IMPROVING THE HIGHER EDUCATION APPLICATIONS PROCESS

A Consultation Paper

September 2005

CONTENTS

Foreword by Sir Alan Wilson

PART THREE: TOWARDS A SYSTEM OF PQA

Chapter 6 – Introduction to PQA

Chapter 7 – PQA Option A

Chapter 8 – PQA Option B

PART FOUR: NEXT STEPS

Chapter 9 – Implementing change

Chapter 10 – How to respond to this consultation

APPENDICES

Foreword from Sir Alan Wilson, Director-General for Higher Education at the Department for Education and Skills

The quest for a system that allows students to apply for higher education courses after they have their qualifying exam results is a very difficult undertaking. In offering me this challenge back in September 2004, Charles Clarke, then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, likened it to an educational equivalent of the search for the holy grail. The proposals in this consultation do not have that kind of significance. But improvements to achieve fairness and effectiveness in HE admissions are desirable. In the report of the group led by Professor Steven Schwartz, it was argued that "the current system, relying on predicted grades, cannot be fair". This has provided the stimulus for a wide-ranging review. With the right will and co-operation improvements are eminently achievable.

I wish to consult widely, first on a number of proposals for early changes to the present system; and, secondly, on some worked-through options for a system based on the principle of post-qualification applications. This document does not provide the complete answer to all the practical challenges. Nor would I ever underestimate the hard work that remains to be done to implement a revised applications system. What I and the many colleagues who have helped me have tried to do is to demonstrate that there is more than one way to achieve the desired objectives, that the balance of advantage may differ between them, but that it is in the hands of those who will have to operate and work with the new system to turn it into reality.

I believe that we are offering the best chance in almost twenty years to develop and implement a more equitable and effective application system by making changes that would precede a full PQA system. And I believe that we have identified the best feasible approaches to PQA. We now need your help: to digest both sets of proposals and to respond to the questions we are posing.

I am indebted to the many people who have helped to get us this far. Their hard work is acknowledged fully throughout the rest of this consultation document. Taken together, that work will establish the platform for the future development of our higher education applications system.

Alan Wilson

September 2005

PART ONE

BACKGROUND

CHAPTER 1

THE CONTEXT FOR CHANGE

In this chapter, we discuss the background to the project, establishing the scope of the work and the reasons why change is sought. We explain how this consultation exercise will work and what will happen when the consultation period ends.

1.1   Scope

1.1.1   The project was originally established to examine the options for implementing a system of post-qualification applications (PQA) to higher education (HE). Under PQA, applicants would know their final exam results before taking binding decisions about whether and where to apply to HE, offering the prospect of fairer and more efficient admissions.

1.1.2   The project focused initially on the timing of application arrangements for learners who apply via UCAS to enter HE in the year in which they take their final school or Further Education (FE) qualifications, paying particular attention to those students whose HE choice is dependent on the results of exams which they have not yet taken. However, as the project developed to examine other aspects of the application process, it embraced the needs of all prospective HE students, including those who already have the qualifications they need to enter HE, part-time students, post-graduates, those taking vocational qualifications which may not meet the HE entry timetable, and overseas non-EU students.

1.2   The case for change

1.2.1   Currently, many students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and around a third from Scotland, apply to go into HE on the basis of predicted results of their final exams. In return, around two-thirds of UCAS applicants receive one or more conditional offers of places based on their predicted grades. Over half of those predicted grades turn out to be wrong.

1.2.2   Evidence suggests that only 45 percent of current predicted grades are accurate.[1,2] Further analysis suggests that predicted grades are likely to be most inaccurate for some from groups with less of a tradition of entering HE, such as those who do not achieve the highest grades, those from the lower socio-economic groups and those from certain school or college backgrounds. UCAS data show that

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[1] Estimating the Reliability of Predicted Grades, UCAS, 2005
[2] However the majority of predicted grades are within plus or minus one grade of actual exam results.

some 9% of students are predicted to achieve grades that are lower than their actual grades. For these people, HE admissions decisions drawing on predicted grades may be particularly disadvantageous. Under-estimated grades may deter some students from applying to HE at all, and it may depress the aspirations of other students.

1.2.3   Crucially, students who receive under-estimated predicted grades may, as a result, not receive the conditional offers that they merit, or they may lose out to others with over-predicted grades. Those students who achieve better than expected results have very limited opportunity under current arrangements to change their applications and obtain places that reflect their success. Many students who achieve worse than expected results may go through a process of 'Clearing'. UCAS figures show that in the 2004 entry cycle some 35,000 students were accepted to institutions via Clearing (representing 9% of all UCAS acceptances). Often, Clearing requires difficult decisions to be made to tight deadlines. The drop out rate amongst those who go through Clearing is higher than the average drop out rate. Survey evidence suggests that some 29% of those who go through Clearing and drop out cite mistaken choice of course as their primary reason.[3]

1.3   Calls for change

1.3.1   In discussions around fairness and efficiency in the HE application system, one proposition that has come up consistently over the years is the introduction of PQA. Under PQA, applicants would know their final exam results before taking binding decisions about whether and where to apply to HE. In the last ten years, several influential and high profile groups have made powerful arguments for PQA.

1.3.2   The **National Committee of Inquiry** led by Sir Ron (now Lord) Dearing was appointed in 1996 to make recommendations regarding higher education over the subsequent 20 years. The Committee recommended that, over the medium term, the representative bodies, in consultation with other relevant agencies, should seek to establish a post-qualification admissions *(sic)* system:

> ### *Extract from the report of the National Committee of Inquiry*
>
> "…the current system for the admission of young school and college leavers does not provide sufficient time for students to make the best decisions. They have to make their selection of programmes very early with offers of places made on the basis of predicted performance. Those who do not meet the offer have to enter Clearing, which requires even faster decisions about which institution

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[3] Elias P et al, (2003), Dropping Out: A study of Early Leavers from Higher education, DfES RR386

> and which programme to pursue. **It was put to us strongly that this system is not in the best interests of students. We agree**… A frequently discussed alternative to the existing system is that admission to an institution should be based on actual achievement, rather than predicted results. This would assist students since they know more about their abilities (and possibly their interests) having received their examination results and having studied for longer." [4]

1.3.3   More recently, the report from Sir Mike Tomlinson's **'Inquiry into A Level Standards'** in December 2002 recommended that consideration be given to moving to a PQA system on the grounds that PQA would:

- increase the accuracy of the admissions process;

- remove much of the burden of Clearing;

- relieve the stress of applying for university during Year 13;

- create more time to focus on gaining good results.

1.3.4   In September 2004, the **Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group**[5]**,** led by Professor Steven Schwartz, argued in favour of PQA on the grounds of fairness. The Group's report was published after consultation in which over half of the respondents to the question "Should the education sector move to a system of PQA?" answered in favour of such a move.

> **Extract from the Admissions to Higher Education Review Report**
>
> "The current system, relying on predicted grades, cannot be fair. It does not meet the Steering Group's recommended principles of fair admissions, since it is based on data which are not reliable, it is not transparent for applicants or institutions, and may present barriers to applicants who lack self-confidence."

1.3.5   The report of **a commission of the Secondary Heads Association**[6] (SHA) in November 2004, found the reasons for PQA "overwhelming". The report asked that its recommendations be considered with a view to establishing a PQA system for the 2008 year of entry to HE.

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[4] *Higher Education in the learning society: Report of the National Committee* July 1997

[5] *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice*: Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group September 2004

[6] *Post Qualification Application to Higher Education: Report of a commission of the Secondary Heads Association*, 8 November 2004

1.3.6   Although there has been strong support for a move to a PQA system, no clear way through the practical difficulties has yet been found and implementation has remained an unsatisfied aspiration. However, such widespread support for change is encouraging evidence of the readiness of many involved in HE applications to look hard at the traditional ways in which things are currently done and find pragmatic approaches to delivering improvements in the future.

1.4   Establishing the project

1.4.1   Charles Clarke, then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, announced in September 2004 that he had asked for work to begin leading to the implementation of a system of post-qualification applications to higher education. In a written statement to the House of Commons following the publication of the **Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group**, Charles Clarke responded as follows to the report's recommendation that he set up a high-level PQA implementation group as soon as possible:

> I am concerned that over very many years such a system has acquired the reputation of a holy grail for the HE admissions world – desirable but not achievable. I am aware of the complexity of the practical difficulties that would need to be overcome before a post-qualification application (PQA) system could be introduced, but I remain persuaded by the arguments for PQA which have been endorsed by Professor Schwartz and his group. It must be fairer and more transparent for students to know their final results before making important choices about where and what to study, and this must also aid decision-making by universities. PQA could also help many students, including those from families without a tradition of HE, to feel more confident in applying to our leading universities. I have therefore asked Sir Alan Wilson, the Director General for Higher Education and the former Vice Chancellor of Leeds University, to lead the work on implementation for PQA. He will be assisted by an implementation group which he will establish. Sir Alan will consult with all interested parties, engaging fully the devolved administrations, and advise me on the arrangements and an appropriate timescale for the introduction of PQA.

1.4.2   Charles Clarke emphasised that the work must involve full engagement with the Devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There are some significant differences between the education systems in the countries of the UK. An underlying principle throughout the project has been to identify a system which could operate across borders for the benefit of students wherever they may wish to study in the UK. The small Working Group which has supported Sir Alan Wilson's project therefore included senior officials from the Scottish Executive, the Welsh Assembly Government and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland, as well

as the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). A list of members of the Working Group is attached at Appendix 1. The response to this consultation document will help to inform Sir Alan's advice to the current Secretary of State for Education and Skills.

1.4.3   The project has been co-ordinated from the DfES. This is primarily because it was initiated in response to the recommendation that the Secretary of State for Education and Skills should set up an implementation group. But it is also because the DfES is well placed to provide strategic leadership by bringing key stakeholders together to analyse the current and future effectiveness of existing arrangements and to seek to build consensus on how those arrangements could be improved.

1.4.4   The Government and the Devolved Administrations respect the autonomy of the HE sector and are absolutely clear that admissions policies are entirely the responsibility of HE Institutions (HEIs). The project is based on a clear and explicit recognition that changes to the HE applications system can only be implemented effectively with the agreement and collaboration of a very wide range of stakeholders from across the full spectrum of the education sector. However, the Government and the Devolved Administrations do have a legitimate interest in ensuring that application and admissions processes are fair and command the confidence of prospective students, parents and teachers. It is a priority to ensure that all students have the opportunity to maximise their potential and apply for the HE place that best suits their ability and preference.

1.4.5   The project has drawn heavily on the help of a national Consultation Group. Whilst this Group was intended to be broadly representative of the key stakeholder groups, its members were invited to join on the basis of their individual expertise rather than as representatives of their respective organisations. Similar Consultation Groups were established in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland to consider the particular issues and implications for each country. The input of each of these Groups has been essential to identify the issues and develop the initial proposals set out in this document. Membership of each Group is listed at Appendix 1.

1.4.6   Sir Alan also established a Stakeholders Standing Conference involving representatives of the very wide range of organisations with an interest in HE applications and admissions. An event was held on 18 March 2005 to provide an opportunity for this group to come together to discuss with Sir Alan and his team the emerging proposals from their work. A list of the organisations invited to take part in the conference is at Appendix 1. The comments which delegates made during and after the 18 March event have contributed to the development of this consultation document.

1.4.7　　　In addition, Sir Alan and members of the Working Group have had discussions about issues of concern and potential solutions with a range of stakeholders and representative bodies. There will be opportunities for further discussions during this consultation period.

1.4.8　　　This consultation document has been prepared by the DfES Secretariat to Sir Alan's Working and Consultation Groups. It has been agreed with, and is issued in collaboration with, the Scottish Executive, the Welsh Assembly Government and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland. This reflects our aim to identify improvements to the HE application system which could operate across the UK.

1.5　Guiding principles for the project

1.5.1　　　An underlying principle of the project has been to find a balance between increasing the fairness and transparency of the application process for students and the interests of management and planning efficiency for HEIs.

1.5.2　　　A further underpinning principle is that of proportionality: we believe that the changes proposed should be of a scale appropriate to the scale of the problem, and avoid undue disruption.

1.5.3　　　Based on earlier work, there appears to be near unanimous support for key elements of a vision for change. That vision is that HE admissions should be as fair as possible to as many students as possible and not disadvantage any particular groups. The system should also be effective in matching student demand to the supply of places and capable of being administered with greater efficiency than at present.

1.5.4　　　To be successful, any reforms that ultimately come out of this work will need to fulfil the following success criteria:

- they deliver improved openness and transparency – and hence fairness – about how admissions decisions are made;

- they allow students to make sound choices;

- they reduce the cost of HE applications processes by reducing volumes of nugatory application processing for HEIs and application making for students;

- they support a holistic approach to the consideration of applications to HE.

1.6   Purpose of this document

1.6.1   The purpose of this document is to offer for public consideration a range of proposals and to seek views and comments on those proposals. In Chapter 10 we explain how to submit comments. A summary of comments received will be published and an analysis of the results will inform the way forward.

PART TWO

IMPROVING THE CURRENT APPROACH TO APPLICATIONS

CHAPTER 2

REFORMING THE CURRENT SYSTEM

In this chapter, we consider the operation, strengths and weaknesses of the current application system, and our approach to reforming it.

2.1 Background to the current system

2.1.1 Over the past forty years or so, the current HE applications system and its predecessors have done a great deal to support and enhance fairness, transparency and accessibility to HE. The system has many positive features that have evolved through experience to address the needs of students and HEIs.

2.1.2 In 2004, 449,450 students applied to university via the main UCAS scheme. Of those, 411,549 (92%) received at least one offer, implying that 37,901 (8%) failed to gain an offer. Of those who gained offers, 368,589 (89.6%) converted them to firm choices – meaning that 42,960 (10.4%) failed to convert their offer into a firm choice.

2.1.3 75,375 applicants held unconditional offers, with 97% of them taking up those offers. The remaining 293,214 received conditional offers. 75% of those holding conditional offers went on to take up their first choice, whilst 8% took up their insurance choice. In total, 52,109 (12.7% of all those who received offers) failed to take up any of their offers (either conditional or unconditional). 35,000 applicants gained places from Clearing (of whom some 860 applied for the first time after they had received their exam results).

2.1.4 So, the current system appears to meet students' needs in the majority of cases. It also allows different timetables for applications to study specialist subjects such as Medicine or Art and Design, and an earlier deadline date for applications to Oxbridge.

2.1.5 Similarly, the current system is able to handle applications from students with a range of circumstances and qualifications other than the traditional route of A-levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and Highers in Scotland. There is a wide range of non A-level qualifications operating to different timetables for different reasons. Some people seeking to enter HE with such qualifications will be doing so as pre-qualified students. Others may be entering as mature students, on the basis of their experience and potential rather than the qualifications they hold.

2.2 Problems of the current system

2.2.1   There are, however, signs that the system is arguably not as efficient as it could be, and that in some important respects is not as fair and flexible as it should be. As we noted in Chapter 1, it is based on a dependence on predicted grades, over half of which turn out to be wrong. UCAS looked at a sample of 36,827 predicted and achieved subject grades, predominantly from 2004.[7] Modelling work on that data has shown that a person who obtains a grade A in their exams is over seven and a half times more likely to obtain an accurately predicted grade when compared to someone who obtained a C grade. At the other end of the spectrum, an individual who got a grade E was approximately 80% less likely to obtain an accurately predicted grade than someone who got a grade C. Data show that almost 60% of all A grades are accurately predicted, whereas only 42% of E grades are accurately predicted. We do not believe this is fair. In Scotland, wrongly predicted grades are less of an issue as there some 70% of students already have their Highers when applying to HE.

2.3 Our approach to reform

2.3.1   We described in Chapter 1 the underlying principles of the project: to make the HE applications system fairer for students without making it more burdensome or inefficient for HEIs; and to make proposals for change which are proportionate to the extent of the problem.

2.3.2   Those involved in the project have searched for possible ways of implementing PQA to achieve these principles. In the process we have identified other factors in the current system which may be responsible for unfairness, quite apart from the timing of students' final decisions on which HE course they wish to take up. These factors centre on:

- the information, advice and guidance available to applicants. In Chapter 3 we propose reforms to help students to make better researched and targeted applications;

- information about applicants. In Chapter 4 we argue that HEIs should have the greatest possible amount of accurate and reliable information about students' past academic performance and future potential and examine various sources for providing this information;

- application processes. In Chapter 5 we propose reforms to the structure of the applications system itself in order to realise the full benefits of the reforms we propose in Chapters 3 and 4. We have sought to create a system in which students target initial applications more accurately, with the possibility of making further

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[7] Estimating the Reliability of Predicted Grades, UCAS, 2005

applications if they do not receive an offer. We have also sought to introduce greater fairness into the Clearing process and propose to change the time at which exam results are published.

2.3.3   We believe that the proposals which we describe in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 could be implemented by the academic year 2008/09. We also believe that they would create a new environment in which students would increasingly be better informed and capable of making more sophisticated HE choices. This has the potential to deliver a better match between student demand and available places more efficiently than under current arrangements. Indeed, it can be argued that these proposals would deliver a substantial part of the objectives of a PQA system.

2.3.4   We also believe that the proposed reforms could pave the way for the introduction of PQA in the longer term, and that it is important to preserve that possibility and the options for PQA systems which have been developed in the course of the project. In Part 3 of this document we go on to discuss two possible approaches to PQA and to seek views on whether and how these, or other approaches to PQA, might be implemented in the longer term.

2.3.5   In consulting on these proposals we do not rule out the possibility of maintaining any or all aspects of the current applications process. The whole purpose of this consultation exercise is to elicit views on whether our proposals are appropriate and viable, and the extent to which they would solve problems with the current system.

CHAPTER 3

INFORMATION, ADVICE AND GUIDANCE FOR STUDENTS

In this chapter, we discuss the information that is required by students when making informed decisions about their HE applications. We look at Entry Profiles, financial information, Teaching Quality Information and feedback from HEIs.

3.1   Improving information for students

3.1.1   Improving the quality and type of information available to students as they research their possible HE applications continues to be a high priority. We congratulate the HE sector on the progress made in this area. However, the information students currently have to support them in making HE choices is variable. It is not always clear what the qualification entry requirements for a course are. Neither is it always clear what financial support may be available.

3.1.2   We believe that this can result in students making poorly researched or badly informed choices. This is not in the best interest of the student as it could lead to suboptimal outcomes in terms of the places they are offered and could ultimately lead to students dropping-out. Students would particularly benefit from a move towards a fully integrated, easily and clearly accessible, source of information.

3.1.3   Poorly informed choices may also contribute to the high number of applications that the current applications system handles. Many of those applications are submitted as make-weights and are not necessarily well-researched preferences. At present, on average each HE place handled by UCAS generates 5.6 applications. Each application costs, on average, approximately £46 to handle. In helping students target their applications more effectively, the system will become more efficient and more cost effective, handling fewer unrealistic applications.

3.1.4   In the following section, we examine some of the key information, advice and guidance available to students.

3.2   Entry Profiles

3.2.1   Students need to be clear about HEIs' individual entry requirements and admissions policies and procedures. We believe that this information is vital to enable students to make better informed and more realistic choices. If students clearly understand the entry requirements for a course, including details of the qualifications held by those who have entered that course in preceding years, then their

applications will be better informed and more realistic.

3.2.2   Entry Profiles were developed by UCAS and are drawn up by individual institutions to provide entry criteria to individual courses (a UCAS Entry Profile template is available at Appendix 2). Entry Profiles are easily accessible through the UCAS website and contain such details as: particulars about the course, including teaching methods; the skills and qualities that a student will need to be successful on the courses; and the types of qualifications that are accepted as entry to the course. Entry routes for different courses may range from the traditional access routes of A-levels and Highers, through to Access to HE courses, Accreditation of Prior Learning and vocational routes, where appropriate. There are currently Entry Profiles for some 14,500 courses, with many more under development.

3.2.3   We note the importance Professor Steven Schwartz attached to Entry Profiles as the most useful vehicle for giving information on these requirements, policies and procedures. We welcome the fact that whilst 65% of HEIs use these profiles currently for some or all of their courses, this is expected to rise to 80-90% by 2008.

3.2.4   We believe that it is vital that the information available is easily accessible and easy to understand. Further, students need to be able to make easy comparisons of the different entry level requirements of all the courses they are interested in. In effect this means that they need to self-predict their grades when considering their HE options.

Proposal 1

UCAS to continue their work to encourage the provision of clear, comparable entry requirement information, with a view to moving toward 100% provision of information for students wishing to enter HE in 2008/09

3.3   Financial information

3.3.1   It is important that students understand, as they are making their choices, what taking up a place in a particular HEI will mean for them in monetary terms. Current research shows that many students only take an interest in financial matters very late in the day. UCAS encourage consideration of financial matters by issuing information leaflets on the financial help available to all applicants and publishing a range of information on its website. This is of particular benefit for students who have already applied to HE. However, work needs to continue to ensure that all potential students are aware that this information is widely available, in a variety of media, and that they know how to access that information.

3.3.2   The support that is available depends on where in the UK the student is domiciled. Each of the UK administrations determines the package of support available to their students. Support will consist of fee support, normally in the form of a loan and support for living costs which will consist of both loans and grants, including additional support for disabled students and those with dependants. Entitlement to this support is assessed by Local Education Authorities for students domiciled in England and Wales, and by Education and Library Boards (ELBs) for students in Northern Ireland. Students domiciled in Scotland are assessed by the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS). Scottish students studying in Scotland have their fees paid for them by the SAAS and have to repay a graduate endowment, after graduation. The Student Loans Company (SLC) is responsible for the payment of support at the start of term and during the academic year for students in England and Wales, but only pays loans to Scottish students. In Northern Ireland, currently, the SLC administers the payment and recovery of student loans, tuition fees support and supplementary allowances. The ELBs are responsible for maintenance grants and Disabled Students Allowance (DSA). Equally important to this statutory support will be non-repayable support in the form of institutional bursaries, available from HEIs charging variable fees. It is likely that the eligibility rules will vary from one institution to the next, and possibly between courses as well.

3.3.3   We strongly endorse the principle that students researching their possible HE applications should be able to access easily, and preferably in one place, accurate and reliable information about all the financial support they may receive whilst in HE. We note that UCAS and the SLC are already working to find ways of providing such information, and potentially joining up the processes of applying for a place and applying for a student loan. The Review of Funding for Learners in Scotland is also looking at putting in place systems for providing comprehensive advice on funding for all potential learners.

3.3.4   The DfES has announced an end-to-end review of the current student finance delivery system in England. The review will consider the whole student finance delivery process in England – from information and advice provided before students apply; the application, assessment and payment process; and the repayment of loans once students have left HE. The review will recommend a range of options to Ministers in November 2005.

Proposal 2

In the context of the end-to-end review of student finance delivery in England, further consideration to be given to how to realise the principle of giving students researching their possible HE applications easy access to timely, accurate and reliable information, preferably in one place, about all the financial support they may receive whilst in HE.

3.4   Teaching Quality Information

3.4.1   We note the development of the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) site – which will also contain data from Scottish HEIs from summer 2005. Once fully developed, the site has the potential to be an excellent source of information, both academic and non-academic, for students. (It should be noted here that the TQI site does not include information on courses that are not funded by the HE Funding Councils.)

3.4.2   We also recognise the importance of the development of the first ever National Student Survey (which will not extend to Scotland), results from which will also be available via the TQI site from early autumn 2005. It will be important to evaluate these information sources as they evolve.

> **Proposal 3**
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> HEFCE to commission early research on how students and their advisers are using the information on the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) website, to ensure it is meeting the needs of students and their advisers and to inform its further development from 2006.

3.5   Feedback to applicants

3.5.1   We heard some persuasive calls for improvements in the way in which HEIs currently feed back to students following the assessment of applications. We were told that, too often, students were given little indication of the reasons why HEIs had rejected their application. We believe that it is important for students to understand these reasons to help them target any further applications realistically. We have heard concerns about the resource implications for HEIs, and worries about the possibility of litigation against them. We note however that the Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group recommended that HEIs should provide feedback on request to unsuccessful applicants. The Steering Group's report[8] included an example feedback letter. We suggest that HEIs could develop feedback letters perhaps offering a detailed profile of students who had been successful in achieving places in recent years. HEIs might anyway need to be prepared to explain their reasons for rejecting applicants in response to requests under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

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[8] *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice* (Appendix 7), Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group September 2004.

> **Proposal 4**
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> HEIs to develop more informative letters to feed back to students, detailing particularly why their applications have been rejected.

3.6   Advice and guidance

3.6.1   Pre-HE information, advice and guidance is currently available through schools, colleges, the Connexions service, and from Careers Wales and Careers Scotland. School staff currently provide informal help and guidance about subject choices and vocational options, and careers advice is provided for school and college students by the Connexions service or Careers Scotland. Adults may seek advice and guidance through the 47 local partnerships managed through the Learning and Skills Council and through other sources, such as Ufi's learner centres and Learndirect or Learndirect Scotland and SUfI. Careers Wales and in Northern Ireland the Department for Employment and Learning's Careers Service provide careers information, advice and guidance to young people and adults seeking help with any aspect of application to Higher Education courses.

3.6.2   We understand that the availability of advice and guidance can be variable. Our proposals throughout this document are based on the view that good quality advice and guidance are essential for making good quality applications.

3.6.3   Work is already underway following the publication of the Skills White Paper[9] to improve the provision of adult advice and guidance, through raising awareness of the services available and enhancing the provision available through Ufi and Learndirect in England. A cross-Government review will be established to determine how best to achieve this.

3.6.4   We expect that the proposals in the Youth Green Paper[10], and actions taken as a result, will lead to improvements in the quality and consistency of information, advice and guidance for prospective HE students in schools, colleges and elsewhere. The Green Paper proposes clear minimum expectations of the information, advice and guidance that young people should receive, and will explore how quality standards could help ensure quality and impartiality.

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[9] Skills: Getting on in business, getting on at work; March 2005; CM6483 – **I, II, III**
[10] Youth Matters; July 2005; CM6629

CHAPTER 4
INFORMATION ABOUT APPLICANTS

In this chapter we re-visit the unfairness of basing admissions decisions on predicted exam grades and seek views about using alternative information.

4.1 Introduction

4.1.1   The process of applying to enter HE is unavoidably a competitive one. The project acknowledges that fact and has not considered trying to change it.

4.1.2   In the same way that it is important that students have accurate and up to date information on which to base their choices and decisions, it is important that HEIs have reliable and fair information on which to judge applicants' ability and potential in order to make admissions decisions as fairly as possible.

4.2 Removal of predicted grades

4.2.1   In Chapters 1 and 2 we discussed the inaccuracy of over half of predicted A-level grades and the inherent unfairness of a system which relies on those predictions to make decisions about individuals' HE experiences.

4.2.2   We have heard many calls for schools and colleges not to supply students' predicted exam grades along with their applications. Research which we commissioned from UCAS showed that predicted grades are accurate in just 45% of cases. In nearly 9% of cases, the predictions are too pessimistic whilst in some 47% of cases they are too optimistic. The reliability of predicted grades diminishes as you move down the socio-economic groups. 51% of pupils from the highest socio-economic group receive accurately predicted grades compared to only 39% in the lowest socio-economic group. Evidence suggests that, after controlling for other characteristics, pupils from the lowest socio-economic group are more likely to receive underestimated predicted grades than their peers in the higher socio-economic groups. We heard widespread concern that these often unreliable predicted grades do play some part in admissions decisions. We do not believe that this can be fair.

4.2.3   We acknowledge that by endorsing the need for HEIs to publicise their entry requirements, including the exam grades expected of their entrants, we are in effect asking students to self-predict their grades when choosing their HE institution and course. Comments have been made to us about the difficulty in practice of preventing references to predicted results being made by teachers, or otherwise

'coded', in students' applications. We are also aware that some HEIs would prefer to continue to see predicted results to inform their admissions decisions.

4.2.4   We appreciate that if the use of predicted grades were abolished, HEIs would need sufficient other information on which to base their admissions decisions. They would continue to have students' personal statements and their school or college references. We discuss below a range of other information which is available or which could be available in the future.

> **Proposal 5**
>
> Schools and colleges should not supply students' predicted exam results with their HE applications and these should play no part in HE admissions decisions.
>
> **Question 1**
>
> What other information could be supplied in their place?

4.3   Availability of academic records

4.3.1   As now, HEIs would see applicants' existing academic records including GCSE results. In Scotland some 70% of students already have their Higher results the year before they enter HE. Therefore, as now, HEIs dealing with applications from Scottish students will often know the Higher results on which initial entry requirements for these students are based.

4.3.2   UCAS and the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) recently carried out a consultation exercise on the incorporation of GCE/VCE AS and A-level unit information and grades into the UCAS application process. This also covered other unit based qualifications. In light of the response to the consultation exercise, UCAS and JCQ plan to introduce a full service in 2007, with arrangements which would allow students to enter unit details and grades when they complete their online applications. This differs from current arrangements under which applicants are instructed to enter only whole qualifications. In addition, UCAS would provide the unit grades to HEIs at the time of Confirmation. For 2006 entry, there will be a small-scale pilot to assess the technical feasibility of Awarding Bodies making available unit grades and UCAS transferring a greater volume of data to HEIs at Confirmation.

4.3.3   This will mean that those students who have their AS results from January and/or the summer of Year 12 will be able to include their unit grades in their HE applications. Students who do not submit applications until the end of March of Year 13 will be able to include results of AS or A2 units, taken in January of Year 13.

4.3.4   We believe that the Delivery Partnership, that we propose in Chapter 9, will want to look at the detail of what UCAS and JCQ plan and to consider emerging practice from the pilot. We are aware of concerns about the use of AS unit grades in HE applications, particularly that, as there is no requirement to take AS in Year 12, not all HE applicants will have results to declare. There are doubts that AS unit grades will be a more accurate predictor of final A-level results than teachers' predictions currently are. However, that is not their aim: they would provide a snapshot of performance at a point in time and the design of the AS allows for re-sits to be taken and hence grades improved.

4.3.5   There are though concerns about students re-sitting AS exams in order to improve their grades. The 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper asked QCA to look at rules governing how and when students can certificate and "cash in" their unit achievement. The Delivery Partnership will need to consider the conclusions of this review. On this basis, it will be able to reach a view on the role AS unit grade information is playing in the HE admissions process. If it were possible to overcome the difficulties that are anticipated, the use of available AS unit grades in applications would go a long way towards achieving PQA.

4.4   Recording achievement

4.4.1   In England, another potential source of information about applicants is the Progress File, the successor to the National Record of Achievement. This is an interactive set of materials designed to help young people (from Key Stage 3 onwards) and adults develop as independent learners, be capable of taking informed decisions about their personal and career development, and make successful transitions from one phase of learning or employment to the next. While the use of Progress File is not a statutory requirement, it is taken up by the majority of secondary schools and many colleges.

4.4.2   The processes which underpin Progress File materials help learners to identify and achieve learning goals and develop successful learning strategies and study skills. Importantly for HE admissions purposes, they help learners to recognise and present the full range of their achievements (whether academic, vocational, community-based, sporting or social).

4.4.3   Progress File fosters evidence-gathering for the applications process, capturing the full range of applicants' achievements alongside their exam results. This could be particularly beneficial for those students wishing to apply to HE who are not taking A-levels or other qualifications whose results are not primarily designed for HE entry.

4.4.4   There is also much work going on in the sector in relation to the development of e-portfolios, the content of which could include a portfolio of evidence compiled by the student, a developmental CV and a transcript or learner record. This includes work by UCAS and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) in the area of e-portfolios and online applications, and also development through the British Standards Institution of the technical standard UKLEAP, based on international standards, to support transfer of learner information. Additionally there are links into Europe and the Europass learner record.

4.4.5   This type of information, representing an up-to-date collection of a student's achievement, could be used by HEIs to help inform admissions decisions. It could be a particularly useful record for those students not following the traditional A-level or Higher based route into HE.

> **Proposal 6**
>
> The Delivery Partnership (that we propose in Chapter 9) to keep in touch with developments in the e-portfolio and investigate its potential role in the HE applications process.

4.5   Testing potential for HE

4.5.1   The Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group report[11] acknowledged that assessing an applicants' potential for HE study, or recognising ability which may not be reflected fully in Level 3 exam results, was a key issue for fair admissions. The report recommended research to assess the idea of a national test of potential and noted that US-style SATs were one test worth exploring, alongside other possibilities.

4.5.2   When welcoming the Steering Group's report, Charles Clarke, then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, supported the notion of research to assess the idea of a national test of potential as an early task for a new centre of expertise on admissions proposed in the report. The form of that centre is being considered by the sector. We note that further developments are already underway, for example the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate plans to trial a new generic test for university entrance, developed with the Australian Council of Educational Research.

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[11] *Fair Admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice:* Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group September 2004

CHAPTER 5
REFORMING THE APPLICATION PROCESS

In this chapter, we seek views on proposals to reform the way students make their initial applications; strengthen the existing facility for students to make additional applications if they fail to gain a conditional offer with their initial applications; continue to treat pre-qualified and overseas non-EU applicants the same as at present; allow those students who achieve better than expected exam results to change their applications should they wish to; simplify arrangements for applications to Art and Design courses; introduce greater fairness into the Clearing process; and change the time at which some exam results are published.

5.1 Introduction

5.1.1   In earlier chapters, we have talked about the information, advice and guidance for, and information about, applicants. In this chapter we focus on the current processes for handling applications. We look at how they may be reformed.

5.1.2   In making proposals for change, we have sought to achieve two goals. First, we want a system that does all it can to ensure that the maximum number of students have offers of HE places before they receive their exam results. In this way, we hope to reduce, as far as possible, the number of people who need to enter Clearing.

5.1.3   Second, we want a system that actively seeks to create a better match between student demand and places on offer earlier in the application cycle. Our intention here is to tackle the difficulties associated with over and under-subscribed courses. We do, however, recognise that no applications system, on its own, can hope to avoid the over-subscription of some courses and the under-subscription of others.

5.1.4   We have also sought to build on the advantages that would be realised by the reforms proposed in earlier chapters.

5.2 Initial applications

5.2.1   We have already discussed a package of measures to help applicants make better informed and researched applications and to give HEIs reliable and fair information about applicants. Taken together, we believe that these will create an environment in which students are increasingly well informed about HE and HE has more and better information about applicants. This will allow applications to be more sophisticated and more accurately targeted, and therefore more likely to result in an offer of a place. We feel that this will allow

students to make, and HEIs to consider, fewer but higher quality applications. We have explored ways to facilitate this and to introduce greater flexibility into the way students make their applications.

5.2.2   We propose an arrangement where students would be able to submit their initial applications at any time between the beginning of September and the end of March. Extending the period for submission of initial applications until the end of March would give students more opportunity to research their HE options. It would also allow students to submit their initial applications later, when they were closer to the end of their studies and may be clearer about the direction they want to take in HE. We propose that students could choose to submit their initial applications all at the same time, or staggered over a period of time.

5.2.3   HEIs would respond to these applications when they were ready, on a rolling basis (i.e. they would not be bound to wait until a given date to respond). We are clear that for this approach to work most effectively, HEIs should seek to respond to applications as speedily as is practicable. This would allow students to respond to one application being rejected by submitting further applications.

5.2.4   We have discussed the merits of proposing that students could initially submit up to four applications, rather than the current six. There is an argument that if students were better informed they would be more likely to make more accurately targeted applications, with a greater likelihood of success. Reducing the overall numbers of initial applications could avoid some unnecessary work and time for both students and HEIs. As we go on to explain in section 5.3 below, we would propose further opportunities for students who received no offers from their initial applications, so that they would not be disadvantaged. We are aware however that this proposal could be perceived as limiting student choice. We are also aware that it would not be desirable for some HEIs, as it may leave some places unfilled until later in the application process. We would therefore welcome views on the advantages and disadvantages of changing the initial maximum number of applications from six to four.

Proposal 7

Students to submit initial applications between the beginning of September and the end of March, either together or separately. HEIs should seek to respond to applications as speedily as is practicable.

Question 2

Are you in favour of four or six initial applications?

5.3 Additional applications for those without offers

5.3.1 We want to ensure that those students who receive no offers (either conditional or unconditional) in response to their initial applications have further opportunities ahead of Clearing. So we envisage an arrangement modelled on the existing UCAS Extra approach. In 2004, some 2,600 people gained a place as a result of participating in UCAS Extra. This facility provides students who do not hold an offer with information about the places that remain available so that they can submit further, single applications, one at a time, until they receive an offer (also see discussion at 5.7.7, where we consider and seek views on whether students should be able to continue submitting additional applications until they have gained two offers).

5.3.2 For us, a key advantage of UCAS Extra is that it involves students contacting HEIs ahead of submitting an application to discuss whether that application would be welcome. This allows the HEI and student to form a relationship and ensures that the student submits only targeted applications. We are keen to see these advantages reproduced in our proposal for submitting additional applications.

5.3.3 Students who had received no offers in response to their initial applications would be able to make an unlimited number of additional applications, one at a time, during the September to March period, until they secured an offer. We also propose that these students should be able to continue to submit additional applications up to the end of June, should they need to.

Proposal 8

Students who receive no offers from their initial applications to be able to submit an unlimited number of additional applications, one at a time, until they secure an offer, up to the end of June.

5.3.4 To ensure that students using this facility were fully informed of the places that remained available, we envisage a stock-take phase at the end of March. HEIs would publish information on the places they still had available. They would review these 'vacancy lists' monthly thereafter until the end of Clearing.

Proposal 9

HEIs to publish monthly vacancy lists, from the end of March until the end of Clearing.

5.4 Exceptions to this timetable

5.4.1 It was put to us during our consultations that the timetable we propose for submitting and responding to applications would not be

feasible in some circumstances. In particular, it would not meet the needs of Oxbridge or courses such as Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science. For these, competition for places is high and interviews are widely used. The additional work involved in assessing the high volume of applications and carrying out interviews is reflected in the fact that, currently, applications for these must be submitted by 15 October.

5.4.2   Whilst we recognise this argument, we also see that there is a real issue here. We have proposed a final deadline of end March for initial applications for the majority of HEIs and courses. Ideally there would be one single final deadline to ensure an equal chance for all students, including those whose potential emerges a little later than others. We would therefore welcome views on whether there should be a single submission date, or, as now, an earlier date for submission of applications for Oxbridge and Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science courses.

> **Question 3**
>
> Should there be one single final date for the submission of applications, or should the current deadline of 15 October remain the same for the submission of applications for Oxbridge, Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science courses?

5.5   Pre-qualified home and EU students

5.5.1   Pre-qualified home and EU students are those who already hold the exam results necessary to get an HE place. This group may include part-time students, post-graduates, mature students, and those taking vocational qualifications which are not designed to meet the HE entry timetable. This group is, to some extent, in competition for places with students who are waiting for their exam results. We heard no suggestion that this competition was unfair or that pre-qualified students could gain advantage on the basis of applying earlier than other students. HEIs already have systems and good practice in place to manage this competition and prevent any unfairness. We believe it will be important for HEIs to continue to operate in this way. We note that a significant number of pre-qualified home and EU students will have chosen to take a gap year before applying to HE and in so doing will already, in effect, be applying on a PQA basis.

> **Proposal 10**
>
> HEIs to continue their work to ensure against unfair competition for places between pre-qualified and other home and EU students.

5.6   Overseas non-EU students

5.6.1   HEIs usually allocate a quota of places for overseas non-EU students which is distinct from places allocated to home and EU students. As a rule, applications from the two groups are considered separately and there is generally no competition between the groups for places. Decisions to admit overseas non-EU students therefore should not normally impact unfairly on home and EU students.

> **Proposal 11**
>
> HEIs to continue to consider applications from pre-qualified overseas non-EU students as they do now and, where appropriate, offer them places on an unconditional basis.

5.7   Offers

5.7.1   Under a PQA type system, students would make final and binding decisions about which HE place to take up once they had their exam grades. It has been put to us that a key advantage of this is that it would allow applicants to choose a place that their exam performance merits.

5.7.2   We are attracted by this advantage and looked at ways in which we might realise it within current application systems. One possibility is to allow students to hold more offers than they do now, pending their exam results. For the above benefit to be realised, students, ideally, would need to hold a range of offers based on different exam result possibilities, from the aspirational, through the expected, to the insurance.

5.7.3   It was put to us that students should be able to hold open all the offers they gain as a result of their initial applications. Depending on the response to our question about whether students should be able to make four or six initial applications, this could imply that students would hold between four and six offers. We were attracted by the benefits of holding this number of offers in terms of the variety of offers it would give to students. But we accept that the more offers a student holds, the more complexity is introduced into the applications system and the greater the difficulties for HEIs in managing their places.

5.7.4   It was put to us alternatively that students should hold fewer offers than at present and, in effect, we should abolish the insurance offer.   We accept that the existence of the insurance offer creates work for HEIs and that this work most often results in no return. We know that of the 215,000 insurance offers held in 2004, only 23,000 resulted in actual places being taken up. Still, in the absence of the insurance choice, these 23,000 students would have had to seek a place through Clearing. We propose a reformed approach to Clearing below (Section

5.11) and believe that this will make Clearing fairer for those who need to enter it. But, we have said earlier that a central aim of our reforms is to ensure that the maximum number of students hold offers as early in the application cycle as possible, with the intention of keeping those who need to enter Clearing to a minimum. Abolishing the insurance choice would be counter to this aim.

5.7.5   We have concluded that there is a case for maintaining the current approach of allowing students to hold up to two offers. This will give students the security of being able to hold both a first and insurance choice. At the same time, it will mean that HEIs need manage only the same level of uncertainty as now when working out which of the offers they make will result in a place being taken up. As now, the majority of those with offers would hold conditional offers and the minority unconditional offers. A small proportion may hold a combination of conditional and unconditional offers.

Proposal 12

Students to continue to hold up to two offers.

5.7.6   In practice, this would mean that students who gained more than two offers as a result of their initial applications would have to choose which two to hold open.

5.7.7   We have said above that students who gained no offers in response to their initial applications should be allowed to submit additional applications until they gained a single offer. It was put to us that all students should be allowed to submit additional applications until they held two offers. So, those students who gained just one offer in response to their initial applications would be able to submit additional applications until they gained a second offer. Those students who gained no offers in response to their initial applications would be able to submit additional applications until they gained two offers.

5.7.8   We need to hear views on the desirability and feasibility of this approach. We see some strength in it: it would allow all students to have the reassurance of a second offer. But we also see drawbacks: it could involve a greater number of applications being made and considered than at present. We also note that very few students currently take up their second or insurance offers - in 2004, only 23,000 applicants (10.6% of those that held an insurance choice) converted their insurance offers into places.

5.8 Ranking offers

5.8.1   We also believe that students should rank their offers as first and insurance choices. We looked at, and rejected, an alternative approach of two, unranked offers. This could allow at least some students to abandon the notion of the insurance offer and hold, instead, a more and a less aspirational choice. Those students who had done better than anticipated in their exams would probably be able to choose between their offers. This could realise the central benefit of PQA, namely that those who do better than expected in their exams can take up a place that their performance merits. Those who do as expected would be able to accept the offer based on that expectation.

5.8.2   But we were not convinced that students would want to adopt an approach based on holding an aspirational and a more realistic offer. Losing the security of the insurance offer is something we felt few would be comfortable with.

5.8.3   It was also put to us that two, unranked, offers may involve a key risk. HEIs would not know which of the offers a student held they preferred. This may mask the very different 'conversion rates' between first and second preference choices - under current arrangements, nearly ten times more people who hold conditional offers take up their first choice than take up their insurance choice. This would increase the difficulty for HEIs in calculating which of the offers they made would be likely to be taken up.

5.9 Allowing students who out-perform their conditional offers to submit a new application

5.9.1   We have said that one of the key advantages we see in PQA is that it allows students to target their applications realistically as they apply after they have their results. We were keen to try and realise this advantage within current application arrangements. In practice, this means allowing those students who have done better than required by their conditional offers to change their applications once they have their results.

5.9.2   We propose an arrangement in which those students who gained better exam results than required by their conditional offers could make a new application for a place that their exam results merit. Their original, first choice conditional offer would be held open whilst they did this. For us, this protection is essential - otherwise, students would find this approach high risk.

5.9.3   It was put to us that providing this facility would incentivise many students to make new applications speculatively. This would place unacceptable administrative burdens on HEIs. We do not believe this would happen. Existing data will not allow us to isolate precisely how many students gain higher exam results than required by their first conditional offer. In general, though, we believe that the majority of students value the security of holding a conditional offer and the relationship that they will have built up with the HEI making that offer. In these cases, students will already have mapped out for themselves their HE future and we do not think that many will be keen to change this.

5.9.4   We also emphasise that the advice and guidance students receive would have to be explicit that places on high demand courses, or those where high exam performance is an entry requirement, are likely to be scarce at this stage. Candidates with the highest possible exam grades will already have been rejected from such courses. We also note that the practice of seeking release from a first choice place post-results is already established and so what we propose seeks to build on current, rather than introduce new, practice. However, we believe that it is vital that those students who have achieved higher grades than those required by their conditional offers and wish to change their applications, are given the opportunity to apply for a place that their results merit.

5.9.5   It was also put to us that HEIs would be inhibited from offering places to new applicants at this stage, until they had confirmed all of the conditional offers they had made. This would not happen until those with conditional offers - who chose to make new applications - had received the results of their new application. In short, the process of making new applications could inhibit offering places to new applicants.

5.9.6   We see some strength in this argument. But again, we believe that the facility would be used by manageably few students. We emphasise that some places would be available in many courses as a result of students failing to gain the grades required by their conditional offers for those courses. We also recognise that the process of students making new applications would free up some places. This would happen because those students would have achieved higher grades than their first choice offer. If their new application failed to gain them a place, they would take up this first choice offer. At no point would they need their insurance offer, so these places could be made immediately available to other students.

5.9.7   We also believe that this approach could have advantages for HEIs in terms of allowing them to gain the best possible students. Currently, if a student fails to gain the grades of their conditional offer, there is an incentive for the HEI to 'drop the offer' and accept the student anyway. The alternative is to make the place the student would have taken up available through Clearing. In Clearing, students will largely have missed the grades of their conditional offers and be coming to the places on offer as second choices.

5.9.8   But, if the approach we describe above existed, HEIs would have the opportunity to offer the places made available as a result of missed conditional offers to those highly capable and qualified students who were making new applications.

5.9.9   Taken together, although few would be eligible or choose to use the facility, we believe that it would have the merit of allowing at least some of those who had out-performed the grades required by their conditional offers to seek a place that they merit. We emphasise that only those who out-perform their conditional offers would be eligible to use this facility, and students would have only one opportunity to submit a new application. HEIs could also benefit in terms of being able to attract more capable students to their courses, rather than being incentivised, as now, to accept a proportion of students who had missed the grades of their conditional offers. This approach offers some of the benefits of PQA Option B, as described in Chapter 8.

> **Proposal 14**
>
> Students who achieve higher grades than required by their conditional offers to be able to make a new application and have their original first firm conditional offer protected whilst they do so.

5.9.10   We looked at when the facility we describe above should happen and identified two obvious alternatives: a separate confirmation and new application round ahead of Clearing, or as part of the first round of Clearing.

5.9.11   A separate confirmation and new application round would start when exam results were published. In effect it would replace the process that currently exists. In this, HEIs receive exam results ahead of students. They take a short period of time to consider which of the conditional offers they have made they will honour. They then let students know whether or not they have a place, usually on the same day as students learn about their exam results.

5.9.12   Three groups of students would be involved in this confirmation and new applications round:

(a)   those confirming their first firm conditional offers or negotiating to take up their first firm conditional offers even though they had missed the grades;

(b)   those confirming their insurance offers or negotiating to take up their insurance offers even though they had missed the grades.

(c)   those making new applications;

5.9.13   HEIs would consider the applications from the above three groups of students in a gathered field i.e. alongside each other and on the basis of the same information. They would consider whether to offer places to those who had missed the grades of their conditional offers at the same time as considering new applications. They would do this in the context of knowing the overall level of achievement of those who had been successful in meeting their conditional offers.

5.9.14   We see two key advantages in a separate confirmation and new application round. First, it would mean that HEIs would be able to resolve, very early, all the uncertainty about which of the offers they had made would be taken up. Second, this, in turn, would allow them to publish comprehensive and accurate vacancy lists ahead of Clearing.

5.9.15   The alternative is to handle this process as part of the first round of Clearing. We describe a reformed approach to Clearing below (see paragraph 5.11).

5.9.16   Handling confirmation of conditional offers and new applications as part of the first round of Clearing would mean that all applicants would be involved in this round – the three groups described above, those who had failed to get the grades for, or negotiate to take up, any of their conditional offers and those few who did not hold any conditional offers. The advantage of this approach is that Clearing could start earlier than if there were a confirmation and new application round.

5.9.17   However, it was put to us that this approach would mean that HEIs would not be able to publish accurate vacancy lists until they had established which of the offers they had made would be taken up. This would not happen until some time into the first round of Clearing. Students who were not confirming their conditional offers in this round would not know where places were available. This risks them making nugatory or poorly targeted applications.

5.9.18   For these reasons, we feel this approach is not feasible.

> **Proposal 15**
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> A confirmation and new application round to be run ahead of Clearing.
>
> **Question 5**
>
> How long would it take to run the above process?

5.10 Simplifying arrangements for Art and Design

5.10.1   We considered the current arrangements for Art and Design applications. There are currently two routes by which Art and Design students can submit applications. Route A replicates the arrangements and timetable for the rest of the mainstream application system. Route B, however, limits the number of applications students can make to three. It involves students submitting these choices sequentially, rather than simultaneously as they would do in all other parts of the application system. In addition, Route B runs to a different timetable to the mainstream application system.

5.10.2   We heard persuasive arguments that these arrangements cause complexity in the system and so confuse applicants and advisers, particularly in regard to the relationship between Route A and Route B. For us, the case for two application routes is weakened by the fact that, of the 165 HEIs that offer Art and Design, 134 use both Route A and Route B for the same courses.

5.10.3   We suggest a single application route for Art and Design, allowing students to make up to four or six initial applications, depending on the response to our Question 2 (see Section 5.2).

5.10.4   We have heard arguments in favour of the sequential approach to applications currently employed by Route B. These are important because interviews with candidates in the presence of their portfolios tend to be essential. In many cases a sequential process also avoids applicants needing to travel to each of their choices.

5.10.5   It has also been argued that Route B's closing date (in late March) for submitting applications is important to accommodate potential applicants studying the Art and Design Diploma in Foundation Studies.

5.10.6   We see no reason why the above elements should not be replicated in a single application route.

> **Proposal 16**
>
> The two route application system for Art and Design to be replaced by a single application system which retains sequential applications and an opening date for applications at the beginning of September and a closing date in late March.

5.11 Reforming Clearing

5.11.1   During our deliberations, we heard many calls for the removal of the disadvantages that are associated with the current approach to Clearing. We described those disadvantages in Chapter 1. Clearing requires students to make applications on a 'first-come, first-served'

basis to those HEIs and courses that have places available. This approach places a premium on speedy applications. This risks unfairness – less capable students may obtain a place ahead of more capable ones, simply because they submitted their application first. It also places students under pressure to make decisions about which HE place to take up to very tight deadlines. This risks poor quality decisions and we have cited earlier evidence about the relationship between poor choice of course and drop out.

5.11.2   We looked at ways of avoiding these disadvantages. We identified one possibility based on the notion of the gathered field. This approach offers the advantages of fair decision making with places going to more capable students ahead of less capable ones. It also means that there is a deadline for students to submit their applications and HEIs to respond to them. This offers the prospect of being able to avoid the disadvantages associated with allocating places on a first-come, first-served basis.

5.11.3   We looked at how the gathered field could be applied to Clearing. One possibility would be to have a series of consecutive application rounds based on a series of gathered fields of applications. At the beginning of these, HEIs would publish information about which places remained available. Students who had not achieved the grades of any of their conditional offers would enter the first application round of Clearing. They would submit one application. HEIs would consider all the applications received in the gathered field and respond to them by offering places. Once students had responded to those offers, HEIs would publish information on the places that remained available. Students without a place would then submit a further single application to the second application round. This process would be repeated with a third, identical application round.

5.11.4   We believe that three application rounds would normally be sufficient to match the supply of places to student demand. Indeed, if these proposals realise the benefits of reducing the numbers entering Clearing, fewer application rounds may be needed. However, we envisage a final round, based on the first-come, first-served approach to applications utilised in Clearing currently, to ensure all places are filled. We anticipate that this would involve very few students.

5.11.5   We believe that the use of a series of application rounds based on gathered fields offers advantages over the current approach to Clearing. It would make for fairer decisions. It would also remove some of the most intense pressure on students to apply quickly and this should yield advantages of better quality and more informed decisions. We would welcome views on this.

> **Proposal 17**
>
> Clearing to operate on the basis of three consecutive application rounds in which students submit one application in each round.

5.12 Changing the time at which exam results are published

5.12.1   It was put to us that the proposals we make above for a confirmation and new applications round and for reforming Clearing may have a disadvantage. There may be insufficient time between the publication of some exam results and the start of the HE term to allocate all places. This may result in some students not having places at the beginning of term. We looked at ways of addressing this potential difficulty.

5.12.2   One way of doing this is to move the time at which some exam results are published. We examined various approaches to this.

5.12.3   Currently, AS and A-level results are published in England, Wales and Northern Ireland between 14 and 20 August. In Scotland, Highers and Advanced Highers results are published between 8 and 14 August.

5.12.4   Results are supplied electronically from the Awarding Bodies to UCAS. UCAS then pass these on to HEIs almost immediately. But exam centres and students do not get the results until a week later, when they are notified by the Awarding Bodies sending result slips.

5.12.5   It would be possible for exam results to be published electronically to HEIs, exam centres and students simultaneously. This could be achieved, for example, by the Awarding Bodies publishing the results via a secure website that HEIs, exam centres and students could access at the same time. This approach could bring forward the date at which exams are published by one week across all the countries of the UK.

5.12.6   We believe that this means that A-level and AS results could be published in England, Wales and Northern Ireland between 7 and 14 August in 2008/09. Additional time savings are anticipated in these countries from changes set out in the 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper. These would reduce the number of A-level units from six to four, reducing the burden of external assessment. It would also be easier to timetable fewer exams and this should allow them to be completed earlier. We believe that those changes could allow exam results to be published a further one week earlier. The first final exams taken on these qualifications are unlikely to be held before 2009 for AS and 2010 for A-Levels. Our assumption is that from 2010, AS and A-level results could be published between 1 and 7 August.

5.12.7   We also believe that Highers and Advanced Highers could be published in Scotland between 1 and 7 August from 2008/09 as a consequence of results being notified electronically to exam centres, HEIs and possibly students at the same time.

5.12.8   What we propose would preserve the teaching time available for AS, A-level, Highers and Advanced Highers. It will be for the Awarding Bodies to consider how the above changes might best be achieved.

5.12.9   We also considered options around de-coupling or re-ordering AS and A2 exams. These options were proposed in the Secondary Heads Association's report on PQA (November 2004), aiming to introduce greater flexibility into the timing and order in which these exams need to be taken and to save time within the overall exam timetable. Current advice, however, is that these options would not help to bring forward the final exam result date. The final result for any candidate cannot be determined until the last exam has been assessed.

> **Proposal 18**
>
> The results of AS, A-Levels, Highers and Advanced Highers to be published at least one week earlier than at present.

5.12.10   We looked at the implications of an HE applications cycle whose start date was primarily determined by A-level and Higher publication dates for those seeking to enter HE with qualifications other than A-levels and Highers (non A-level qualifications hereafter). There are a wide range of non A-level qualifications which operate to different timetables for different reasons.

5.12.11   Some of these non A-level qualifications will not have HE entry as part of their design and the timetable for the publication of their results is not tied to the traditional academic year. The majority of people taking these qualifications will not be doing so to enter HE. So we feel that it is undesirable to change the timetable to which these types of qualifications operate, to bring it into line with A-levels, Highers, Advanced Highers and the HE applications process, as it would impact on many people who are not seeking to enter HE.

5.12.12   Other non A-level qualifications are occupationally focused and their publication dates are determined by occupational, rather than HE entry, factors. Again, it is not desirable to change the timetable of these qualifications as it would impact adversely on people taking qualifications for professional reasons, rather than for HE entry.

5.12.13   Still other non A-level qualifications are designed so that students can learn at their own pace and seek accreditation to their own timetable. Once more, we see compelling reasons to leave the timetables of these types of qualifications alone.

5.12.14   We note that many of those seeking to enter HE with these types of qualifications will be doing so as pre-qualified students. We emphasise that exam publication dates do not impact on pre-qualified students as they already have their qualifications when applying to enter HE. Other candidates with non A-level qualifications will be entering HE as mature students. So whilst they may enter HE with a non A-level qualification as their last or highest level of educational attainment, they may not be relying on this qualification to enter HE. Many will enter on the basis of experience and potential rather than the qualifications they hold. Some will enter HE specifically to change the direction of their career or life. Their past qualifications (particularly professional qualifications) may not be a prime factor to their gaining an HE place, as their qualifications and their HE place will be in very different subjects.

5.12.15   But for those who do use the above types of non A-level qualifications to enter HE, it seems reasonable that everything possible should be done to inform them, in advance, of the HE applications process. This will allow them, where possible and appropriate, to timetable their learning and accreditation accordingly. We want to hear further views on what might be done to realise this principle.

> **Proposal 19**
>
> Work to be undertaken to look at what might be done to inform those taking non A-level qualifications, whose timetables it is not feasible to bring in line with the HE admissions cycle, of the requirements of that cycle, with the aim of allowing them, where possible and appropriate, to timetable their learning and accreditation accordingly.

5.12.16   Some non A-level qualifications, however, do have assessment, accreditation and result publication arrangements based on the academic year. These include BTEC National, OCR Nationals and the International Baccalaureate. Generally speaking, the results for these types of qualifications are published towards the end of August. Available data will not allow us to isolate precisely how many people use these particular qualifications to enter HE. We believe that this group represents a small minority of students. We also believe that, again, some, possibly many, of these people enter HE as pre-qualified students and so may not be affected by issues of results publication times. In other cases, substantial proportions of the intake for particular courses will be made up of people with these qualifications. Here, these students will be 'competing' against each other. They will hold the same type of qualifications with the same publication date. So, the fact that that publication date is later than the date for A-levels results will not be relevant.

5.12.17   We looked at ways of publishing the results of these types of qualifications at a similar time to A-levels, Highers and Advanced Highers, but encountered substantial difficulties. These types of

qualifications involve students completing, and results being awarded on the basis of, portfolio work. It was put to us that it is already challenging in some cases to meet the deadlines set for the submission of portfolio work. Any proposal to have results published earlier would mean that these submission dates would also have to be moved. This would inevitably reduce the amount of time that students had to prepare their portfolios. This does not seem a viable approach.

5.12.18   We considered the effect of moving the results publication date for A-levels, Highers and Advanced Highers but not for portfolio based non A-level qualifications. Students studying the latter would continue to get the confirmation of their results and of whether they had achieved the grades of their conditional offers later than everyone else. For those who had achieved the necessary grades, this would represent no problem, their conditionally offered place would be held for them. However, there may be a difficulty for those students who fail to obtain the grades for any of their conditional offers. These students would need to seek an alternative place. They would do this either through the current arrangements for Clearing or, if accepted, our proposed reform thereof. In either case, they would enter the competition for places later than others, when some or many places would have been allocated. They may then be faced with a very limited choice of HE places.

5.12.19   This would affect a very small number of people. We have said above that only a small minority seek to enter HE with these types of qualification. We have said that the majority of people (87%) of those who receive conditional or unconditional offers currently take up one of their offers. We also emphasise that currently, results for these qualifications are published later than A-levels, Highers and Advanced Highers and we have not encountered evidence that this causes particular problems. Still, as a matter of principle, we feel that the current approach risks unfairness to those studying portfolio based non A-Level qualifications. This risk could be exacerbated if A-Level, Higher and Advanced Higher results are published earlier as we propose. We need to hear views on our suggestion that work should be started now with the express purpose of ensuring that, by 2008/09, the results of non A-level portfolio based qualifications are published earlier than they are at present.

5.12.20   The 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper includes proposals for developing Diplomas. These will offer progression routes into HE. To facilitate this, it will be important that their design takes account of the HE applications process.

> **Proposal 20**
>
> Work to be started now with the express purpose of ensuring that, by 2008/09, the results of non A-level portfolio based qualifications are published earlier than they are at present.

5.13 The start of the HE term

5.13.1   A second way of making more time for the allocation of places would be to move the time at which the HE term starts. We encountered significant opposition to this approach as it implies less teaching time in HE. It was also argued that it would be unpopular with overseas students, who value the induction opportunities afforded by the start of the HE term in its current position. We suggest therefore that there should be no change to the start of the HE term, but want to hear views on whether it is feasible to operate a confirmation and new application round and operate the reformed approach to Clearing which we propose in the time available between the suggested revised exam publication date and the current start of the HE term.

> **Question 6**
>
> (a) Working on the assumption that exams are published earlier, as proposed: is there sufficient time to operate our proposed approach to Clearing, whilst maintaining the current HE term start date?
>
> If not:
>
> (b) How much later than at present could the HE term start?

5.14 Traditional holiday times

5.14.1   Under our 2008/09 reforms, students would take final HE decisions in the period immediately after getting their exam results in early August. This is during the traditional summer holiday period. It was put to us that this was unfair to students – requiring them either to forego their family holiday or have it interrupted by the potentially stressful process of making decisions about their HE future.

5.14.2   We have some sympathy with this view. But we emphasise that current arrangements already involve students learning about their exam results, whether they have achieved their conditional offer and, if not, making decisions about entering Clearing and taking up a HE place in that way, during the traditional summer holiday period. We note that the period in which applications and decisions need to be taken under our 2008/09 reforms will still be fixed and known in advance. So families of applicants will be able to avoid it when booking their holidays. We further recognise that electronic application systems offer the prospect of students being able to make and monitor the progress of their applications from anywhere in the world.

5.14.3   Changing the exam publication date changes the time at which students are making their final HE decisions. They will need support in the form of advice and guidance during this period. We discussed the need for improved advice and guidance in Chapter 3.

5.14.4   We have heard some views that the changes we suggest to exam-result publication may cause some difficulties for the appeals process in Scotland. Here, an appeal draws on evidence from exam centres. Some staff involved in this process may be on holiday at the time of exam result publication. However, given that the appeals process can go on, as it does now, up to and beyond the beginning of term, we see no reason why this timing would be any more of an issue under our reforms for 2008/09 than it is currently.

5.14.5   Changing the exam publication date and the time at which Results Enquiries and appeals can start could have implications for the examiners who carry out Results Enquiries and appeals. We do not believe that what we suggest would involve any more or different work for examiners. But it could require them to be available for Results Enquiry and appeal work earlier than they are under current arrangements. It will be for the Awarding Bodies to advise on how best to manage this change.

5.15 Summary

5.15.1   In this chapter, we have proposed a series of reforms to the current processes for making applications to HE. Our intentions in making these proposals are, first, to ensure that the maximum number of students have conditional offers before they receive their exam results with the intention of reducing as far as possible the numbers who need to enter Clearing. Second, to deliver a better match between student demand and places on offer earlier in the application cycle with the intention of tackling some of the difficulties associated with over and under-subscribed courses. We also want to make sure that the reforms we set out in Chapter 3, about information, advice and guidance for applicants, and those we described in Chapter 4, about information about applicants, are built into the applications system. We believe that these changes can be implemented from 2008/09.

5.15.2   Appendix 3 sets out some illustrations of how the application process might work in 2008/09.

If the proposals discussed are accepted, then the HE application system in 2008/09 will have the following key elements:

- Students will be better informed and supported when researching their possible HE choices. They will, for example, be able to consult entry level profiles for each course;

- Students will submit up to four or six initial applications whenever they are ready from the beginning of September to the end of March;

- More information will be available about applicants for HEIs to draw on when considering applications;

- Students who do not gain an offer in response to their initial applications will be able to submit further single applications, on a rolling basis, until they have one, or even two, conditional offers;

- There will be a single route for those applying to Art and Design based on sequential applications and interviews and a late March closing date for applications;

- Students will hold up to two, ranked, offers;

- There will be a confirmation and new application round immediately following the publication of AS, A-Level, Higher and Advanced Higher results. Students may either confirm acceptance of their conditional offers or those students who have achieved better results than required by their conditional offers may make a new application for a place that better suits their achievement. (In practice, most departments will have a small number of vacancies at this point, because some students will not have achieved their conditional offer targets.)

- Clearing will operate on the basis of three consecutive application rounds. Students will submit a single application into each round, until they gain a place. For those without a place after the third round, there will be a final, fourth round, based on a first-come, first-served basis.

- To make more time available for the proposed application process, the date on which AS, A-level, Higher and Advanced Higher results are published will be earlier in August than at present. Work will also start to find a way of publishing some non A-Level Qualifications earlier.

- These measures, taken together, will deliver many of the benefits of a PQA system.

PART THREE

TOWARDS A SYSTEM OF POST-QUALIFICATION APPLICATIONS (PQA)

CHAPTER 6

INTRODUCTION TO PQA

> In this chapter we describe the concept of PQA and consider ways in which a system of PQA could operate.

6.1 A staged approach to reform

6.1.1   In Part 2, we looked at ways in which we might reform existing arrangements for HE applications. But, as we set out in Part 1, it has also been central to our work to look at how those arrangements might be replaced with a system of PQA.

6.1.2   Our work to date has involved looking at complex issues. We have examined the issues associated with PQA, developed PQA ideas, discussed these with stakeholders and developed possible PQA approaches. In this part of the document, we try to set these out as clearly as possible. But, inevitably, we need to describe and discuss difficult concepts in some detail.

6.1.3   In developing our thinking and suggestions for reform, we have proceeded on the understanding that it is for the sector to agree the details of the applications system it wants to operate and to introduce any changes. We also recognise that there is a range of reforms planned or already happening that will impact on the way applications to HE are made and considered.

6.1.4   It will be important that the sector has the chance to consider the implications of these reforms, alongside the changes proposed in Part 2, before taking decisions on if and how to move to PQA. We are convinced that PQA is right in principle and that it would help to widen participation, making the HE application process fairer and more transparent. Although we are not making firm recommendations for the introduction of a particular model of PQA at this stage, we suggest that our PQA Option B (described in Chapter 8) would be a natural extension of the changes to the application system which we have proposed to be introduced by 2008/09.

6.1.5   In the following chapters, we describe the concept of PQA. We discuss how a PQA system could work in general. We set out two possible approaches to PQA; we believe that both are feasible and have merit. In setting out these options, we hope to stimulate discussion about whether PQA in general will bring benefits additional to those of our 2008/09 changes. We seek views on two particular illustrative PQA options. We do not claim that the options described are the only approaches to PQA and welcome the idea that new approaches may emerge as a result of this discussion.

6.1.6   We plan to publish a final report, following this consultation, early in 2006. That report will finalise our thinking, based on the responses received.   We believe that it is for the sector-led Delivery Partnership (proposed in Chapter 9) to implement reform. The Delivery Partnership, in consultation with stakeholders, will need to resolve a great deal in terms of the precise design detail of the reforms.

6.2   The concept of PQA

6.2.1   Under current HE admissions arrangements, HEIs may conditionally offer places to students on the basis of predicted exam results. When results are published, students who have achieved the grades required by the conditional offer can take up that offer. Those who have exceeded the grades required have little opportunity to change their choice and opt for a course that better reflects their ability and potential. Those who have not achieved the grades can negotiate with the institution and some may be offered a place. Those who are unsuccessful in negotiating a place may enter Clearing.

6.2.2   Under a PQA system, applications would be made when exam results are known. This would enable students to apply for places that best matched their ability and needs. HEIs would consider applications on the basis of more accurate information about students than at present. This would allow them to make better quality decisions, based on reliable and fair assessment of each student's ability.

6.3   How might PQA work?

6.3.1   There is more than one way to organise a system incorporating PQA features. We took it as our task to seek an approach that secured the benefits that PQA promises for students who are predicted to gain lower grades than they actually achieve. We drew heavily on the invaluable work that underpinned the Secondary Heads Association report into PQA, published in November 2004. We have also been keen to retain the best of the current system and to avoid unnecessary change, or change that brought disproportionately small benefits. We looked therefore at a range of approaches to PQA, using work that others had done before us. We rejected several at an early stage. These included: unconditional offers being made on the basis of AS results in England; moving the start of the HE term back significantly, perhaps as far as Christmas, to make space for all registration and application processes to take place post-results; or introducing a compulsory gap year. We were convinced that these approaches either failed to deliver fairness for students or involved unjustifiable upheaval of current arrangements.

A *single-stage approach* to PQA

6.3.2   We gave the majority of our time to considering and seeking views on two broad approaches. The first approach is where the entire

application process (interviews, admissions tests for subjects such as Medicine etc) takes place after exam results are published. We describe this as the *single-stage approach.*

6.3.3   The key attraction of the *single-stage approach* is that all applications are made at the same time and contain equivalent information, including actual exam results. When making admissions decisions, HEIs can consider all applications alongside each other and on the same basis. We describe this approach as allowing HEIs to look at a gathered field of applicants.

6.3.4   There are serious drawbacks with the *single-stage approach.* Our key concern was that it would involve HEIs assessing and taking decisions on all the applications they received in a very short period of time. This is a very significant volume of work that could only realistically be achieved in two ways, by:

(i)   a very significant shift in the times at which exam results are published and the HE term starts. We saw no way of achieving this without significant loss of teaching time in schools/colleges or HE or both; or

(ii)   accelerating the work involved in admissions so that it was completed in a very short period of time. This raises the risk of admissions decisions happening in a mechanistic manner. Places may be offered solely on the basis of exam grades with no consideration of wider suitability factors. We rejected this on the basis of unfairness to students.

A *two-stage approach* to PQA

6.3.5   The second approach we considered was a *two-stage approach* based on the concept described in the Secondary Heads Association's report on PQA (November 2004). This would ask students to research their preferences thoroughly before submitting expressions of interest to their chosen HEIs at a pre-results *Registration Phase*. They would then submit formal applications – which could be to the institutions contacted in the *Registration Phase,* or to new institutions altogether – in the post-results *Application Phase*. A *two-stage approach* of this kind would allow much of the administrative process (e.g. students supplying information to HEIs; most interviews; applications for student support) to happen at the *Registration Phase*. It would maintain the notion of a gathered field where applications are considered alongside each other, at the same time, in the *Application Phase*.

6.3.6   The *two-stage approach* may overcome many of the difficulties associated with the *single-stage approach*. The administrative work done at the pre-results *Registration Phase* should significantly reduce the burden of the post-results *Application Phase*. So the *Application Phase* should involve significantly less intensive work for HEIs. This

means that the *Application Phase* could be delivered in less time and with less upheaval to the exam and HE term timings. The *Registration Phase* also allows HEIs to build relationships with prospective students, through open days and interviews, enabling more holistic assessments of their suitability. But, importantly, the student retains the opportunity to change his or her mind at the *Application Phase* in the light of their exam results and the earlier feedback they will have received from institutions.

6.3.7   We have proceeded on the basis that a *two-stage approach* to PQA is preferable. The detailed models we propose in the following chapters are both variants of the *two-stage approach.*

CHAPTER 7

PQA OPTION A

In this chapter we propose a model of PQA based on a two-stage approach and explore how such a system could operate.

7.1 Option A

7.1.1   Option A is a *two-stage approach*, comprising a pre-results *Registration Phase* and a post-results *Application Phase*.

7.2 The *Registration Phase* of Option A

7.2.1   During the *Registration Phase*, students would submit expressions of interest via UCAS to up to four HEIs, attending open days or interviews where appropriate. HEIs would consider expressions of interest and respond to them.

7.2.2   We have found it difficult to articulate the terms in which HEIs would respond to expressions of interest. It has been put to us that as this option is a PQA approach to applications, HEIs would not be in a position to offer places or make rejections ahead of the post-results *Application Phase*. We see the logic of this argument. However, it implies that HEIs would respond to expressions of interest by indicating whether they were likely to welcome a formal application from the student. This may be confusing to students and create nugatory work for HEIs at the application stage. Students whose expressions of interest had not been favourably viewed by the HEI would receive feedback that, whilst not encouraging a formal application, would not explicitly reject the student's expression of interest. Students may choose to submit a formal application to the HEI despite the feedback, or because they misinterpret it. This could mean that some HEIs would have to, in effect, consider an application from the same student twice, once at the *Registration Phase* and again at the *Application Phase*.

7.2.3   We believe that, as a matter of principle, it is reasonable to expect that HEIs should give students appropriate feedback on the likelihood of their gaining a place. Only in this way would students be able to make informed applications, based on a realistic understanding of where they were likely to gain what sort of HE place. We need to hear further views on this issue, in particular, on how this could be realised in practice.

Question 7

How might HEIs feed back to students' expressions of interest under Option A?

7.2.4   We believe that there should be scope for students to do more research and submit further expressions of interest at the end of the *Registration Phase*, if they have no realistic prospect of gaining a place at any of the 4 HEIs they initially expressed an interest in. We recognise that allowing students to have an unlimited opportunity to submit as many applications as they like could create disincentives for well researched and realistic expressions of interest, as well as additional and unnecessary burdens on HEIs. However, we believe that in the situation described above, students should be allowed to submit a single additional expression of interest. If that was then rejected, they should be allowed to submit further single expressions of interest on a rolling basis.

7.2.5   We considered placing limits on the number of additional expressions of interest a student could submit or introducing a cut off point at which this process would finish. However, there was not a sufficient case for either of these approaches as we believe that very few students will be involved in this additional process. In effect, there is a cut off point at which the process ends, namely the publication of exam results and the beginning of the *Application Phase*. At this point, all interactions between students and HEIs would be on the basis of formal applications.

7.3   The *Application Phase* of Option A

7.3.1   Under Option A, the *Application Phase* would be broken down into three consecutive application rounds. At the beginning of the *Application Phase*, students would submit three ranked applications to UCAS. UCAS would enter the first of these into the first application round. If this application were unsuccessful, UCAS would submit the second ranked application to the second application round and so on. All application rounds would then operate on the basis of the gathered field. UCAS would monitor which HEIs or courses had filled all their places and identify which students' applications this made irrelevant. Students would review their applications in the light of information about the places that remain available.   Because students would hold no offers of places ahead of the *Application Phase*, they could not hold open an insurance choice as they do under current arrangements.

7.3.2   We received views that three rounds would normally be sufficient to match student demand to available places. In the event that some students remained without a place after these three consecutive application rounds, we envisage a fourth and final round, based on the rolling approach to applications. In this round, students would submit one application. If that were rejected, they would be free to submit a further application as soon as they were ready. This process would go on up to and even beyond the beginning of term, until all places were filled.

7.3.3   A rolling approach to applications may disadvantage some students because they would not be able to submit new applications following a rejection as quickly as their peers. This may affect their chances of gaining the place they want or merit. But the rolling approach has advantages of efficiency and speed because it makes for very quick turn around times between one application being rejected and the next one being made. We are attracted to this approach in this context, as it gives the best chance of the highest number of students receiving places in the quickest possible time. We also note that very few students are likely to enter this round and so the risks of unfairness would be kept to a minimum.

7.4   The Results Enquiry process under Option A

7.4.1   There may be a problem with the way the Results Enquiry process would operate under Option A. This should affect only a very small minority of students.

7.4.2   The key difference between Option A and current arrangements in terms of the Results Enquiry process is that, under Option A, no student would hold a conditional offer at the time of receiving their results. If their results were worse than expected they could enter the Results Enquiry process to question them. But the result would not be available until later in the *Application Phase*, by which time some places, particularly high demand places, would have been allocated.

7.4.3   This may leave the student with two options. The first would be to apply on the basis of the grades they were questioning and risk not competing effectively against others in the gathered field for the place they want. The second would be to wait for the outcome of the Results Enquiry and enter the *Application Phase* then, with the risk that the place the student wants or deserves would no longer be available. This group of students could include those who had participated in the *Registration Phase* and those who had chosen to participate only in the *Application Phase*.

7.4.4   This problem would not affect many students. In England, for example, only 0.13% of unit entries that were pivotal to an applicant successfully gaining a place were questioned under the Results Enquiry process in 2004. As a consequence of this process just 0.08% of enquiries resulted in an overall change of the subject grade. It is not possible to calculate what proportion of students these figures represent. But we believe that only a small number of students would ever find themselves in a difficult position as a result of results enquires under Option A. Still, this represents a real disadvantage to some students and our inability to guard against this may represent a small but significant disadvantage of Option A.

7.4.5   We have looked hard at ways in which we could ensure against any disadvantage, but have not yet found what we consider to be an

entirely satisfactory solution. As students hold no conditional offer, we cannot adopt the current approach of protecting that offer whilst their results enquiry runs its course. We see no value in approaches based on students being able to make applications on the basis of predicted grades or the grades they felt they merited. We have discussed earlier the unreliability of predicted grades and repeat here that 47% of them are overly optimistic.

7.4.6   We considered but found no feasible way of reserving some places so that they were available for this group late in, or after, the *Application Phase*. It would be impossible to predict how many students might fall into this category. Reserving places for them could cause difficulties for HEIs in managing their places. It could also remove places from the system unnecessarily meaning that students who wanted or deserved them were unable to obtain them.

7.4.7   We considered an approach where students could participate in the *Application Phase* on the basis of the grades they are questioning. They may gain a place before they received their enquiry result. They would not be bound to firmly accept this place until they had received the outcome of their Results Enquiry. If that resulted in their grades changing, they could re-enter the *Application Phase* on the basis of their new grades. They could hold open the offer they had been made prior to their results enquiry, in recognition of the fact that the choice of places will be more limited towards the end of the *Application Phase*.

7.4.8   We see difficulties with this approach. The place a student is offered ahead of their results enquiry may not be the one they want or deserve. Having this as a fall-back would be little comfort if the enquiry results in improved grades but there was insufficient choice of places available by that time to meet the students' needs.

7.4.9   We believe, however, that an approach of this sort offers the most acceptable way forward in the circumstances but want to hear views on this.

Question 8

Under Option A, should students questioning their exam results be able to accept an offer of a place based on their results, but re-enter the *Application Phase* unbound by that offer, if their Result Enquiry changes their grades?

Question 9

Do you support Option A?

7.5   Summary

7.5.1   In this chapter, we have described one way in which a PQA system could work. We have called this Option A. If the suggestions we make here were adopted, then Option A would have the following characteristics:

OPTION A KEY FEATURES

All students apply for HE places on a PQA basis

Registration Phase

- students submit up to 4 initial expressions of interest via UCAS by 31 March

- opportunities to attend open days and interviews

- no offers are made: HEIs respond to expressions of interest indicating the likelihood of students gaining a place post-results

- students who receive no encouraging responses may submit further expressions of interest, one at a time, on a rolling basis

Application Phase **(starts when final exam results are published in early August)**

- students submit 3 ranked applications to UCAS

- 3 consecutive, time-limited application rounds

- UCAS enter first choices in first application round and, where unsuccessful and according to availability of places, second and third choices in the 2 subsequent rounds. Where chosen places are not available, students make fresh applications

- students without a place after Round 3 may enter further single applications on a rolling basis up to or even beyond the start of term

CHAPTER 8

PQA OPTION B

> In this chapter we propose a second model of PQA which, while based on a two-stage approach, also preserves elements of the current HE applications system.

8.1 Option B

8.1.1 Option B is a *two-stage approach*, comprising a First Application Phase (pre-results – hereafter 'Phase 1') and a Second Application Phase (post-results – hereafter 'Phase 2'). Unlike Option A, institutions will offer some places on a conditional or unconditional basis at Phase 1. Institutions will be asked to reserve and publicise a proportion of their available places for allocation at Phase 2.

8.1.2 Strong arguments were put to us during our preliminary consultations for this type of approach - uppermost was that it promotes efforts to widen participation. The ability to make a conditional offer at Phase 1 helps cement the relationship between HEI and student and encourages students to continue with the application process. This is particularly valuable when dealing with some students from non-traditional HE backgrounds, not least as it allows HEIs to meet the expectations of students generated as a result of Compacts or work with schools in deprived areas. Reserving some places for Phase 2, however, delivers the central benefit of PQA: that students whose results are better than expected have the chance to change their minds and get places that they merit and which suit them.

8.2 Phase 1 of Option B

8.2.1 Phase 1 of Option B would be modelled on the reforms we propose in Part 2 for 2008/09. During this phase, students would submit applications to up to four HEIs, via UCAS, and attend open days or interviews. HEIs would consider students' applications and feed back to students in one of two ways:

> (i) offering them a place either unconditionally or conditional on their exam results; or

> (ii) not offering a place but, possibly, flagging that some places will be reserved for Phase 2 in which the student would be free to apply.

8.2.2 Students who received no offers from their initial four applications would be able to research further options and submit further, single, applications on a rolling basis.

8.3   Phase 2 of Option B

8.3.1   Under Option B, Phase 2 would be broken down into three consecutive application rounds. At the beginning of the phase, students would submit three ranked applications to UCAS. UCAS would enter the first of these into the first application round. If this application was unsuccessful, UCAS would submit the second ranked application into the second application round and so on. This would mean that all application rounds would be operated on the basis of a gathered field. UCAS would monitor which HEIs or courses had filled all their places and identify which students' applications this made irrelevant. Students would then review their applications in the light of information about the places that remained available.

8.3.2   We received views that three rounds would normally be sufficient to match student demand to available places. In the event that some students remained without a place after these three consecutive application rounds, we envisage a fourth and final round, based on the rolling approach to applications. We have set out how this round would work and argued why we feel it should operate in this way in the context of Option A (paragraphs 7.3.2 and 7.3.3). We envisage the same approach for the same reasons under Option B.

Removing the 'insurance' offer

8.3.3   If a student receives multiple conditional offers in Phase 1, they would need to choose just one to 'hold open' for Phase 2. This would abolish the insurance choice available under current arrangements. We heard concerns that allowing only one offer to be held open at Phase 2 would mean that students would feel that changing their minds in that Phase would be high risk. It was put to us that students would prefer to be able to hold open a second, insurance, choice.

8.3.4   We have some sympathy with these concerns and looked hard at approaches to preserving the insurance choice under Option B. However, in doing so, we encountered very real difficulties around the increased workload created by the existence of the insurance choice in the current system. Under PQA, these workloads may be unsustainable as they would coincide with the workloads inevitably involved in a PQA type, post-results Phase 2. In 2004, for example, 215,000 students held an insurance choice. Only around 23,000 (or 10.6%) were converted to students taking up places, representing a very low return for the efforts invested by HEIs.

8.3.5   The insurance choice can also add to the complexity of the system because it calls for a tactical approach on the part of applicants. Deciding on an insurance choice is not just a simple matter of opting for a lower offer. Factors such as the differences between a precise grade offer and a flexible points offer also come into play. This means that there are very real doubts for HEIs about which, and how many,

students will ultimately take up their insurance offers.

8.3.6   We heard arguments that this complexity and uncertainty would be likely to be augmented if the insurance choice were maintained under PQA Option B. This is because HEIs would have to keep some places back to honour insurance choices, in addition to a proportion of places offered on an unconditional or conditional basis in Phase 1, and those reserved for Phase 2.

8.3.7   The need to hold back some places to honour insurance choices could reduce the number of places made available in Phase 2. Moreover, places held to honour insurance choices would only be made available in Phase 2 after the first round of that Phase, when it was clear how many students had achieved their first choice application and how many wished, and were able, to take up their insurance choice. This raised concerns about fairness. It would mean that some desirable places were not available in the first application round because they were being held to honour insurance choices when they would be available later. So a student's chance of obtaining one of these places could depend as much on their having an application in play with the right HEI at the right time, as on their ability or merit.

8.3.8   The option remains to preserve the insurance choice under Option B. However, we have assumed that, because of the above difficulties, this option is unlikely to command support. We also believe that there are ways of making it easier and safer for students to change their minds at Phase 2 that do not involve the insurance offer (we describe these below). In the light of these difficulties with the insurance offer and our proposals for allowing students to change their minds, we seek views on whether our assumption that Option B should not involve the insurance offer is correct.

> **Question 10**
>
> Do you support the proposal that Option B should not involve an insurance offer?

Allowing students to change their applications

8.3.9   We believe that those students who wished to change their applications could be supported in doing this if they were able to hold open their original conditional offer whilst they applied elsewhere.

8.3.10   In practice, this would mean that two groups of students would have the option of either applying to confirm their offer or applying elsewhere for a place that better matched their ability whilst their conditional offer was protected. If these students failed to find a new offer in the first application round, they could still take up their original conditional offer.

8.3.11   The first group would be those students who had achieved higher grades than required by their conditional offer. We believe it is essential that these students have the chance to change their minds and seek to gain an HE place that best matches their actual achievement. Protecting their conditional offer whilst they go through this process recognises that competition for places during Phase 2 will inevitably be strong. Applying to change a conditional offer, in the absence of any protection for that offer, could be seen as too high risk by many students. In addition, we believe that it would be unfair not to offer this protection because students who sought to gain a place that better matched their anticipated exam results could end up with a place that is not as close a match or with no place at all.

8.3.12   The second group would be those students who had achieved the grades of their conditional offer. It was put to us that these students should also have their conditional offers protected whilst they went through the process of changing their application. This reflects the fact that there may be many reasons (including personal or financial reasons) for some students wanting to change their choice of institution at Phase 2. We do not believe that many students will want to do this. The vast majority will value the relationship they have built up with the HEI making the offer and the assurance that the offer provides. So we anticipate that this approach would add only a very small volume of work to Phase 2. We also believe that this approach would not create any unfairness in the system as these students would apply and have their applications considered alongside all others in the gathered field.

8.3.13   We appreciate that this approach could add a little complexity into the system. It may be difficult to predict precisely how many of those who achieve the grades of their conditional offer would want to change their applications. It may be equally difficult to forecast how many of these would fall back on their conditional offer. We are assuming that these numbers would be small. Nevertheless, HEIs would need to keep places open to honour conditional offers. Therefore, those places would not be available in the first application round, although they may become available in the second application round. We believe that this uncertainty could be managed if sufficient places were reserved for Phase 2.

8.3.14   This protection would apply only to the original conditional offer held by the student at the beginning of Phase 2. It would not extend to any offers students obtained *during* Phase 2. So a student could not apply to change their original conditional offer whilst that offer was protected, gain a subsequent, unconditional offer, and then apply to also change this subsequent offer. If allowed, it could encourage students to seek to change their choice of institution on more than one occasion. This could cause real difficulty for HEIs, without offering any real advantage to applicants.

8.3.15   There are two groups of students whose conditional offers it is not feasible to protect.

8.3.16   First, self evidently, we cannot protect those who do not hold a conditional offer. It is difficult to estimate how many students would fall into this category. It would comprise those who had not achieved a conditional offer in Phase 1 and those who had not participated in Phase 1. For the first group, we have assumed that the vast majority of students who participate in Phase 1 would receive conditional offers. But we are unable to estimate how many may not. For the second group, UCAS data suggests that approximately 860 students sought to obtain an HE place once they had their exam results in 2004. It is very possible that this significantly under-estimates the number seeking to enter HE in this way. Some may approach HEIs direct, circumventing UCAS. It is probable, in any case, that the figure would rise significantly under a PQA system. Currently, around 25% of HE's annual intake enter as pre-qualified students. We are unable to identify how many of these do so, on the basis of exams they gained in the immediately preceding year. We assume that, under PQA, some of these students would seek to enter HE via a post-results phase, rather than wait a year and enter as pre-qualified students.

8.3.17   Second, we do not see a satisfactory way of protecting the conditional offers of those who had failed to achieve the grades of their conditional offer whilst they applied elsewhere. This recognises the fact that the conditional offers made to these students would no longer apply because of their exam results. In effect, these students would no longer hold a conditional offer. We do see some exceptional circumstances, particularly where a student is appealing against their exam results by going through the Results Enquiry process, where it may be desirable to protect the conditional offers of those who fail to get the grades required by them. We discuss these later in this chapter.

8.3.18   The students described in the two paragraphs above would apply and have their applications considered alongside all other applications in the gathered field. They would be able to submit 3 ranked applications. We believe that this would give applicants some reassurance.

Reserving places for Phase 2

8.3.19   We looked at whether HEIs should reserve a minimum proportion of places for Phase 2 in Option B. We heard arguments against this approach. High demand courses would have no difficulty in filling all their places at Phase 1. Reserving places in these courses may seem counter-intuitive. It implies that some students would fail to get offers of places on these courses at Phase 1, only to 're-apply' successfully at Phase 2. Conversely, it could mean that some very capable students, who were unsuccessful in gaining a place on the high demand course of their choice at Phase 1, were put off applying for that course at Phase 2, even if their results meant that they merited a place.

8.3.20   There may be a further problem with reserving a minimum proportion of places for Phase 2, namely that it could prove difficult for admissions tutors to predict how many conditional places offered during Phase 1 would be taken up. If more than anticipated were taken up, it could result in fewer places being on offer at Phase 2. We note that admissions tutors currently have to make complex judgements about how many of the conditional offers they make will be taken up.

8.3.21   Set against this general problem, we believe it is right in principle to expect that any applications process that claims to be PQA gives students the chance to apply for the first time, or change their existing application, after they receive their exam results. For us, this implies that a PQA approach must have places available in all courses, and at all institutions, at the beginning of Phase 2. To some extent, current arrangements already work like this. Admissions tutors need to ensure that they hit their enrolment targets. They make judgements about what proportion of places will be taken up by those who achieve or exceed the conditional offers they make. They also make calculations about how many places they can offer to those who have just missed their conditional offers. We need to hear further views on this issue and, in particular, how we might realise the above principle in practice.

8.3.22   In the meantime, we have considered how HEIs might determine the proportion of conditional places they should offer at Phase 1 and the proportion they should reserve for Phase 2. One option is to leave this decision to the discretion of each institution. However, we heard arguments against this approach because it would result in a variation of practice across the sector. It would not always be transparently obvious to students what the practice of an institution was or why it had adopted a particular approach. This could be perceived by students as inconsistent and even unfair.

8.3.23   It has also been suggested that within HEIs the proportion of places allocated between subjects at Phase 2 should not be varied. The notion of a common approach across subjects has the advantage

of simplicity and comprehensibility for students. It also means that there would be at least the minimum proportion of places available in all subjects at the beginning of Phase 2, giving those who wish to change their applications or apply for the first time in that Phase the chance to apply for any course.

8.3.24   However, we have heard concerns that this approach would not reflect the fact that entry to some courses is more competitive than others. Further still, where an HEI can fill all the places on a particular course at Phase 1, it should do so.

8.3.25   It was put to us that there may be a further problem with reserving the same proportion of places for all courses, particularly those that are high demand. In many cases, a reserve of approximately 10-15% of places will represent very few actual places. For high demand courses, the fact that any places are on offer may lead to very high volumes of applications. The vast majority of applicants will not secure a place and the work involved for the HEI in processing their applications may not be justified if it results in only a handful of places being offered.

8.3.26   We appreciate that places on high demand courses will continue to be the subject of strong competition. We note that no approach to HE applications can entirely solve the problems associated with the over-subscription of high demand places. The best that can be achieved is that the basis on which these places are competed for, and allocated, is as fair as possible.

Question 12

a)   Should all HEIs reserve a minimum proportion of places for Phase 2 of Option B?

b)   How might HEIs determine what proportion of places to allocate at Phase 1 and what proportion to reserve for Phase 2 of Option B?

c)   Should the same proportion of places be reserved on all courses?

8.3.27   We looked at what proportion of places it would be reasonable to reserve for Phase 2 under Option B. We found it difficult to predict how students would behave under PQA. The current system inhibits students from changing their applications once they have their results and this may explain why very few choose to do so. It may also imply that, were the option available, more would choose to take it.

8.3.28   The research commissioned from UCAS suggests that 9% of exam results are currently higher than predicted. Our working assumption is that 9% of applicants achieve higher exam results than predicted. These students would be likely to want to change their HE choices after they had received their results. We feel that it is

reasonable to expect that Option B should, as a minimum, give at least this 9% of students the opportunity to change their minds, should they wish to. We do not believe that all 9% would change their minds. If, as we anticipate, some chose not to, this would make some reserved places available for others who may wish to change their applications. These may include, for example, those few students who achieve the grades of their conditional offer but choose a different HEI for other reasons.

8.3.29   There would also be a group who did not participate in Phase 1 and sought to enter HE through Phase 2 alone. We have said above (8.3.16) that we cannot identify how many students may choose to seek an HEI place via Phase 2. For the sake of prompting discussion, we have assumed that it may be in the region of 5%.

8.3.30   We heard some misgivings that reserving places for those who did not participate in Phase 1 could incentivise students to seek to enter HE only when they had received their results. We have some sympathy with these misgivings. We believe it is important that students build relationships with HEIs during Phase 1 so that they have a clear and realistic understanding of what entering HE will mean for them. Competition for places in Phase 2, however, will inevitably be strong. Those who choose to enter it without the preparation of Phase 1 could find themselves at a disadvantage in competing for the place they want. We also accept that the more students that do not participate in Phase 1, the greater the administrative burden of Phase 2. This is because it would involve processing higher volumes of entirely new applications. Nonetheless, we believe that a system that does not accommodate those who choose to apply after they receive their results is, by definition, not PQA.

8.3.31   We therefore feel that there is a case for arguing that sufficient places should be reserved for Phase 2 to accommodate those who do not apply until after they have received their results. Allowing around 5% of places for such applicants, and some 9% for those whose exam results are better than expected, suggests reserving approximately 15% of places for Phase 2. The work involved for HEIs in Phase 2 for which 15% of places have been reserved is significantly less than an *Application Phase* where 100% of places are to be allocated (as is the case under Option A). We need to hear further views on what proportion of places it may be reasonable to reserve for Phase 2 of Option B.

> **Question 13**
> What proportion of places should be reserved for Option B Phase 2?

8.4　The Results Enquiry process under Option B

8.4.1　　　In the Results Enquiry process under Option B, there are two groups of students who could be placed in a difficult position.

8.4.2　　　The first group would be those students who had failed to get the grades required by their conditional offer, but believed they had a basis for questioning their results. As under current arrangements, HEIs would honour those students' conditional offers if their appeals improved their grades sufficiently. However, as few results enquiries produce significant changes in grades, students would know there was a very real chance that their results enquiry would not result in their achieving the grades needed for their conditional offer. They would also know that competition for places in Phase 2 would be strong and that very many places would be allocated early. So, there would be a risk that by the time their results enquiry was known, the choice of available HE places would be limited.

8.4.3　　　We looked at ways of protecting the interests of those students whilst their results enquiry ran its course. We suggest that they should be allowed to participate in Phase 2 and apply for courses that match the grades they are questioning, but are also allowed to take up their original conditional offer, should their results enquiry be successful.

8.4.4　　　This would mean that some in this group might hold three offers at the same time: their original conditional offers (firm and insurance), for which they failed to get the grades, and a further unconditional offer, made on the basis of the grades they achieved and are questioning.

8.4.5　　　We appreciate that this approach introduces some complexity and raises some issues about how HEIs would manage their places under Option B. But we anticipate that very few students would be in this position. We also anticipate that students in this group would hold multiple offers for a very short period of time. In 2004, 100% of priority results enquiries were resolved within 20 days and we see no reason why this should change under PQA. We suggest that the limited difficulties associated with this approach would be justified by the benefits it would bring in terms of fairness to students, but we need to hear further views on this.

Question 14

a)　Under Option B, should students questioning their exam results be able to hold open the original offers they were made, whilst their results enquiry runs its course, and take up one of those offers if the results enquiry results in their grades changing?

b)　Should those students be able to seek an alternative place during this time on the basis of the grades they are questioning and take up this place if their results enquiry does not change their grades?

8.4.6　　　The second group of students who could be in a difficult position would be those who did not hold a conditional offer at the beginning of Phase 2 either because they had failed to gain one during Phase 1 or because they had chosen not to participate in Phase 1. These students would, in effect, enter Phase 2 as entirely new applicants without conditional offers. If their results were worse than they expected they could question them. But the result would not be available until later in Phase 2, when most places would have been allocated, or perhaps only after Phase 2 had finished. So, these students would have the option of (i) participating in Phase 2 with worse than expected results, risking not competing effectively with others, (ii) entering Phase 2 late when few places are available, or (iii) applying the following year as pre-qualified students on the basis of the outcome of their results enquiry.

8.4.7　　　We note that this group is likely to be extremely small as the vast majority of students would get conditional offers during Phase 1. We anticipate that those who had chosen not to participate in Phase 1 would be those who had not expected to achieve the grades necessary to enter HE. They would only be likely to change their minds if their results turned out to be better than expected. It is unlikely that they would believe that their results were both sufficiently better than expected to seek to enter HE and sufficiently worse than expected to give them a basis to question them.

8.4.8　　　We believe that it is important that those students who do not participate in Phase 1 understand that there will be high competition for the places remaining in Phase 2. It would however be possible for students in this group to apply in a subsequent year, after their results enquiries were resolved, as pre-qualified students.

8.4.9　　　We further note that these students would, in effect, be in the same position as those questioning their results under Option A (i.e. they would enter Phase 2 of Option B without a conditional offer). We have suggested earlier an approach to handling the Results Enquiry process for this type of student under Option A. Briefly, it allows such students to participate in Phase 1, obtain an unconditional offer, but not be bound to take up that offer. If their grade changed following their results enquiry, they could re-enter Phase 2, seeking a place that better matched their grades. They would be able to hold open the unconditional offer they had already obtained whilst this process took place.

8.4.10　　　We have highlighted the drawbacks of this approach above. There may be few places available towards the end of Phase 2 and the student may not be able to find one that matches their needs and merits. We emphasise these drawbacks in the context of Option B, where places are likely to be allocated more quickly than Option A. Still, we suggest that this approach is the best available in the circumstances and seek views on this.

Question 15

Under Option B, thinking about students who hold no conditional offers at the start of Phase 2 and are questioning their results: should these students be able to gain an offer on the basis of the grades they are questioning, seek an alternative place should their results enquiry improve their grades, but still be able to take up their original place should they choose?

Question 16

Do you support Option B?

8.5   Summary

8.5.1   In this chapter, we have described a second way in which a PQA system may operate. If the suggestions we make here are adopted, Option B would have the following characteristics:

OPTION B KEY FEATURES

Some places are offered at Phase 1: HEIs reserve a proportion of places for Phase 2

Phase 1

- students submit up to 4 initial expressions of interest via UCAS by 31 March

- opportunities to attend open days and interviews

- HEIs respond by either:

(a)   making a conditional or unconditional offer, or

(b)   flagging that the student is free to apply for places that will be reserved for Phase 2

- students who receive no offer may submit further expressions of interest, one at a time, on a rolling basis

- students receiving multiple conditional offers choose one to hold open

Phase 2 **(starts when final exam results are published in early August)**

- HEIs have reserved a proportion of unfilled places for students who wish to change their existing application or

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apply for the first time after they receive their exam results

- 3 consecutive, time-limited application rounds

- students may either confirm their conditional offer or submit 3 new ranked applications to UCAS

- students who achieve or exceed their expected grades and wish to try a new application may have their chosen conditional offer held open during the first application round: they must then choose to accept or reject it

- UCAS enter first choices in first application round and, where unsuccessful and according to availability of places, second and third choices in the 2 subsequent rounds. Where chosen places are not available, students make fresh applications

- students without a place after Round 3 may enter further single applications on a rolling basis up to or even beyond the start of term

PART FOUR

NEXT STEPS

CHAPTER 9
IMPLEMENTING CHANGE

In this chapter we suggest mechanisms that the sector could put in place to take forward any reforms coming from this consultation process and to help facilitate future decisions on PQA.

9.1 Leading Change

9.1.1   We recognise that implementing the proposals for change to the current HE applications system that we set out in Part 2 and developing the suggestions concerning PQA that we describe in Part 3 will take a determination to change to secure improvements for students and a more efficient system. It would also require co-operation and collaboration between the key stakeholders throughout the system.

9.1.2   We are clear - and all the soundings we have taken so far confirm our view - that it is not the Government's role to impose or to be primarily responsible for implementing change. We heard strong arguments though that such a complex and far-reaching programme of reform is unlikely to be successful if it is left to develop in a wholly piecemeal fashion. We suggest that there is a clear need for leadership and co-ordination of the reform programme and that this role is for the various sector stakeholders acting in partnership.

9.1.3   We suggest that the sector establishes a 'Delivery Partnership'. This would be a group of key stakeholders who would direct and oversee implementation. As the central elements of the changes that we propose to the current systems and the suggestions we make on PQA relate to the administration of the applications system, we believe that the Partnership should be led by UCAS. UCAS represents, and is respected in, the HE sector. It also has unrivalled expertise in the field of applications administration and a track record of delivery.

9.1.4   It would be very important to ensure that the membership of the Delivery Partnership represented the key interests of all those involved in HE applications processes, including schools and colleges, students, Awarding Bodies and HEIs. The changes we propose would need to build on and take account of developments from a range of wider reaching strategies and programmes. In particular, there are links to the reforms to qualifications resulting from the 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper. The Delivery Partnership would need to draw on relevant expertise in these and many other areas. It may wish to involve a representative of the DfES. Crucially, it would also need to involve and take account of the views of stakeholders from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

9.1.5　　　The key purpose of the Delivery Partnership would be twofold. First it would drive forward and co-ordinate the implementation of whichever changes to the current system are taken forward following this consultation exercise. Second, it would lead discussions in the sector on PQA, develop the proposals for change that emerge and help steer the sector towards decisions.

9.1.6　　　Given its implementation role, it would be important that the Delivery Partnership was a tightly-focused group, capable of efficient decision making and effective oversight of action to realise those decisions. This means that it would be a relatively small group. We have suggested that it would need to include in its membership representatives of the key stakeholders in HE applications. But we are also clear that very many people and organisations have an interest in this area and that reform would require their full commitment and active co-operation.

9.1.7　　　We suggest therefore that the Delivery Partnership should be supported by a Stakeholder Advisory Forum. This would be a much larger group than the Delivery Partnership with a wider membership. Its key role would be to bring together partners and practitioners from all those involved in, or affected by, HE applications across the UK. It would provide a general sounding-board for the Delivery Partnership. Particular members or sections of the Forum could provide more detailed, expert advice on specific issues, where appropriate. Members of the Forum could also act as champions for the reform process, supporting its implementation by advocating its benefits widely.

9.1.8　　　We suggest that it would be for the Delivery Partnership to establish the Forum, determine its membership and set out how it wanted to draw on its support. Appendix 4 sets out, for illustrative purposes, the kind of roles we envisage the Delivery Partnership would want the Forum to play.

9.1.9　　　We believe that the Delivery Partnership and the Stakeholder Advisory Forum need to be in place quite quickly following this consultation, probably early in 2006. This would allow them to start engaging the key stakeholders and wider sector in the change process.

> **Question 17**
>
> Do you support the proposals made in this chapter for a Delivery Partnership to lead implementation of reform to the applications system, supported by a Stakeholders Advisory Forum?

CHAPTER 10

HOW TO RESPOND TO THIS CONSULTATION

The consultation runs from 10 September 2005 to 5 December 2005

The consultation response form is available at www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/
You can complete this on-line, or download it and post it to us.

If you are responding on-line, select the "Respond on-line" option at the
beginning of the consultation webpage: www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/
If you prefer you can send the completed response form to:

Posted to:	PQA Consultation, DfES Consultation Unit, Area 1A Castle View House, East Lane, Runcorn, WA7 2GJ.
E-mail:	pqa.consultation@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

Hard copies are also available on request and can be ordered from
pqa.consultation@dfes.gsi.gov.uk or by calling 0114 259 3548.

A summary of the consultation responses will be available, following the
consultation, on:
http://www.dfes.gov.uk/hegateway/hereform/consultation_2005/Index.cfm

APPENDICES

MEMBERSHIP LISTS

1. Working Group membership

Sir Alan Wilson, Director-General of Higher Education, DfES - Chair

Mark Batho, Head of Lifelong Learning Group, Scottish Executive
Mark Dawe, Deputy Director of Learning and Skills Transformation, DfES
Mike Hipkins, Director of Student Finance Group, DfES
John Howells, Head of Higher Education Division, Welsh Assembly
John Jones, Examinations System and 14-19 Reform Unit, DfES
David McAuley, Director of Higher Education and Analytical Services, DELNI
Miranda Steiner, Corporate Leadership Group, Schools Workforce Unit, DfES
Ruth Thompson, Director of HE Strategy and Implementation Group, DfES

2. Membership of the National Consultation Group

Patricia Ambrose, Executive Secretary, the Standing Conference of Principals
Nick Bennett, Principal, Gorseinon College
Keith Brooker, Group Director of Markets and Products, City and Guilds
Roger Dancey, Chief Master of King Edwards' School, Birmingham
Hannah Essex, Vice President of Education, National Union of Students (to May 05)
Brendan Ferguson, Head of Academic Registry, Glasgow Caledonian University/Chairman of the Academic Registrars Council
Susan Hayday, Curriculum and HE Manager, Association of Colleges (from March 05)
Helen Hyde, Headteacher, Watford Grammar School for Girls
Dr Tina Isaacs, Head of Secondary Curriculum Programme, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
Professor Christine King, Vice Chancellor and Chief Executive of Staffordshire University
Professor Noel Lloyd, Vice Chancellor, University of Wales
Dr Bill Macmillan, Pro-Vice Chancellor, University of Oxford (from March 05)
Anthony McClaran, Chief Executive, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
Dr Ron McLone, Chair of Joint Council for Qualifications, Director General of Assessment
John Morgan, Headteacher, Conyers School
Jane Minto, Director of the Oxford Colleges' Admissions Office (to Feb 05)
Julian Nicholds, Vice President of Education, National Union of Students (from June 05)
Judith Norrington, Director of Learning and Quality, Association of Colleges (to Feb 05)
Alan Roach, Headteacher, Chalvedon School
Derek Ross, Director of Operations, Student Loans Company
Professor Steve Smith, Vice Chancellor, University of Exeter
John Tredwell, Principal, Worcester Sixth Form College
Professor David Vaughan, Principal, Cumbria Institute of the Arts
Fiona Waye, Policy Advisor, Universities UK

3. Membership of the Consultation Group in Northern Ireland

Professor Ken Bell, Queen's University Belfast
John D' Arcy, Association of Northern Ireland Colleges
Patrick Hanna, Northern Ireland Teacher Education Committee
Roger McCune, Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
Jill McGrath, National Union of Students/Union of Students in Ireland
Terry McKnight, Association of University Teachers
Dr Damian O'Kane, University of Ulster
Maureen Stewart, SHA (Northern Ireland)
Brian Turtle, Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education
Stirling Wisener, Queen's University Belfast
David Mann, Department of Education

4. Membership of the Consultation Group in Scotland

Una Bartley, Universities Scotland
Steve Cannon, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service/University of Aberdeen
Peter Donachie, Scottish Executive: Education Department
Tom Drake, Scottish Qualifications Authority
Brendan Ferguson, Academic Registrars Council/Glasgow Caledonian University
Irene Finlayson, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
Lesley Jackson, University of Edinburgh
Bill McGregor, Headteachers' Association of Scotland
Derek Ross, Students Loans Company
David Stephen, Students Awards Agency for Scotland
Professor William Stevely, Universities Scotland/Robert Gordon University
Graeme Wise, National Union of Students Scotland

5. Membership of the Consultation Group in Wales

Jill Bedford, Deputy Director of the Registry, Cardiff University
Dawn Bell, Head of Admissions, University of Wales Newport
Nick Bennett, Principal, Gorseinon College
Dr Hywel Davies, Head of Admissions, University of Wales Aberystwyth
Ainsley Lewis, Senior Assistant Registrar, University of Wales, Bangor
Graham Pickering, Qualifications, Curriculum & Assessment Authority for Wales
Gareth Pierce, Welsh Joint Education Committee
Meilyr Rowlands, Adult, Community-Based, Learning & ITET, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education & Training in Wales (ESTYN),
Amanda Wilkinson, Director, Higher Education Wales

6. Stakeholder Standing Conference membership

1994 Group
ACCAC (Qualifications, Assessment and Curriculum Authority for Wales)
Academic Registrars Council (Admissions Practitioners Group)
Assessment and Qualifications Alliance
Association of Directors of Education in Scotland
Association of Directors of Education in Wales
Association of Heads of University Administration
Association of Northern Ireland Colleges
Association of Scottish Colleges
Association of Teachers and Lecturers
Association of University Teachers
Association of University Teachers (Scotland)
British Medical Association
City and Guilds
CMU
Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (Northern Ireland)
Council for Higher Education in Art and Design
Council of Deans and Heads of UK University Facilities for Nursing and Health
Professions
Council of Deans of Dental Schools
Council of Heads of Medical Schools
Department of Health
Edexcel
Educational Institute of Scotland
Estyn
Federation of Awarding Bodies
General Dental Council
General Medical Council
General Social Care Council
General Teaching Council for England
General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland
General Teaching Council for Scotland
General Teaching Council for Wales
Girls' Schools Association
GMB
Headteachers' Association of Scotland
Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference
Higher Education Funding Council for England
Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
Higher Education Wales
Independent Schools Association
Independent Schools Council
Joint Council for Qualifications
Learning and Skills Council
National Association of Connexions Partnerships
National Association of Head Teachers
National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers
National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education
National Employers' Organisation for School Teachers

National Union of Students
National Union of Students in Scotland
National Union of Student – USI in Northern Ireland
National Union of Students in Wales
National Union of Teachers
Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR)
Professional Association of Teachers
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
Quality Assurance Agency
Royal College of Nursing
Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons
Royal Veterinary College
Russell Group
Russell Group on Admissions
SCOP Admissions and Recruitment Network
Scottish Council of Independent Schools
Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Councils
Scottish Secondary Teachers Association
Scottish Qualifications Authority
Secondary Heads Association
Secondary Heads Association (Northern Ireland)
Sixth Form Colleges Forum
Skill
Society of Heads of Independent Schools
Student Awards Agency for Scotland
TGWU
The Sutton Trust
Teacher Training Agency
UCAC (Wales' Own Teachers' Union)
UKCOSA: Council for International Education
Unison
Universities Council for the Education of Teachers
Universities Scotland
Universities Wales
University Vocational Awards Council
Welsh Joint Education Committee Examinations Board
Welsh Local Government Association
Welsh Secondary Schools Association

7.   DfES Secretariat

Sophie Coberman
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ENTRY PROFILE TEMPLATE

Course: BA (Hons) Accounting N400

<u>Why choose the University of Newtown?</u>

Entry Routes

<u>English, Welsh and Northern Irish Framework ations</u>

<u>Scottish Framework Qualifications</u>

<u>Other Tariff Qualifications</u>

<u>Access & Supporting Qualifications</u>

<u>Other qualifications</u>

International applicants

Mature applicants

Opportunities for all

What this programme offers

<u>About this course</u>

<u>Special</u> features of this course

<u>Your career options</u>

What our students say about this course

Application and selection

What are we looking for?

Completing your application

Our selection criteria

How we choose our students

What happens next?

Fees, bursaries and financial support

Fees for home students

Fees for EU students

Fees for international students

Bursary and scholarship information

Links to further information

About this institution

<u>Accommodation</u>

<u>Careers Advice and Guidance</u>

Disability access

International students

Prospectus

Student life

Open Days

Faculties

Entry Profile objective:
To assist all those who have the potential to succeed and who can benefit from the course to:
- *gain admission to the university*
- *successfully complete the course*
- *obtain future graduate employment.*

By choosing a title such as 'Why choose the University of Newtown?' you can describe those elements that make your institution special, and emphasise those features which make it attractive to applicants.

Entry Routes

Entry requirements are collected on-line through Net.update, and they automatically appear in this section. Other headings can be added to address particular groups of applicants - international applicants, mature applicants, local schools students or to explain your Widening Participation initiatives.

What this programme offers

In this section, you can give information about the course – how it is structured, assessment, optional modules in addition to the basic course, opportunities for studying abroad etc. You might also wish to give information about the career opportunities this course offers and comments from current or former students. Information can be text or url links to specific pages on your web site.

Application and selection

Headings in this section enable you to give as much information about your admission procedures as you wish. Admissions criteria could be explained, together with guidance about the skills, experience and personal qualities you are seeking in applicants. Your applicants will then have a better idea of how to structure their personal statements. This information would also be helpful to referees. If your institution is participating in 'Fair Enough?' initiatives, information and guidance could be offered in this column as well.

Fees bursaries and financial support

This section allows you to provide information about fees for home, EU and international students as well as available bursaries and scholarships.

About this institution

This section allows you to create links directly to the specific pages of your web site which give potential applicants information about the institution itself. Some headings, such as 'Accommodation', 'Careers Advice and Guidance' 'Disability access' etc are already listed. Headings do not have to be used, and provision is there for you to add more headings if you wish – campus locations or travel advice, for instance.

Information in this section only has to be entered once – it appears automatically in all published Entry Profiles.

ILLUSTRATIONS OF HOW THE 2008/09 REFORMS MIGHT WORK

Illustration 1: Rolling approach to applications

Lisa submits just one of her initial applications to Oxbridge in October. She does not receive a conditional offer. The feedback she does receive tells her that her application was very strong, but that she was out competed for a place in a very competitive and large field of applicants. Lisa is disappointed by this. But the feedback shows her clearly that her AS grades do not match the average grades of those successful in gaining offers.

Reflecting on this feedback, Lisa, who has been continuing to research possible HE choices whilst her Oxbridge application was being considered, submits a second initial application to what is still a high demand course by the middle of January. This time, Lisa is offered a place conditionally.

But Lisa feels that the grades required by this conditional offer are very challenging, not least as they will require a real improvement in performance compared to her AS grades. So, drawing again on the research she did ahead of her second application, Lisa submits a third and fourth application to courses whose Entry Profiles tell her that she should need to achieve lower grades to gain a place there than to take up her conditional offer. These applications are submitted by the end of March. At that point, Lisa also decides to re-sit one of her AS qualifications in June, to improve on her original grade and increase her chance of achieving her first conditional offer.

Lisa receives conditional offers in response to both her third and fourth applications. In both cases, the grades required are lower than for her first conditional offer. So Lisa chooses one of these conditional offers to hold open as an insurance choice.

In total, Lisa has submitted just four applications. On every occasion, she has submitted well researched applications to courses she genuinely wanted to attend. She has rejected just one offer. She holds both a first choice based on aspirational exam performance and an insurance offer based on a more realistic assessment of her likely results.

Illustration 2: Additional applications in response to no conditional offers (assumes four initial applications)

Mark wants to attend HE. But he is not sure about the subject he wants to study. Trying to cover all options, he submits all of his initial applications to a range of possible courses. He does this by the end of October.

But Mark's lack of clarity about the subject he wants to study is reflected in the quality of his applications which are viewed as poorly focused and badly targeted. Mark receives no conditional offers in response to his initial applications. He starts to receive responses to these initial applications from

the end of November. By the start of the New Year, he has responses to all four.

Mark is naturally disappointed to receive no conditional offers. But he takes the advice that he is given and puts applying to university to one side whilst he prepares for and sits important A2 module exams in January.

Once these are out of the way, Mark starts his research into possible HE choices again in earnest. This time – as a result of the module exams and the fact that Mark is now that much closer to finishing his qualifications – he is clear about the subject he wants to pursue in HE.

He submits a single, additional application towards the end of February. By early April Mark is offered a place on a course he genuinely wants to attend. On the basis of the module results Mark received at the end of March, he is confident of achieving the grades required by this conditional offer and holds it open as his sole choice pending his final results in August.

Mark has submitted five applications. His initial ones were poorly targeted. But the process of submitting them and the feedback they elicited has taught Mark a great deal about applying for HE. Receiving no conditional offers was a shock. But the ability to submit additional applications kept Mark tied into the admissions cycle. The fact that he could submit these additional applications after he had taken his January module marks meant that he became much clearer about what he wanted to study at university. The fact that he knew his January module results before he had to take final decisions on which conditional offers to hold open pending his final exam results, meant that he felt confident in holding just one offer that he genuinely wanted to take up.

Illustration 3: Pre-qualified students

David never really saw himself as HE material. University wasn't the sort of thing his family or friends did. In any case, he had managed to get himself full time work off the back of the Saturday job he had been doing whilst studying for his GCSEs and he took this up rather than stay on for A-levels.

David was good at his job and progressed. He picked up bits of on the job training along the way. At some point, his employer offered him the chance to do an NVQ level 3 and he took this up, largely because he couldn't think of a good reason not to and in any case, it may help with future promotion. He enjoyed the learning and gained the qualification.

He wasn't quite sure why, but it dawned on David at some point that he was now qualified to the same level as he would have been if he'd stayed on at school. And then it struck him that this meant that, perhaps, he was qualified enough to go to university. He'd seen something about the local university in the regional evening newspaper and he followed this up.

David was prepared to be disappointed. He assumed that there would be

some hugely bureaucratic application process for him to go through, one where he would be in competition with younger, better qualified people, one where, no doubt, he would have to sit some sort of entry exam. He was surprised when he found that the local university were happy to receive an application from him when he was ready to submit it. Ok, he couldn't start until everyone else did in September, but that was fair enough.

David submitted his application in June on the basis of the qualifications he already held. He learned in July that he had been offered a place. It was tight, but this gave him just enough time to sort things with work and rent and so on to allow him to start in September.

David made just one application. He did this on the basis of the qualification he already held. The HEI needed to consider just one application and knew that if they made an offer, it was almost certain to be taken up. At the same time, the HEI and David were able to build a positive relationship to support David in his entry into HE. David was not forced to apply alongside those taking exams in the year immediately preceding their HE entry. He knew, over two months before the course started, that he had a place.

Illustration 4: Reformed approach to Clearing

Anna submitted three initial applications, one after the other, until she gained a conditional offer. Anna received her conditional offer in January. The results it required her to achieve were challenging. But Anna felt she could get them. She wanted to attend this course. So she submitted no further applications and held open just the one conditional offer pending her results.

When these came through, a little later in August than AS, A-Level, Highers and advanced Highers on account of the fact that Anna was studying a BTEC National, Anna was shocked to find that she had failed to achieve her conditional offer. She contacted the HEI in question. But Anna knew she had missed the conditional offer by a significant margin and she wasn't at all surprised when the HEI wouldn't offer her a place.

Anna was determined to go to university. She knew it was possible to get a place through a process called Clearing. She found out what was involved in this. It seemed that Anna would enter Clearing at what was called the 'second application round'. She would have a week or so to look at information about what HE places remained available before she had to submit a single application. Everyone else would do the same. All applications would be considered alongside each other. The universities would then let candidates know if they had gained a place. Those who had not would go through the process again, researching information about what places were available and submitting an application by a given date.

Anna didn't much like the sound of all of this. But in the end, it didn't turn out to be as bad as she had thought. She was able to access information about the places that remained available easily enough on the UCAS website. It turned out that some of the places were on courses that Anna had seriously

considered applying to in the first place. She had to get on with making a choice, but she wasn't panicked into a rushed application. In the end, the hardest thing for Anna was whittling the possibilities down to just a single application.

Naturally, Anna was worried that she wouldn't be offered a place. But at least, she thought, everyone was in the same position and all the applications were going to be considered alongside each other so at least it would be fair.

Fortunately, Anna's single application resulted in her being offered a place.

Anna made just three initial applications. Anna knew, with hindsight, that she should have used all of her initial applications and tried to get an insurance offer. If she had, she thought, she would probably have tried to get an insurance offer for the course to which she successfully applied in Clearing. So, maybe in the end, nothing was very much different.

Anna made just one application in Clearing. This was based on sound research. The HEI considering the application was able to consider Anna's application alongside all others for the places they had available. At the time of this consideration, all applicants had received their exam results and so all applications were considered on the same basis.

Illustration 5: Students who out perform their conditional offers

Alex really wanted to do Engineering at university. But she knew from looking at entry level profiles for Engineering courses that she'd have to do better than her teachers predicted in her Maths A-Level to get a place. All the same, she used a couple of her initial applications on Engineering courses. But, as she suspected, she didn't get a conditional offer. It didn't much matter though as one of Alex's other initial applications resulted in her being given an offer of a place on a different course.

The grades Alex needed to achieve to satisfy her conditional offer were stretching. But she got stuck into her studies over the rest of the year and even re-sat a couple of units in January to improve on the grades she'd got first time round. When the results came out in August, Alex was delighted to find she'd got the highest possible mark in Maths. And this brought back the idea of doing Engineering.

Alex didn't hold out much hope that at this late stage there would be any Engineering places left. But she found out that she could keep her original conditional offer open for a few days whilst she put in one new application to an Engineering course. She knew it was a long shot, but it offered a better chance of getting the place she really wanted than doing nothing. So she put in the application.

Alex was rewarded with an unconditional offer of a place on an engineering course.

Alex got a much better grade in one exam than anticipated. She put in one new application. She felt comfortable in doing this because her original conditional offer was protected whilst she made her new application, so she always had a good fall back. A very few places were available on the Engineering course as a result of some of the students who held conditional offers for that course missing the required grades. The Engineering Department received and accepted an application from a student who really wanted a place on their course and had demonstrated her ability to take up that place with her exam results. If that place had not been allocated in that way, it would have been given to a student who had missed the grades of their conditional offer or made available through Clearing, where the majority of students would be coming to the course in question as a second choice.

Illustration 6: Selecting department (assumes that students make four, rather than six, initial applications)

The department is used to receiving many more applications than it has places and this year seems to be no exception.

Only this year it is a little easier to differentiate between the applications. For those students who have taken them, the department has AS grades. So it has some real evidence of academic performance. For all A-level students, the Department knows which modules the student is taking. And it is able to make offers conditional not just on overall full qualification performance, but also on module performance. So it is able to make offers that will stretch the candidates that bit further and show which have real ability and outstanding potential.

And maybe, there are just a few less applications than usual. Some of that seems to be down to students knowing very clearly before they apply what the entry level profile is for the course. But perhaps also some of it may also be down to students, with four initial applications, being more focused and targeted about the applications they make.

Certainly, the department knows that a higher proportion of the applications it has received are the only ones the student has in play at that time. This says something about the students' desire to attend that course. They are waiting to learn how their application to it has been viewed before applying elsewhere. This is different to normal. Normally, the HEI knows that the candidates who have applied to it have also applied, sometimes rather speculatively, to as many as five other departments at the same time.

Overall, the Department has received a few less applications than usual. It is better able to distinguish between the current academic record of some applicants. It is able to make conditional offers that distinguish more sharply between candidates by stretching them further in their exams. It has a clearer idea of whether the applications it has are definite preferences for the candidates in question or whether they are just one in a series of more speculative choices.

Illustration 7: Recruiting department (assumes that students make four, rather than six, initial applications)

The Department is good at marketing itself and its places. It has a good record of getting out there and successfully attracting students.

This year, things feel a little different though. The marketing drive has swung into action as smoothly as ever. But there aren't quite the usual numbers of applications. Numbers do start to pick up as the applications cycle progresses and some students start to submit additional applications.

On the other hand, what the applications lack in quantity they more than make up for in quality. Many more than usual appear to be much more targeted. And many more seem to be very genuine applications, because the Department can tell from the UCAS system that in many cases, the application the department has is the only one the student has in play.

All of which gives rise to a new, albeit welcome, question: what proportion of conditional offers the Department makes will be taken up?

In the past, the answer was relatively straightforward: a pretty small proportion. And this had been the answer for a long time. The department was used to receiving very many applications that were not the student's definite preference. And it was used to considering these applications at the same time as it knew other HEIs were considering other, higher preference applications from the same applicants. So the department knew that in many cases, its consideration of applications would be nugatory. It would, all too often, inevitably lead to the candidate rejecting, almost out of hand, the conditional offer the department had made.

This year though, that answer feels wrong. It feels like a much higher proportion of the conditional offers that the department makes will be taken up. That is a very positive feeling. It means that a much higher percentage of those who take up places will have researched their choices thoroughly and, in the light of much more transparent information about entry requirements for the course, positively decided to attend it. It may take a couple of years' experience to work out precisely what proportion of conditional offers result in places being taken up. But the department can be flexible enough in the way it manages its places during that time to avoid any problems.

Overall, the department gets fewer, but better quality applications. It needs to dedicate less resource to considering these fewer applications and it knows that the resource it does use will deliver a better return because more of the conditional offers it makes will result in places being taken up. More of the students taking up places will be clearer about the course and will be embarking on it as a definite preference rather than a second best option.

TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE HE ADMISSIONS REFORM DELIVERY PARTNERSHIP

The HE Admissions Reform Delivery Partnership will comprise the key stakeholders in HE admissions, including those from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It will be led by UCAS. Its terms of reference will be:

1. To bring together the key stakeholders in HE admissions across the UK and maintain their commitment to reforming the HE admissions system;

2. To direct, oversee and co-ordinate the implementation of reforms to current HE admissions arrangements for 2008-09;

3. To lead discussions in the sector on PQA, develop the proposals for change that emerge and help steer the sector towards decisions on how to introduce PQA from 2010;

4. Where appropriate, to design approaches to piloting change, oversee the implementation of those pilots and ensure effective implementation in the light of lessons learned;

5. To anticipate transitional issues springing from the implementation of change, put in place and co-ordinate action to manage these issues effectively; and

6. To establish a Stakeholder Advisory Forum, comprising representatives from all those involved in or affected by HE admissions, to provide advice and support to the Delivery Partnership.

TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE HE ADMISSIONS REFORM STAKEHOLDER ADVISORY FORUM

The HE Admissions Stakeholder Advisory Forum will comprise representatives of all those involved in or affected by HE admissions across the UK. Its membership and precise terms of reference will be determined by the Delivery Partnership. The roles it may play could include:

1. To bring together all the stakeholders in HE admissions across the UK;

2. To provide a general sounding board for the Delivery Partnership;

3. To provide detailed expert advice on specific elements of change as required; and

4. To act as champions for reform, advocating its benefits to the wider sector.

Notes