postgraduate applications

UCAS moved into postgraduate applications for the first time in April 2007, when it piloted the optional Postgraduate Admissions and Statistics Service, known as UKPASS. For those institutions not participating in UKPASS, applications are made direct to individual institutions, following the application procedures and deadlines determined by each institution. Many institutions have developed or are developing their own online application facility.

Part-time applications

In the light of Schwartz's recognition that the predominantly local and particular nature of application procedures for part-time courses would make implementation of the principles recommended in his report difficult, UCAS has been considering a part-time admissions service. At present part-time applications are made direct to individual institutions; it is not clear how many institutions would opt for a centralised service if UCAS were to offer it.

Assessing applications

Universities have complete autonomy in the matter of admissions. Schwartz backed this principle, going on to identify three basic rights relating to teaching as essential to the preservation of academic freedom: the right to choose who will teach, what will be taught and to whom.

The admissions process is normally straightforward. If applicants clearly demonstrate they meet the entry and other requirements and the course is not over-subscribed, they are likely to receive an offer. As Schwartz recorded, most courses are not over-subscribed and little or no selection is required beyond establishing basic qualification. UCAS advises applicants that, providing they are prepared to be flexible and have the required qualifications, gaining a place at university or college is likely to be straightforward: overall, supply is equal to demand. An area of exception, though, is in subjects to which entry is controlled by quotas related to forecasts of the requirements of the UK workforce: medicine, dentistry, and teaching and veterinary science. There are also oversubscribed selective courses such as law.

Where circumstances are not so clear-cut – when there is doubt about an applicant's qualifications, the demand for places exceeds supply, or the course prepares for practice of certain professions and the applicant's suitability needs to be assessed, admissions staff take additional information into account. In these cases practice is focused on building a detailed picture of the applicant to inform a balanced and fair judgement in relation to admission to the course concerned.

Practice varies, both across and within institutions. Sources of additional information include: interviews, portfolios and auditions, compact arrangements, school performance and contextual factors, credit from preparatory programmes, aptitude/admissions testing, entry pathways for applicants with vocational or access qualifications, assessment of prior experiential learning, progression to special subjects, medicine and law, and random selection (for graduate entry to medicine). These are dimensions of 'holistic assessment', or taking into account all relevant factors about the applicant. Institutions are urged by UCAS to make clear in their entry profiles and other materials about what is taken into account in the making of decisions about admissions.

Some institutions routinely interview all applicants, and there are usually interviews in other universities for professional subjects such as teaching, and medicine. In certain other health professions, and in social care and teaching, interviews are a common feature, along with increased use of prior experiential learning, a strategy being encouraged by the NHS to help tackle chronic workforce shortages in nursing and midwifery in particular. Similarly, portfolios and auditions are routine aspects of admissions procedures to art and design and performing arts courses respectively.

Training and professional development for admissions staff

A high quality, efficient admissions system and a professional service to applicants demand highly trained admission staff. Universities take the training of their staff seriously. Training provision can vary widely and includes extensive in-house programmes provided by staff development offices or by the senior admissions office staff for new admissions staff and those wishing to update their skills and knowledge. Examples of training includes best practice (fair) interviewing; fair and transparent selection; external policy developments, changes in the 14-19 curriculum; equality legislation; UCAS procedures and implications for admissions staff; qualifications equivalences and handling complaints from applicants. In addition to in-house training sessions admissions staff are able to attend the UCAS continuing professional development programme.

This programme, which consists of a unit-based programme and development sessions, provides a number of professional development opportunities specifically designed for those supporting the recruitment and admission of applicants into both further education and higher education programmes. The programme provides staff with the chance to build on their knowledge and expertise in order to:

- further the fair admissions agenda;
- support professionalism in the sector;
- ensure that current knowledge, expertise and experience can be acknowledged;
- provide a range of professional development opportunities for those that are new to the sector.

UCAS is currently working towards the development of a new framework and qualification that will be accessible to all staff working in student recruitment and admissions. Participants will obtain the qualification through the achievement of a number of mandatory and optional units.

The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme also works closely with institutions to support the training of admissions staff and has gathered many examples of good practice in this area through their institutional visits and events. Developments in the sector that give rise to new training needs are discussed with colleagues in UCAS's continuing professional development programme.

Many institutions also use external professional trainers and experts to enhance the skills and knowledge base of their admissions staff and belong to practitioners groups and attend conferences which provide further training sessions and the opportunities to share good practice.

Higher education institutions

The ultimate decision about the admission of students to a programme of study is the responsibility of each individual higher education institution.

UCAS

UCAS manages applications for admission to full-time undergraduate courses – first degrees, Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) and university diplomas – at UK universities and colleges. UCAS also offers an admissions service to institutions recruiting postgraduate students.

It is the mission of UCAS, 'to promote a partnership between prospective students and universities and colleges.' The service acts as a resource to help students gain entry to higher education, provide information to parents, and assist advisers in schools and colleges to prepare pupils for researching courses and making strong applications. It works closely with staff in universities to ensure that their needs are met. It provides specific supports for university admissions staff through an accredited continuing professional development programme.

UCAS is a charity and a company limited by guarantee that is funded by university, college and applicant fees.

UCAS Change User Group

This group comprises administrative admissions practitioners and UCAS staff. Its remit is to look closely at every UCAS admissions product, together with associated processes and practices, to ensure that the impact of any changes is anticipated and adequately communicated to institutions and their software suppliers.

In particular, the Change User Group

- considers future changes to be made to UCAS systems which are required by internal or external imperatives;
- advises on objectives and key success factors for future formal projects conducted by UCAS which interface with admissions processes conducted in member institutions;
- assists in reinforcing the understanding within UCAS of the way in which changes made have an effect on processes, procedures and practices operated by member institutions;

- acts as a channel of communication and consultation in order to facilitate the transition from existing processes to new ones and improved understanding between UCAS and member institutions; and
- is mindful at all times of the need for admissions processes to be applicant-centred.

UK Postgraduate Applications and Statistical Service

In 2007 the UK Postgraduate Applications and Statistical Service (UKPASS) was established by UCAS in response to demand from the higher education sector for a centralised admissions service for postgraduates. This optional on-line facility aims to provide a cost-effective service that helps institutions to monitor their applicants and also enables them to get to know more about this aspect of the student market.

Quality Assurance Agency

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education is an independent body, funded by subscriptions from UK universities and colleges of higher education, and through contracts with the UK higher education funding bodies. It aims to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education.

The Quality Assurance Agency code of practice supports the national arrangements within the UK for quality assurance in higher education. As part of an ongoing review of practice, and in the light of the Schwartz Report, it revised section 10 of its code of practice – concerned with 'admissions' – in 2006.

Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme

The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme (SPA) was established in 2006 to act as a central resource of good practice in higher education admissions. Supported by the national funding councils, the programme is based at UCAS but is independent of it.

The programme works closely with higher education institutions, schools, colleges and other stakeholders. It makes sure that admissions policies are as fair as possible, providing guidelines for good practice and helping higher education institutions to maintain and enhance excellence in admissions, student recruitment and widening participation across the sector. The SPA programme director, supported by a steering group of stakeholders, advises on all aspects of the programme of work. The programme has visited more than 95 higher education institutions to collect evidence of good practice, which it analyses and shares with the sector and other stakeholders through its conferences, website and publications and other events throughout the UK.

Delivery Partnership: improving the higher education applications process

The Delivery Partnership steering group is drawn from a wide range of stakeholder bodies, led by the higher education sector, in acknowledgement of institutional autonomy in this area. Universities UK and GuildHE provide the secretariat, with technical expertise provided by UCAS. It contains representatives from each of the four UK countries. Several working groups are looking at particular improvements to the application process.

Although a separate entity, the steering group works closely with the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme and the programme director acts as a direct link between the two bodies.

Admissions Practitioners Group

The Academic Registrars' Council has established an Admissions Practitioners Group. The council is a membership organisation consisting of the academic registrars, or their equivalents, of higher education institutions. Its purpose is to provide an information and support network for its membership, promote and share good practice in the academic administration of the sector and to provide a source of operational knowledge and experience.

The Admissions Practitioners Group's remit is to discuss issues relating to the admission of students, including specifically considering matters relating to UCAS systems, policy and procedures. The group is mainly, but not exclusively, concerned with admission arrangements for undergraduate students, and UCAS and Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme staff provide updates to the meetings. In this context it acts as a major forum for discussion of the operational aspects of the UCAS scheme, and is also used by UCAS as a sounding-board for proposed changes.

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