Fair admissions to higher education: draft recommendations for consultation

Closing date:
28 May 2004

Contents

Foreword by Professor Steven Schwartz

I have been asked by Charles Clarke, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, to lead an independent review of the options that English higher education institutions should consider when assessing the merit of applicants for their courses, and to report on the high-level principles underlying these options. I am supported in this review by a Steering Group representing a range of stakeholders.

Admissions are the responsibility of universities and colleges themselves, and rightly so. Institutions should be able to set their own criteria, choose their own assessment methods, and select their own students. But it is important that everyone has confidence in the integrity of the admissions process. Access to higher education matters to many people, and so do fair admissions.

Our inquiry has looked at the available evidence relating to admissions. Last September we published our first consultation paper, on the key issues relating to fair admissions, and we have received a large number of responses. I have personally debated and discussed with a wide range of people and organisations some of the most controversial issues facing our review. How do we define merit and what is a fair admissions system? To what extent should background factors be considered when selecting students? What exactly does transparency of admissions criteria and processes mean? Are some assessment methods more reliable and valid than others? Are the expense and complexity of some aspects of our current admissions system a barrier to applicants, and how can efficiency be improved?

The Steering Group is now publishing this second consultation paper, in which we lay out our thinking on the issues and make a series of draft recommendations. These are in draft form because we believe that our final recommendations will benefit from being informed by wide consultation. Only after we have considered responses to this consultation will we prepare our final report for the Secretary of State.

I very much hope that you will take this opportunity to let us have your views. The closing date for responses to this document is 28 May 2004.

Steven Schwartz
Vice-Chancellor, Brunel University

Executive Summary

1.   Background

1.1   The Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group has been asked to develop a statement of high-level principles about admissions that all universities and colleges can adopt. Its terms of reference, and details of its membership, are available at Appendix 1.

1.2   The Steering Group consulted on the issues relating to fair admissions in autumn 2003. In this second consultation document, its proposed recommendations are set out for comment. A final report will be presented to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills later this year.

2.   Why are admissions important?

2.1   A fair and transparent admissions system is essential for all applicants. Higher education (HE) is a valuable commodity: it can affect salary, job security and power to influence society. The number of people who seek an HE qualification has grown enormously, with over 1.2 million full-time undergraduate students and an additional 633,000 studying part-time. Overall, the benefits of HE are strong and are holding steady. But they also vary considerably from course to course and between institutions, in terms of both the learning experience and graduate outcomes. The sector is diverse and choice of course and institution matters. In this context, it is vital that all stakeholders in the admissions process – applicants, parents, schools, colleges, teaching and admissions staff – believe the system is fair.

3.   What are the issues?

3.1   The student population studying HE is diverse, but certain groups are still under-represented. There is a wide range of processes that can affect who participates in HE, of which admissions is one. The remit of the Steering Group is not to make recommendations on all these processes, but to focus solely on admissions. Within that context the Group accepts the evidence that admissions processes are generally fair. However, it also believes there is room for improvement. It has identified the following issues that need to be addressed as we move towards our goal of an admissions system that is both fair and seen to be fair:

- There are differing interpretations of merit and fairness;
- It can be difficult for applicants to know how they will be assessed;
- The information used in assessing applicants may not be equally reliable and consistent;

- Some courses have high drop-out rates, which may be related to admissions processes;
- For courses that are over-subscribed, it can be difficult for admissions staff to select from a growing pool of highly-qualified applicants;
- Some applicants face a burden of additional assessment;
- There is uneven awareness of and response to the increasing diversity of applicants, qualifications and pathways into higher education;
- Most offers depend on predicted grades, not confirmed examination results;
- The legislation applicable to admissions is complex and there is uneven understanding of what it means for admissions policies and processes.

All these issues are addressed in the Group's high-level principles for fair admissions, the guidelines for their implementation, and wider recommendations, which are summarised below.

4.   What is a fair admissions system?

4.1   The Steering Group believes a fair admissions system is one that provides equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of background, to gain admission to a course suited to their ability and aspirations. Everyone agrees that applicants should be chosen on merit: the problem arises when we try to define it. Merit could mean admitting applicants with the highest examination marks, or it could mean taking a wider view about each applicant's achievements and potential.

4.2   A level results remain the best single indicator of success at undergraduate level, and continue to be central to the admissions process. However, the evidence the Group has considered suggests that equal examination grades do not necessarily represent equal potential. The effect of social background on attainment begins to appear by the age of two. Many applicants have responsibilities at home or at work, or interrupted schooling, that can affect their educational achievement. And recent research shows that, all other things being equal, students from state schools and colleges tend to perform better at undergraduate level than students from independent schools and colleges.

4.3   It is not the task of higher education admissions to compensate for educational or social disadvantage. But identifying latent talent and potential, which may not fully be demonstrated by examination results, is a legitimate aim for universities and colleges which seek to recruit the best possible students regardless of background. Eighty-six per cent of respondents to the Group's first consultation agreed that universities and colleges should consider the obstacles an applicant might have had to

overcome, and 65% thought they should take account of an applicant's educational context.

4.4   The Steering Group does not want to bias admissions in favour of applicants from certain backgrounds or schools. The Group does however want to ensure that the factors considered in the assessment process are accurate and relevant and allow all applicants equal opportunity to demonstrate achievements and potential. This is facilitated by 'holistic assessment,' or taking into account all relevant factors, including the context of applicants' achievements, backgrounds and relevant skills. 'Broad brush' approaches are generally not appropriate; applicants must be assessed as individuals.

4.5   In considering factors other than examination results, the Group recognises that admissions staff may be constrained by practical issues. Staff dealing with large numbers of applications may not have time to assess each applicant in a holistic way. The process of 'sifting' applicants is used widely, and is an appropriate response to this problem. The Group believes that it is desirable for even the first sift to consider contextual factors in some way, but this will require the standardised provision of agreed information on application forms.

4.6   The Group believes it is justifiable for an institution to consider an applicant's contribution to the learning environment; and that institutions and courses which confer particular benefits upon their graduates have an obligation to make reasonable efforts to recruit a diverse student community. The presence of a range of experiences in the laboratory or the seminar room enriches the learning environment for all students. A diverse student community is likely to enhance all students' skills of critical reasoning, teamwork and communication and produce graduates better able to contribute to a diverse society. The Group is aware of a recent decision by the US Supreme Court upholding a university's "compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body".

4.7   Fairness does not mean that the Government should choose students. The Steering Group wishes to affirm its belief in the autonomy of institutions over admissions policies and decisions. Moreover, it should be clearly recognised that it is perfectly legitimate for admissions staff to seek out the most academically excellent students.

5.   Recommended principles

5.1   The Steering Group recommends that all universities and colleges should adopt the following principles of fair admissions:

Principle 1: A fair admissions system should be transparent

Universities and colleges should publish their admissions policy and detailed criteria for admission to courses, along with an explanation of admissions processes. This should include a general indication of the weight given to prior academic achievement and potential demonstrated by other means.

Information should also be provided about the entry qualifications of applicants accepted in the previous year; subject-level drop-out rates and employment rates; and procedures for complaints and appeals. Institutions should conduct and publish an annual analysis of admissions data, and provide feedback on request to unsuccessful applicants.

Principle 2: A fair admissions system should strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid

Admissions policies and procedures should be informed and guided by current research and good practice. Where possible, universities and colleges should use tests and approaches that have already been shown to predict undergraduate success. Where that is not possible, institutions should demonstrate that their methods are relevant, reliable and valid or likely to be so. Universities and colleges should monitor and evaluate the link between their admissions policies and undergraduate performance and retention, and review their policies to address any issues identified.

Principle 3: A fair admissions system should enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and their potential

Ability to complete the course must be an essential criterion for admission. In assessing applicants' merit and potential, institutions may legitimately consider other factors in addition to examination results, including the educational context of an applicant's formal achievement; other indicators of potential and capability (such as the results of additional testing or assessment, including interviews, or non-academic experiences and relevant skills); and how an individual applicant's experiences, skills and perspectives could contribute to the learning environment.

However, applicants should be assessed as individuals: it is not appropriate to treat one applicant automatically more or less favourably by virtue of his or her background, school or college. At any stage in the admissions process, all applicants should be given an equal opportunity to provide relevant information or demonstrate relevant skills. Admissions criteria should not include factors irrelevant to the assessment of merit: for example, institutions should not give preference to the relatives of graduates or benefactors. Admissions staff have the discretion to vary the weight they give to examination results and other indicators of achievement and potential and therefore to vary the offer that they make to applicants, providing this is done consistently with the principles of fair admissions.

Principle 4: A fair admissions system should seek to minimise barriers for applicants

Admissions processes should seek to minimise any barriers that are irrelevant to satisfying admissions requirements. This could include barriers arising from the means of assessment; the varying resources and support available to applicants; disability; and the type of an applicant's qualifications.

Principle 5: A fair admissions system should be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes

An institution's structures and processes should be designed to facilitate a high-quality, efficient admissions system and a professional service to applicants. Structures and processes should feature clear lines of responsibility across the institution to ensure consistency; allocation of resources appropriate to the task; and clear guidelines for the appointment, training and induction of all staff involved in admissions.

6.   Wider recommendations

6.1   There are also some wider recommendations designed to produce a high-quality admissions process and facilitate holistic assessment while minimising any increase in the overall cost of the admissions process to the HE sector. Many of these recommendations will involve a range of partners in addition to universities and colleges.

6.2   The Group expects that universities and colleges will wish to review their admissions policies and systems in light of its recommendations, and to ensure equality of opportunity within the legal framework. Reviews should include considering whether a degree of centralisation might facilitate adoption of the principles of fair admissions.

6.3   The Group welcomes the progress which is being made towards greater use of electronic applications, and encourages the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and other admissions services to consider how they might further improve and extend current practice. It also recommends that UCAS and other admissions services review the design of application forms in partnership with HE admissions staff, schools and colleges to consider the inclusion, on a consistent basis, of summarised information about contextual factors to inform the assessment process.

6.4   The HE sector as a whole should review the coverage of special admissions arrangements (for example, compact schemes) to ensure that there is equality of opportunity to participate in schemes giving preferential treatment.

6.5 While recognising the potential value of additional assessment, the Steering Group is aware of the potential burden for applicants and believes additional assessment should be kept to a minimum. In the short term, wherever possible, universities and colleges are encouraged to make more use of existing information rather than developing new admissions tests. In the medium term, the Group welcomes and encourages the trend towards common tests being used across several universities and colleges, and recommends that Universities UK (UUK) and the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) work with member institutions to explore the scope for greater co-ordination of common tests. It also welcomes an operational pilot of US style SATs as a potential common test in the UK, and evaluation of other tests, that would help to inform future developments. It suggests that the idea of common interviews for courses with clearly defined professional requirements is explored. Looking to the longer term, the Group welcomes the commitment by the Working Group on 14-19 Reform to develop a coherent, single qualification which could enable finer differentiation between applicants to higher education. A broader qualification that allowed the testing of aptitude, potential and relevant skills in addition to academic achievement would be particularly welcome. Such developments may eliminate the need for much of the additional testing carried out separately by universities and colleges.

6.6 If it could be done while maintaining holistic assessment of applicants, the Group believes that a system of post qualification applications, or PQA, would both increase the fairness of the admissions process and improve efficiency. It asks the Government to work with stakeholders to identify ways to resolve the practical issues identified in previous studies. It also asks the Working Group on 14 – 19 Reform, in the next stages of its work, to consider the extent to which changes to the volume and nature of assessment might help to facilitate PQA in the longer term.

6.7 The Steering Group would welcome the creation of a central source of expertise and advice on admissions issues, led by the HE sector. This could offer institutions advice on the legal framework, review and disseminate the latest research and provide specialist advice on assessment methods.

7. Options for assessing merit

7.1 The Steering Group lists methods from which institutions may choose (section F of the full report) and stresses that these should be implemented in accordance with the principles of fair admissions.

8. Reviewing progress towards fair admissions

8.1 Universities and colleges must retain autonomy over their own admissions policies, and the right to make their own judgements in assessing applicants. However, the Steering Group believes that there is a need for some mechanism to review progress in implementing the recommendations on fair admissions. It welcomes views on how best to achieve this. One option would be for institutions that wish to charge a higher variable fee voluntarily to include a section within their access agreement with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) to indicate their support for the principles of fair admissions. Another option would be for institutions to confirm to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) that they had adopted the principles and report on progress with implementation.

Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group
April 2004
www.admissions-review.org.uk

Section A
Background

Introduction

A1.   The Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group has been asked to make recommendations on fair admissions. After examining the evidence and consulting with stakeholders, the Steering Group accepts the evidence that admissions are generally fair, but believes that there is scope for improvement. This set of draft recommendations is being published at a time when many claims are being made (both accurate and inaccurate) about the admissions process. Biases of one sort or another are alleged.

A2.   This review is intended to bring some clarity to the admissions debate. It is concerned with the following questions: How should higher education students be chosen? Are examination scores the only relevant indicators of undergraduate success or should universities and colleges also consider other factors, such as educational context and broader achievements and skills? How can we support admissions staff in their role? To what extent can we offer guidance on assessment methods? What information do applicants need to make informed choices and what feedback, if any, should unsuccessful applicants receive? These questions are of vital interest to employers, schools and colleges, the higher education sector, government, applicants' families, and, of course, the applicants themselves. This review attempts to answer these questions while at the same time elucidating the principles and processes that constitute a fair admissions process.

A3.   The scope of this review is applications from the United Kingdom for undergraduate courses provided by English institutions.[1] The Steering Group recognises that institutions and individuals in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales may well be interested in the implications of the draft recommendations contained in this report, and welcomes comments from these perspectives. The full terms of reference for the Admissions to Higher Education review, and the membership of the Steering Group, are available in Appendix 1.

A4.   The Steering Group consulted widely, from September to December 2003, on the key issues relating to fair admissions. It received 361 formal responses to the questionnaire which accompanied its first consultation paper, and also benefited from discussion and debate of the issues at a number of consultation events around the country (see Appendix 2). The results of the consultation have been invaluable in informing the thinking of

1 Applicants from the European Union and the European Economic Area, must, in principle, be treated in the same way as UK applicants. However, extending all aspects of fair admissions principles to these applicants involves complex, longer-term developments across all member states. See paragraph E12.

the Steering Group as it sought to clarify those issues which need addressing, and to frame its draft recommendations. A brief overview of the responses is available in Appendix 3. A fuller analysis of responses and further details of the review process can be found at the Admissions to Higher Education Review's website at www.admissions-review.org.uk

Why are admissions important?

A5. Higher education (HE) is a valuable commodity: it can affect salary, job security and power to influence society. Despite the introduction of fees and the abolition of grants, the financial return of an HE qualification in terms of increased earnings is large and is holding steady.[2] It is therefore unsurprising that the number of people who seek an HE qualification has grown enormously and that there are now over 1.2 million undergraduate full-time students and an additional 633,000 undergraduates studying part-time.[3]

A6. Each year, more than 460,000 people[4] apply for admission to UK institutions offering higher education. Because of the expansion of HE, there is room for almost everyone who applies. But the sector is diverse and the choice of course and institution matters. It matters because the benefits of HE vary considerably from course to course, in terms of both the learning experience and graduate outcomes. This is reflected in different retention rates, graduate employment rates and graduate salaries.[5] For a proportion of applicants to highly selective courses or institutions, the admissions process involves intense competition for a limited number of places. Failure to gain admission can arouse powerful emotions, and with good reason. The graduates of the most selective universities and courses tend to do well in later life. They get good jobs, they are admitted to the best postgraduate programmes and they develop relationships which will support them throughout their careers.

A7. A fair and transparent admissions system is essential for all applicants. As we enter an era in which students may face substantial tuition fees, applicants must become informed consumers. They need to know how to compare institutions and courses and how to interpret a prospectus. All applicants, including those from backgrounds currently under-represented in HE, also need to know how to present their attainments to admissions staff so that their achievements are fairly assessed. As will be seen in this report, 'recruiting' and 'selecting' courses face many common issues in ensuring the best fit between applicant and course.

2 See Harkness and Machin (1999) and McIntosh (2002).
3 The figures here cover all HE students in UK universities and colleges (including further education institutions and the Open University) in 2002/03.
4 This figure covers all UCAS applicants (UK and overseas) to UK institutions. Total figures for applicants to part-time courses are not available.
5 Numerous studies have shown the extent of the variation in benefits which can accrue from different courses and institutions. See, for example, Conlon and Chevalier (2002); Chevalier and Conlon (2003); and Walker and Zhu (2001).

A8.   Given the fierce competition for the benefits of HE, it is vital that all participants in the applications and admissions process – including parents, schools, colleges, academics and applicants – believe that the system is unbiased. The system must not only be fair, but must also be seen to be fair. Everyone must feel confident that all applicants with the ability to succeed have a fair chance of gaining admission to higher education.

A9.   Our admissions arrangements have developed over time to respond to wider changes in the English education system. However, the pace of change in recent years, in both the secondary and higher education sectors, means there is a need to look closely at whether the admissions system is still appropriate and effective.

Changes to the English education system

A10. Today, secondary and further education offer a wider range of opportunities than ever before. Learners have greater choice and can progress to HE by studying both academic and vocational subjects. Mature learners can follow similar pathways and have the additional options of Access courses and Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). In contrast with the past, HE in England is characterised by diversity and mass participation. Depending on the course and the institution, there are significant differences in entry requirements and starting points. Some courses place great emphasis on academic excellence, others place more emphasis on vocational relevance; others may be more learner-centred, aiming to provide learning opportunities appropriate for a particular community. This diversity should continue: a diversity of institutions, of approaches to learning and of courses allows greater choice for students.

A11. The Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group recognises that, while admissions processes today continue to benefit from careful planning and management, there is a need to ensure that they respond appropriately to a system of mass participation by a diverse pool of applicants. This need is particularly pressing in view of the Government's commitment to expanding the provision of vocational learning pathways and to increasing and widening participation in HE.

Under-representation of certain groups in higher education

A12. Students from families with professional and non-manual occupations continue to dominate HE enrolments. In 2001/02 only 26% of young entrants to full-time degree courses came from skilled manual, partly skilled or unskilled family backgrounds.[6] This occupational class difference is greater at the more selective universities and colleges. While participation by under-represented groups has increased significantly over the last 10 years, the gap in participation rates is still wide. Its principal cause is the continuing pattern of lower prior attainment by young people from poorer backgrounds. An

6 See HEFCE (2003b). People from such backgrounds constitute 40% of young people within the population.

additional problem is that well-qualified young people from poorer backgrounds are not applying in proportionate numbers to the most selective universities.[7] Students from some ethnic minority backgrounds are also under-represented at the more selective universities and colleges.[8]

A13. Further difficulties can be experienced in progressing to higher education through vocational routes. Although awareness of the diversity of qualifications and pathways into higher education is gradually increasing, knowledge is still uneven across institutions (see paragraph B22).

A14. The subject of prior educational attainment lies outside the remit of this review. This review does, however, address whether differences in background and opportunities are relevant to fair admissions.

Methods of assessment for admission to higher education

A15. There is considerable variation in the ways in which admissions staff in HE assess the suitability of applicants.[9] This reflects the diversity of entry requirements, applicants and learning pathways, but also the uneven relationship between supply and demand. For the majority of courses, little or no selection is required: if students apply with the required grades (or projected grades), then they get a place, and most of them subsequently complete the course successfully. On the other hand, for those courses attracting more qualified applicants than there are places, some way of differentiating between apparently equally qualified applicants is needed.

A16. Admissions staff for many courses do consider broader factors such as educational context, relevant skills or other indicators of individual potential or capability in addition to Level 3 examination results (and sometimes instead of them).[10] They generally do so for the following reasons:
- Identifying the potential of students whose ability might not be reflected in their grades;
- Differentiating between apparently equally qualified candidates for courses with competitive entry;
- Encouraging students from a background without a tradition of HE to apply to university or college;
- Recruiting from a pool of diverse applicants those who collectively will form the best possible group of students;
- Assessing course-specific skills or an applicant's suitability for a profession (such as teaching or medicine).

7 See Appendix 1 to Admissions to Higher Education Review (2003) for more details.
8 See Connor et al (2003), p. 34. This is due partly to a tendency among applicants from ethnic minority backgrounds to apply for courses of a vocational nature or leading to professions; most of these courses (medicine and law being notable exceptions) are more commonly offered in newer universities, and colleges. In addition, ethnic minority applicants to some colleges and pre-1992 universities appear to have a lower chance of receiving offers than other applicants, all other things being equal. See Shiner and Modood (2002) and Connor et al (2003), chapter 4. HEFCE has announced its intention to re-examine data on ethnic minority offers; see HEFCE (2003a), paras 45-46.
9 An overview of current practices was included in the Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group's first consultation paper, Admissions to Higher Education Review (2003), pages 8-15.
10 Level 3 qualifications include: A levels; National Vocational Qualifications; Advanced Modern Apprenticeships; and Access to HE courses.

Section B
What are the Issues?

Introduction

B1.   It is important to note that, across all universities and colleges, and all subjects, admissions processes generally appear to be fair.[11] There is a great deal of good practice within the sector on which to build. This is not to say there are no problems: there are wider issues relating to fairness that might not be reflected in admission statistics. And public perceptions are important. The Government has identified the need to reinforce public confidence in the fairness and transparency of admissions.[12]

B2.   The Steering Group has identified the following problems to which it believes solutions are needed as we move towards the goal of admissions processes which are both fair and seen to be fair:

- There are differing interpretations of merit and fairness;
- It can be difficult for applicants to know how they will be assessed;
- The information used in assessing applicants may not be equally reliable and consistent;
- Some courses have high drop-out rates, which may be related to admissions processes;
- For courses that are over-subscribed, it can be difficult for admissions staff to select from a growing pool of highly-qualified applicants;
- Some applicants face a burden of additional assessment;
- There is uneven awareness of and response to the increasing diversity of applicants, qualifications and pathways into higher education;
- Most offers depend on predicted grades, not confirmed examination results;
- The legislation applicable to admissions is complex and there is uneven understanding of what it means for admissions policies and processes.

Each of these issues is explored in more depth below and links to specific recommendations set out in sections D and E. Appendix 7 provides a table linking the issues and the recommendations and is provided as a tool for ease of reference.

11 See National Audit Office (2002), paragraphs 1.19 to 1.20. See too DfES (2003b), p.2. There is, however, evidence of some discrimination against ethnic minority applicants: see footnote 6 above; Shiner and Modood (2002); and Connor et al (2003).
12 See DfES (2003b).

There are differing interpretations of merit and fairness

B3.   Everyone agrees that applicants should be selected on merit; the problem arises when we try to define it. Merit could mean admitting applicants with the highest marks in Level 3 examinations, or it could mean taking a more holistic view of an applicant's achievements and potential, looking at the applicant as an individual and taking into account all relevant factors including context, background and relevant skills.

B4.   Although the interpretation of merit is a matter for individual institutions, the Steering Group believes each institution's interpretation of merit should be made explicit in its admissions policy. The purpose of the Steering Group's report is to clarify what is meant by 'fair admissions'. In considering this question, the Group examined a great deal of evidence. This evidence, which is summarised below, suggests that equal examination grades do not necessarily represent equal potential. This has implications for admissions practices, if universities and colleges are indeed to recruit the best students for their courses.

Educational and socio-economic disadvantage affect pre-entry achievement

B5.   In the UK, students from skilled manual, partly skilled or unskilled family backgrounds are far less likely to achieve high grades at A level or equivalent examinations than those from professional, intermediate or skilled non-manual backgrounds.[13] The effect of social background on attainment begins to appear by the age of two.[14] DfES analysis shows that lower-income pupils are over-represented in schools that add the least value to pupils' performance.[15] It also shows that lower-income and higher-income pupils alike all make greater progress in schools with a low percentage of pupils with free school meals. This means that some applicants will have grades lower than they might have achieved had they attended a different school, or had their families been wealthier. Clearly, much work is needed to address this disadvantage earlier on in children's lives, but this is outside the remit of this review. The Steering Group does not believe that the higher education admissions system should have responsibility for compensating for social disadvantage or for shortcomings in other parts of the education system. What it does believe is that universities and colleges have a responsibility to identify the talent and the potential of applicants and to treat all applicants fairly and transparently. Institutions should also recognise that talent and potential may not be fully demonstrated by examination results and that making efforts to recruit the best students for their courses regardless of background is a legitimate aim.

13 See Appendix 1 of Admissions to Higher Education Review (2003) for more details.
14 DfES (2003a), DfES (2003b).
15 This analysis drew on a number of sources, including Feinstein and Symons (1999), Gibbons (2002), Strand (1997) and Yang and Woodhouse (2001).

The type of school attended affects the predictive validity of examination grades

B6.   Prior attainment is the main determinant of undergraduate performance.[16] However, there has been much debate and research about whether the characteristics of an applicant's school or college affect performance at undergraduate level, once prior attainment has been taken into account. These characteristics include 'school type' (state or independent) and 'school performance' (as measured by the average performance of the school's students in A level examinations).[17] The Steering Group has received expert advice on the validity of the most recent studies of schooling effects. This is summarised in Appendix 4.

B7.   On the basis of this expert advice, the Steering Group accepts the evidence for a 'school type' effect. This means that, other things being equal, students from state schools and colleges tend to perform better at undergraduate level than students from independent schools and colleges. The Steering Group notes the heterogeneity of the independent school sector and the fact that the school type effect may not be consistent across this sector. For example, the school type effect may not apply to low-fee independent schools, but applies strongly to high-fee schools. The Steering Group notes that the state sector is also heterogeneous, and that individual pupils in some state schools may well have advantageous personal circumstances.[18] Estimation of the school type effect is more difficult at the highest end of the A level range (where students are most likely to be competing for places on the most selective courses with high entry requirements), though the effect is still valid.

B8.   The Steering Group accepts that there is a lack of consistent evidence for the 'school performance' effect; that is, there is a lack of consistent evidence that students from poorly performing schools do better in higher education than similar students from better performing schools, all other things being equal.[19]

Other contextual factors can be relevant – but how should they be measured?

B9.   Many admissions staff consider other contextual factors, including, for example, an applicant's responsibilities at home or at work and interrupted schooling. Responses to the Steering Group's first consultation suggest that there is widespread support for assessment that takes contextual factors into account. Eighty-six percent of respondents were in favour of considering the obstacles an applicant might have had to overcome. The effect of such long-term contextual factors on an applicant's pre-entry achievement is not measurable. Nevertheless, contextual factors – and in particular an applicant's response to them – can help to indicate skills and qualities linked to success in HE, such as time management, motivation and conscientiousness.

16 This was confirmed in HEFCE (2003c).
17 'School type effect' and 'school performance effect' are terms relating to both schools and FE/sixth form colleges.
18 For example, their parents might pay for additional coaching outside school.
19 See Appendix 4.

B10. A related issue is how to consider contextual information fairly, treating applicants as individuals. Emphasising the applicant's response to context, rather than the context itself, may present the most feasible solution. The task then focuses on assessing relevant skills and qualities and on collecting the appropriate evidence for this assessment.[20]

There is agreement that diversity is important, but lack of clarity on how to achieve it

B11. Contextual factors can also include considering an applicant's contribution to the diversity of the student community. It can be argued that diversity brings educational benefits, that students learn not only from professors, books and laboratories but also from one another. Exposing students to peers from different backgrounds can be seen as an important part of their education. Such views appear to be widely supported: 96% of respondents to the first consultation said it was important for universities and colleges to have students from a wide range of backgrounds.

B12. Although there is broad agreement that diversity is important, there is considerable uncertainty about how it should be considered in the admissions process. The Steering Group recognises that the HE system in England, where admission is normally to a particular course rather than an institution, presents some particular issues for English institutions that have diversity as part of their mission. Specifically, the small numbers of students involved makes it difficult, and sometimes impossible, to achieve a mix on each individual course that is representative of wider society.

It can be difficult for applicants to know how they will be assessed

B13. Transparency is important to enable all applicants to make the right choice. With the proposed introduction of variable tuition fees, it will become even more significant because students will be placed more obviously in the role of consumers.

Transparency of criteria and processes

B14. While universities and colleges generally publish their admissions policies as well as admissions criteria and processes for individual courses, the level of detail varies. One particularly important issue that is often unclear is the interpretation of merit and fairness (see paragraphs B3 and B4). Are equal grades treated as being equal, or is context considered? What else may be taken into consideration? When additional assessment is used, what is its aim? Do applicants know what is expected of them? Assessment is, of

20 These longer-term contextual factors should be treated separately from the factors considered under 'special consideration' regulations, under which a school or college can apply on behalf of a student to an examination awarding body. These regulations allow the awarding body to take into account the effect of circumstances such as recent personal illness, accident and bereavement when awarding grades; see Joint Council for General Qualifications (2003), p.53. There is anecdotal evidence that some HE admissions staff are not aware of these mechanisms and may be asked to consider these circumstances too, possibly leading to 'double counting'.

course, of limited value if applicants know in advance what to do or say. However, basic information, such as the broad aim of the assessment process and the skills admissions staff are seeking to assess, would give all applicants the opportunity to prepare appropriately, whatever additional coaching and advice they may receive. It may be impossible to level the playing field, but all applicants should be given a good idea of its shape.

Transparency produces informed consumers

B15. Transparency about admissions policies, criteria and processes has the additional benefit of aiding self-selection by applicants. If applicants can see that they are unlikely to meet the criteria for a course, they may be less likely to apply for it. This may result in fewer 'wasted choices' on application forms and could help lower drop-out rates. Conversely, greater transparency might prevent other applicants from wrongly discounting themselves from particular courses.

The information used in assessing applicants may not be equally reliable and consistent

B16. We have seen earlier in this report that examination results, though the best single indicator of success in HE, are not always wholly reliable indicators of potential or predictors of undergraduate success. But what about other information used in admissions? There are two issues to be addressed here: the lack of consistency in information provided by or gathered about applicants; and the reliability and validity of assessment methods.

Lack of consistency in information about applicants

B17. There is wide variation in the support provided to applicants in preparing their personal statements for application forms. Although guidance is provided by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), it is not always clear that information about contextual factors could be relevant. Levels of understanding of what is required vary significantly among staff who advise applicants or write references. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some staff and parents advise to the extent that the personal statement cannot be seen as the applicant's own work. At the other extreme, mature applicants not enrolled at a school or college may rely entirely on their own judgement.

How reliable and valid are assessment methods?

B18. A wide range of methods of assessment is in use in addition to Level 3 examinations. These range from referring to GCSE results to aptitude tests to interviews. Only some of the assessment methods used have been demonstrated to predict undergraduate success. While our generally high retention rates indicate that admissions staff perform their difficult task well,

the Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group is concerned that there is currently no expectation within institutions that the reliability and validity of methods being used should have been established. It is also concerned that there is no central and authoritative source of advice for admissions staff about the reliability and validity of different methods.

Some courses have high drop-out rates, which may be related to admissions processes

B19. The UK as a whole has one of the highest completion rates for HE among OECD countries,[21] but some courses have high drop-out rates. These courses are often at institutions that excel at widening access. The evidence suggests that the decision to drop out is a complex one and that people who drop out do so for a combination of reasons.[22] Institutions with courses with high drop-out rates may wish to look at the reasons for this, and, where these reasons relate to factors which can be assessed in admissions, review the reliability of their admissions practices. For example, assessment of applicants' ability to complete the course should take account of the support likely to be available to admitted students. While the Steering Group recognises the financial incentives for institutions to admit students, it believes it is unfair to admit applicants who are unlikely to complete the course.

For courses that are over-subscribed, it can be difficult for admissions staff to select from a growing pool of highly-qualified applicants

B20. A specific issue concerns highly competitive courses, which receive many applications from qualified applicants. Students with high marks, who could have once expected to be admitted to their first choice course, may now be rejected in favour of students whose qualifications appear more or less identical. The unpredictability of the process is one of the reasons that admissions have featured so heavily in the news. Under competitive conditions, perceptions about 'unfair' admissions processes and decisions persist. Lack of transparency in admissions criteria and the patchy provision of feedback to applicants exacerbate the problem.

Some applicants face a burden of additional assessment

B21. Some applicants may face up to six sets of separate requirements: for example, sitting tests or attending interviews. Preparing for and then undergoing this assessment can constitute a significant burden. Multiple additional assessment can make it difficult for applicants to continue to meet their study requirements as well as responsibilities at home or at work. Travel to interview can be expensive and some assessment (for example, auditions and tests) incur costs. These factors could be a deterrent to applicants with limited financial resources or from a background with no tradition of higher education.

21 See OECD (2003).
22 These typically include lack of compatibility between the student and the course or institution, lack of preparation for higher education, poor academic progress, lack of commitment to the course, financial hardship, and personal problems. See Davies and Elias (2003) and Universities UK (2001).

There is uneven awareness of and response to the increasing diversity of applicants, qualifications and pathways into higher education

B22. Learners with vocational and Access qualifications are spread unevenly across the HE sector.[23] The cause of this uneven spread is unclear. The curriculum mismatch between some vocational and Access qualifications and some HE courses appears to be one factor. This is a legitimate consideration. Applicants need to be equipped with the knowledge necessary to progress successfully. Lack of familiarity with such qualifications among admissions staff may be another factor. If this is the case, then it may point to a need for better training and continuing professional development of admissions staff. The Steering Group does not consider lack of familiarity with an applicant's qualifications to be a legitimate reason for not considering that applicant.[24]

There is currently no national credit accumulation and transfer system

B23. There is a real problem of credit transfer in the HE sector, with students facing major barriers when attempting to transfer between institutions (and sometimes even when transferring between courses within the same university or college). In the White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*,[25] the Government asked the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to look at credit systems, including compatibility with the European Credit Transfer System. Universities UK and the Standing Conference of Principals have set up a group, chaired by Professor Bob Burgess, Vice Chancellor at the University of Leicester, to scope this topic, among others. The Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group welcomes recognition of this problem and looks forward to seeing the recommendations of the Burgess Group.

Most offers depend on predicted grades, not confirmed examination results

B24. Admissions offers are mostly based on predicted examination grades that are confirmed later. Overall, half of predictions are accurate and half are not (although the accuracy of predictions varies by school/college and by subject).[26] Several reviews have recommended that the education sector adopt a post qualification applications system (PQA) in which admissions decisions are made after examination grades are known.[27] Such a system is

---

23 While academic Level 3 qualifications have been the traditional entry requirement for HE courses, at least some courses in most universities and colleges also accept vocational Level 3 qualifications, Access qualifications and Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL). In 2001/02, 16% of young entrants and 71% of mature entrants were admitted on the basis of such qualifications, but they were concentrated in some courses (such as nursing) or in some universities and colleges (typically in post-1992 institutions and colleges of higher education).
24 In the case of Access courses, it can be difficult for admissions staff to achieve familiarity. Variations in the requirements for the award of the Access certificate and in methods of recording student achievement are a cause for concern among admissions staff. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has recently undertaken a review of Access to HE provision, and will publish a report in early summer 2004. A database of QAA-recognised Access courses is available on the UCAS website at: www.ucas.com/access/index.html
25 See DfES (2003a).
26 See Dhillon (2004). This research looked at predicted grades submitted to the AQA examination board, not at UCAS predicted grades submitted to admissions tutors.
27 The CVCP-led Review of National Applications/Admissions Systems (1994-96) and (1998-99) proposed a model for PQA which was subsequently rejected in consultation. (In 1996 the findings of the CVCP enquiry were passed to the Dearing committee - see Dearing (1997).) See also DfES (2002); Commission on the Organisation of the School Year (2000); and House of Commons (2001).

likely to be fairer and more efficient. In addition, it might help students who lack self-confidence, because, for example, they are unfamiliar with higher education or because of their current educational or personal circumstances. There is anecdotal evidence that such students currently might choose not to apply at all, or may restrict their choice of course, because they do not think their marks will be good enough. In a post qualifications system, they would already know their marks before applying. However, PQA might reduce the amount of time available for assessing applicants.

The legislation applicable to admissions is complex and there is uneven understanding of what it means for admissions policies and processes

B25. The Human Rights Act, Race Relations Act, Sex Discrimination Act, Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regs 2003, Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regs 2003 and Disability Discrimination Act all have an impact on admissions policies and processes. Since this legislation is complex, and much of it untested in the courts, it can be difficult for universities and colleges and individual admissions staff to be certain their policies and processes are lawful. While there are staff development programmes in universities and colleges covering the legal framework for admissions, there is still an uneven understanding of what can be considered and why. For example, not all admissions staff are clear that improving access to HE for disadvantaged or under-represented groups is a legitimate aim for institutions and that the European Court of Human Rights[28] has held that the aim of redressing a pre-existing situation of inequality is a legitimate objective of differential treatment. This is particularly important in relation to special admissions arrangements such as 'compacts'[29] or other schemes aiming to address existing inequalities. Appendix 5 outlines some of the legal issues which institutions providing higher education need to consider when developing their admissions policies and procedures.

28 See Belgian Linguistics Case (1968) and Lindsay v UK (1986).
29 See footnote 45 for further details.

Section C
A Fair Admissions System

Introduction

C1.   The Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group believes in the autonomy of institutions over admissions policies and decisions. Fairness does not mean that governments should choose students. Preserving academic freedom requires that academic institutions retain three basic rights in relation to teaching: the right to choose who will teach, what will be taught and to whom. This means that the specific applicants that a university or college accepts should be a matter for each institution and no one else. Moreover, it should be clearly recognised that it is perfectly legitimate for admissions staff to seek out the most academically excellent students. Admissions must, however, be fair to applicants.

What is a fair admissions system?

C2.   After considering the issues, evidence and arguments summarised in the earlier parts of this report, the Steering Group has reached the opinion that a fair admissions system is one that provides equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of background, to gain admission to a course suited to their ability and aspirations.

C3.   The Steering Group believes that admissions should not be biased in favour of applicants from certain backgrounds or schools. The Steering Group does however want to ensure that the factors considered in the assessment process are accurate and relevant and allow all applicants equal opportunity to demonstrate achievements and potential. This is facilitated by 'holistic assessment'.

Holistic assessment

C4.   In practice, the admissions process is often straightforward. If applicants clearly demonstrate that they meet the necessary course entry requirements, and the course is not over-subscribed, they receive an offer. However, when it is unclear whether the applicants meet the necessary course entry requirements, when there are more qualified candidates than can be accommodated, or when applicants' suitability for some professions or courses is being assessed, admissions officers must consider additional types of information. These might include, but are not limited to, personal statements, the school reference and the results of additional assessment, including interviews. The Steering Group believes that it is fair and

appropriate to consider the contextual factors as well, given the variation in learners' opportunities and circumstances. Assessment that considers a broad range of additional information, including relevant skills and contextual factors as well as academic achievement, can be termed 'holistic assessment'. The Steering Group believes that the use of holistic assessment, when further information about a candidate is needed, reflects the aims and nature of the English HE system. (In some countries, by contrast, admissions staff rely solely on examination results and differentiate between candidates as necessary by looking at these results in finer detail.) Holistic assessment is not, however, an aim in itself, and when additional assessment is unnecessary it should be avoided.[30] For holistic assessment to be fair, admissions staff considering relevant skills or contextual factors should treat each applicant as an individual and should use an evidence-based approach. Admissions staff should not make generalised assumptions solely on the basis of the applicant's social background or school/college.

A diverse student body

C5.   The Steering Group also believes that it is justifiable for an institution to consider an applicant's contribution to the learning environment. This is because the presence of a range of experiences and perspectives in the laboratory or in the seminar room enriches the learning environment for all students. It believes that a diverse student community is likely to enhance all students' skills of critical reasoning, teamwork and communication, and to produce graduates better able to contribute to a diverse society.[31] The Steering Group is aware of a recent decision by the US Supreme Court upholding a university's "compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body".[32] A range of evidence was presented in that case to illustrate these benefits.

C6.   Furthermore, the Steering Group believes that those institutions and courses which confer particular benefits on their graduates have an obligation to make reasonable efforts to recruit a diverse student community. On this point, the Steering Group endorses the view taken in the Fourth Report from the House of Commons, Education and Employment Committee (2001). This report sees it as desirable "to achieve a more representative social mix in admissions to high-status research-intensive universities, many of whose graduates go on to occupy positions of power and influence in business, industry, the professions and in politics".[33]

30 The practical implications of holistic assessment are discussed in D14 and D15 and in E6 and E7.
31 Recognition of the value of a diverse learning environment and a diverse teaching body and police force is reflected in the setting of targets for the recruitment of teachers and police officers from ethnic minority backgrounds. See http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crimpol/police/equality/dismantlingbarriers.htm and http://www.tta.gov.uk/php/read.php?articleid=1006&sectionid=46
32 United States Supreme Court (2003). This comment was in relation to admissions practices at the University of Michigan Law School.
33 See House of Commons, Education and Employment Committee (2001), paragraph 74.

Section D
Principles Underpinning Fair Admissions

Introduction

D1. Section B of this report identified problems with the current admissions system. Section C set out the Steering Group's definition of fair admissions and its views on matters that it believes institutions striving for fairness should consider. The next two sections of the report are concerned with how the problems the Steering Group has identified may be addressed. Section D recommends a set of high-level principles which the Group believes underpin fair admissions, and presents guidelines for universities and colleges in applying these principles. Section E concerns wider recommendations for universities and colleges and other bodies. For ease of reference, Appendix 7 provides a table setting out the links between the problems, the principles and the recommendations.

Principles underpinning fair admissions

D2. The Steering Group recommends that universities and colleges adopt admissions principles that will support:

- Transparency;
- Reliability and validity;
- Selection for merit, potential and diversity;
- The minimising of barriers;
- Professionalism.

D3. The proposed principles and accompanying guidelines for their implementation by universities and colleges are discussed in more detail below. Development of both the principles and the guidelines has been informed by the Human Rights Act, Race Relations Act, Sex Discrimination Act, Disability Discrimination Act and other relevant legislation. Universities and colleges may also wish to refer to Appendix 5 for further clarification of legal considerations. The diversity of the HE sector means that the mission and aims of institutions will vary, and that some courses are likely to have more flexible entry requirements than others. For these reasons, the implications of the following guidelines for admissions practice will vary between and within institutions.

Transparency

Principle 1: A fair admissions system should be transparent

Guidelines: information

D4.　Many universities and colleges already provide a lot of useful information for applicants. This type of good practice should be supported and extended to ensure that information is consistent across the sector and easily accessible. The Steering Group encourages universities and colleges to provide information consistently and efficiently through appropriate mechanisms. Institutional prospectuses should include:

i.　admissions policy and detailed criteria for admission to courses, with an explanation of admissions processes. This should indicate:

- the likely weight given to prior academic achievement and potential demonstrated by other means;

- how applicants may demonstrate potential and relevant capability;

- whether such potential and relevant capability will be considered on top of a set level of examination results or is a means of earning credit alongside a flexible level of examination results (see D14);

ii.　entry qualifications of applicants accepted on each course in the previous year (including median and range);

iii.　an annual analysis of admissions data for the institution as a whole (indicating offer rates for applicants from particular ethnic and social groups, and by school type and sex);[34]

iv.　procedures for complaints and appeals.

The information relating to specific courses should also be included in UCAS or equivalent entry profiles. The Steering Group notes that developing entry profiles for all courses is a longer-term project and encourages universities and colleges to contribute as appropriate.

D5.　In addition to information published directly by institutions, data on the quality and standards of HE programmes will be available to potential applicants, with effect from 2004/05 onwards, through a new national 'Teaching Quality Information' (TQI) website hosted by Higher Education and Research Opportunities in the UK (HERO).[35] This will include:

- drop-out rates (by subject at each institution);[36]

- employment rates (by subject at each institution).[37]

34 The practical implications of this analysis will need to be explored more fully (see the Steering Group's initial impact assessment on the Review website at www.admissions-review.org.uk). It should be noted that offer rates calculated without reference to entry qualifications and various other factors are of limited significance. Including such factors would increase the task to an impractical level, if it were to be conducted annually.

35 The information available will include detailed quantitative Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data on students' entry qualifications, progression, completion of awards, and employment, together with information on learning and teaching strategies, summaries of findings of external examiners, and other qualitative information provided by institutions. The HERO website can be accessed at www.hero.ac.uk

36 In a market economy, applicants should be equipped to make informed choices. It is acknowledged that drop-out rates and employment rates can be affected by a range of factors, including the health of individual sectors of the economy, and universities and colleges may wish to provide explanatory notes where necessary.

37 The Lambert Review has also recommended that data on graduate salaries be published. See Lambert Review (2003).

D6.   While recognising that the TQI website will become an increasingly important source for applicants, the Group suggests that relevant information should also be made available to applicants in other easily accessible and targeted ways, including prospectuses, application information packs, and signposting from the Aimhigher website (www.aimhigher.ac.uk).

Guidelines: feedback

D7.   The Steering Group believes that it is desirable for universities and colleges to provide feedback on request to unsuccessful applicants. It recognises that there will be practical constraints on the amount of feedback that can be given (some courses attract 30 applicants for every place). The Steering Group recommends that each institution decide for itself the amount of feedback it can offer applicants. As an interim measure, the Steering Group encourages universities and colleges to support good practice by documenting reasons for admissions decisions and by providing appropriate training in this for admissions staff. Clear information about admissions criteria and processes may itself help reduce the number of requests for feedback.

Reliability and validity

Principle 2: A fair admissions system should strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid

Guidelines: admissions policies and procedures

D8.   Admissions policies and procedures should cover, among other important information, details of all the assessment methods used by the institution. These may include:
- Interviews;
- Additional testing;
- Use of tests other than Level 3 qualifications.

D9.   All assessment methods should be informed and guided by current research, good practice, relevant national reports and guidelines of professional bodies.[38] Where possible, universities and colleges should use tests or formats that have already been shown to predict undergraduate success. If it is not possible or appropriate to use previously validated methods, institutions should demonstrate that their methods of selection are relevant, reliable and valid, or likely to be so.[39] The Steering Group would welcome a central specialist source of advice for institutions on admissions assessment (see E13). Admissions policies and procedures should continue to allow the use of discretion and informed academic judgements.

38 The latter includes for example the Bristol Royal Infirmary Inquiry (2001) (also known as the Kennedy Report), which includes recommendations for admissions processes for medical and other health-related courses.
39 In this context, the Steering Group defines 'reliable' as meaning that two people applying the same method would reach the same conclusion about the same person, and 'valid' as meaning that the method predicts what it is supposed to predict.

Guidelines: application forms

D10. Universities and colleges, in partnership with schools, UCAS and other bodies as appropriate, should review application forms and any other forms used in assessment with the aim of eliciting relevant information consistently across applicants and allowing them equal opportunity to demonstrate their suitability for the course. This may require, for example, redesign of the UCAS form and its equivalents, including university and college application forms for part-time students (see paragraph E7).

Guidelines: links between policies and procedures and performance

D11. Universities and colleges should monitor and evaluate the link between their admissions policies and procedures and undergraduate performance and retention, and review their admissions policies or support services as appropriate to address issues identified. Issues can include poor performance and retention, either across all students on a course or among those with particular characteristics.

Selecting for merit, potential and diversity

Principle 3: A fair admissions system should enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and their potential

Guidelines: key tenets

D12. Two important beliefs held by the Steering Group underlie the recommendation of this principle:
- Ability to complete the course is an essential criterion for admission to HE;
- Applicants should be assessed as individuals: it is not appropriate to treat one applicant automatically more or less favourably by virtue of his or her background or school/college.

Guidelines: A level and equivalent results

D13. A level results remain the best single indicator of retention and success at undergraduate level. The continuing use of prior attainment data will of course reflect changes in A level and equivalent qualifications and any new 14 – 19 qualifications, including any which may be implemented as a result of the Tomlinson review.[40]

40 See DfES (2004).

Guidelines: considering other factors

D14. In assessing applicants' merit and potential, universities and colleges may usefully consider a broad range of additional information, including relevant skills and contextual factors in addition to examination results.[41] These include:

i. The educational context of an applicant's formal achievement. Universities and colleges should refer to recent studies on schooling effects (see B6 – B8 and Appendix 4). These indicate that the type of school attended can affect the ability of examination results to predict performance in HE. The studies suggest that equal grades do not necessarily represent equal potential; the ability of two applicants with the same grades might differ. Conversely, two applicants with different entry grades might perform equally well in HE. The studies do not, however, provide evidence for adopting a 'broad brush' approach which automatically requires higher or lower grades from particular applicants. Universities and colleges should be mindful of the heterogeneity of both the independent and the state/maintained sectors and the influence of factors other than schooling;

ii. Indicators of individual potential and relevant capability, such as

- the results of additional testing or assessment, including interviews;

- an applicant's non-academic experiences and relevant skills, such as practical skills or the *Fair Enough?* criteria.[42] These skills can be demonstrated in a range of contexts. For example, applicants can demonstrate that they are self-organised by successfully fulfilling responsibilities at home or at work while meeting study requirements. The ability to study well independently could be demonstrated by a high-achieving applicant from a school or college with high teacher turnover, or without home support;[43]

iii. The educational benefits of diversity. Admissions staff are not legally permitted to consider an applicant's race, sex, sexual orientation or religion in determining whether or not an application is to be accepted.[44] However, they may consider an individual applicant's experiences, skills and perspectives and how these could contribute to the learning environment of the course or to the wider student community. When doing this, admissions staff

---

41 This will generally be for reasons outlined in A16 above.
42 The Universities UK *Fair Enough?* project identified a number of objective criteria linked to success on courses. Generic criteria include being self-organised, motivated to learn and interested in the subject area, and working well independently. See Universities UK (2003), p.8.
43 Demonstrating capabilities and potential through skills developed in response to challenging circumstances indicates a positive accomplishment. This is different from and separate to the existing process of applying to an examination awarding body for special consideration, as discussed earlier (see footnote 20).
44 Compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) requires a different approach. Admissions staff are obliged to consider an applicant's disability, and to make reasonable adjustments, where their admissions arrangements place a disabled applicant at a substantial disadvantage: see section 28T DDA. In addition, the DDA does permit universities and colleges to discriminate against disabled applicants where the discrimination is justified (for example, in order to maintain academic standards): see DDA section 28S.

- should consider a broad range of potential contributions to the diversity of the student community. These could include, for example, paid or unpaid work experience, gap year experiences, home responsibilities, experience of diverse communities or cultures, and musical or sporting skills;
- should not automatically make offers to or require higher or lower grades from applicants from particular groups, backgrounds or schools, although in some cases universities and colleges may have special admissions arrangements (see below);
- should not seek to establish quotas for applicants from particular groups, backgrounds or schools.[45]

Guidelines: opportunity to present information

D15. At any stage in the admissions process, all applicants should be given an equal opportunity to provide relevant information or demonstrate relevant skills. Special measures may be adopted for certain applicants if these measures are required to allow them to be considered on an equal footing with other applicants: for example, interviews to clarify unfamiliar qualifications. Institutions considering additional information or skills may wish to consider the following points:

i. In assessing applications, admissions staff may be constrained by practical issues. Admissions staff dealing with large numbers of applications may not have time to assess each applicant holistically. The process of 'sifting' applicants, applying more complex methods of assessment with each successive sift, is used widely and is an appropriate response to this problem. The Steering Group believes that it is desirable for the first sift to consider contextual factors in some way, but acknowledges that this would require the standardised provision of agreed information on application forms (see also E6 and E7);

ii. Special measures such as compact and related schemes[46] that confer an advantage in the admissions process may be adopted if they can be objectively justified and it can be demonstrated that the scheme is proportionate to its aim. Raising aspirations and improving access to HE for those from disadvantaged or under-represented groups is generally a legitimate aim. Compact schemes could be vulnerable to legal challenge if they target only a limited number of schools or colleges, or give only some disadvantaged potential applicants the opportunity to participate (see Appendix 5). The Steering Group encourages universities and colleges to

45 Quotas usually involve setting a number or proportion of places for applicants from particular groups, backgrounds or schools and seeking to recruit that number. Such applicants are often considered separately from other applicants. It is not legal in the UK to set quotas in relation to race, sex, disability, sexual orientation or religion. Quotas in relation to other criteria are not necessarily unlawful, but issues of indirect discrimination may arise and such quotas would need to be shown to be objectively justified. Quotas are not the same as targets, which universities and colleges may set in order to inform the direction and scale of policy and planning, and will not necessarily result in a particular number of admissions from any particular group, background or school.
46 Compacts are arrangements between providers of higher education and secondary or further education. Their primary aim is to raise aspirations and improve knowledge of HE. They often require a student to identify and progress towards key steps (such as attendance and homework targets) that will help prepare him or her for HE study. They allow for students in partner schools and colleges to receive an advantage in the admissions process, provided they meet their targets.

collaborate in schemes such as compacts to provide parity of opportunity across England (see E8). Such schemes should be monitored to ensure that they do not inadvertently discriminate on the basis of ethnic background, religion, disability or sex.

Guidelines: irrelevant factors

D16. Admissions criteria should not include factors irrelevant to the assessment of merit. For example, this means that institutions should not give preference to the relatives of graduates or benefactors.[47]

Guidelines: discretion

D17. Admissions staff have the discretion to vary the weight they give to examination results and other indicators of achievement and potential. This means that admissions staff have the discretion to vary the offer that they make to applicants, provided this is done consistently with the principles of fair admissions.

Minimising barriers

Principle 4: A fair admissions system should seek to minimise barriers for applicants

Guidelines: potential barriers

D18. Admissions processes should seek to minimise any barriers that are irrelevant to admissions requirements. This relates to barriers potentially arising from:
- Means of assessment;
- The varying resources and support available to applicants;
- Disability;
- The type of an applicant's qualifications.

D19. Each institution should consider these issues in relation to its own admissions processes, bearing in mind that each applicant needs to address the requirements of up to six course choices.

D20. Admissions staff are generally aware of the varying support and resources available to applicants. There is already much good practice in ensuring that financial difficulties do not prevent participation in additional tests or travel to interview, and that testing and assessment processes are designed carefully and explained as clearly as possible to minimise the effect of disabilities or coaching. There is general recognition that administrative processes and interview and assessment arrangements should use applicants' time efficiently and consider their personal convenience, including their responsibilities at home or at work. In all these areas, universities and colleges should support and extend good practice.

47 Those institutions with admissions policies that include special consideration of applicants from a particular geographical area (for example, 'local applicants') are advised to seek specific legal advice.

D21. There is similarly much good practice, particularly in post-1992 universities and in colleges offering higher education, in providing opportunities for progression from vocational learning pathways. Learners would benefit from clearer identification of progression opportunities across the HE sector. Universities and colleges should support admissions staff in making informed judgments about the suitability of individual applicants through regular training and updating on the full range of qualifications and of pathways into higher education.

Professionalism

Principle 5: A fair admissions system should be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes

Guidelines: institutional structures and procedures

D22. Admitting students to higher education is a serious undertaking. The outcomes of admissions decisions are of interest to many stakeholders: parents, employers, schools and colleges, government and, of course, applicants. An institution's structures and processes should be designed to facilitate an efficient, high-quality admissions system and a professional service to applicants. Institutional structures and processes should feature the following:

i. Clear lines of responsibility for admissions policy and processes across the institution to ensure
- the consistent implementation of institution-wide policy and processes
- that course-specific criteria and assessment methods are consistent with institutional guidelines;

ii. Allocation of resources appropriate to the task. This may involve
- providing appropriate administrative assistance
- adjusting the teaching workload of academic admissions staff to give them sufficient time for their admissions duties
- raising the status of admissions as a task, perhaps by considering institutional recognition and reward of good practice by admissions staff;

iii. Clear guidelines for the appointment, training and induction of all staff involved in admissions. Training for those assessing applications is likely to include
- information about external issues, such as the full range of UK 14 – 19 qualifications,[48] progression routes, equal opportunities, and relevant legislation. The Steering Group welcomes the UCAS-co-ordinated initiative to provide a national accredited programme of continuing professional development for admissions staff

48 Institutions should have processes to obtain accurate information about the qualifications of EU and EEA applicants.

- information about the institution's policies and processes and, where applicable, training in assessment methods used within the institution or for a particular course.

D23. It is desirable for such training to be of a consistently high quality across the sector, and the Steering Group recommends that UCAS lead discussion on some form of quality assurance for institutions' own training in this area.

D24. The Steering Group notes that there have already been significant efforts across the sector to develop appropriate structures and processes, and that there is much good practice on which to build. All institutions will wish to ensure the consistent implementation of institution-wide policy and processes alongside appropriate academic involvement in admissions decisions and to have willing, able and well-trained staff implementing their admissions policy. The Steering Group hopes that the publication of its final report will provide an opportunity for universities and colleges to review their structures and processes in order to achieve these objectives.

D25. In addition to training and continuing professional development for staff in institutions providing HE, teachers and others providing guidance for applicants should receive appropriate training and support. Where other professional staff (for example, National Health Service staff or teachers) are involved in the admissions process, for example in interviews, they should also receive appropriate training, and support and recognition within their own organisations for this role.

Section E:
Recommendations Requiring Co-ordination across the Education System

Introduction

E1.   The previous section made recommendations on high-level principles underlying fair admissions which the Steering Group would like to see universities and colleges adopt. This section makes some wider recommendations, many of which will involve a range of partners in addition to universities and colleges. These recommendations have been guided by the need to produce a high-quality admissions process and facilitate holistic assessment while minimising any increase in the overall cost of the admissions process to the HE sector. The Steering Group intends to make firm proposals in its final report on how these recommendations might best be delivered, and would welcome views during the current consultation on the suggestions outlined below.

General improvements to the admissions system

E2.   The Steering Group believes that general improvements to the admissions system are likely to result from:

- More consistent implementation of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) code of practice relating to recruitment and admissions;[49]

- At least some degree of centralisation of the admissions process within institutions, to encourage greater consistency and efficiencies of scale;

- Standard use of electronic application forms, to facilitate the efficient transfer of information, the inclusion of relevant material, and monitoring.

E3.   The Quality Assurance Agency's Code of Practice has been a key source for the Steering Group's work. The Group welcomes the commitment by the QAA to review the section of their Code of Practice relating to recruitment and admissions in the light of its work.

E4.   The Steering Group expects that universities and colleges will wish to review their admissions systems in the light of its recommendations. It encourages them to include in such reviews consideration not only of policies and procedures, but also of structures and responsibilities, as described in paragraphs D22 – D25. This should include consideration of whether a

49 See Quality Assurance Agency (2001), section 10: recruitment and admissions.

degree of centralisation of admissions processes might facilitate adoption of the 'Schwartz principles'. The Group believes there is much good practice within the HE sector in the management and audit of admissions systems which can be shared. An outline for a 'model' institutional admissions policy is set out in Appendix 6.

E5. The Steering Group welcomes the progress being made by UCAS towards greater use of electronic applications. The Steering Group encourages UCAS and other admissions services, and universities and colleges where applications are made directly, to consider the extent to which they might improve on existing practice in the use of electronic application forms. Appropriate arrangements will be needed to ensure the electronic application route is accessible to all potential applicants.

Improving information provision through redesign of application forms and the personal statement

E6. The Steering Group has already noted that there is limited information available to help admissions staff to assess broader factors such as educational context, indicators of individual potential or capability or students' potential to contribute to the university or college (see B10, B17 and D15). In particular, there are variations in the extent to which personal statements and references include information about, for example, disruptions to schooling, socio-economic context, home responsibilities or other challenges applicants might have had to overcome. Eliciting such information consistently is likely to require changes to application forms: for example, the inclusion of appropriate prompts in the personal statement and reference spaces. The Steering Group recommends that UCAS and other admissions services review the design of application forms in partnership with higher education admissions staff, schools and colleges. This review should specifically consider the provision of 'contextual indicators', or summarised information about contextual factors, on application forms. The purpose of these indicators is to inform the 'sifting' of applicants, as proposed in D15(i). The Steering Group notes that UCAS has already done much relevant work as part of its Electronic Data Transfer Study.[50]

E7. Institutions providing part-time and distance learning courses will also need to review their own application forms with the same aims in mind. It is recommended that these institutions should also take collaborative action, in partnership with admissions services as appropriate, to develop common application forms for applicants for part-time study (such applicants must currently complete a different application form for each institution to which they apply). This may require co-ordination by Universities UK (UUK) and the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP), working with UCAS.

50 Further details on the Electronic Data Transfer Study are available from UCAS upon request.

Equality of opportunity within the legal framework

E8. The Steering Group suggests that universities and colleges review their admissions policies and, together with relevant partners, any special admissions arrangements, with the aim of ensuring equality of opportunity within the legal framework. Guidance on legal points is included in Appendix 5, although it the responsibility of each individual institution to ensure that its own admissions arrangements are lawful.

E9. As well as each university or college reviewing its own admissions policy and procedures, there is a need for the HE sector as a whole to review the geographical coverage of special admissions arrangements (for example, compact schemes) to ensure that there is equality of opportunity to participate in schemes giving preferential treatment or to be considered under special measures. Such a review should be sector-led, and the Steering Group suggests that UUK and SCOP may wish to collaborate to co-ordinate this.

Additional assessment

E10. While recognising the potential value of additional assessment,[51] the Steering Group is also aware of the potential burden for an applicant of six sets of admissions requirements and means of assessment. The Steering Group believes that additional assessment should be kept to a minimum, and offers the following specific recommendations:

i. In the longer term, the Steering Group welcomes the commitment by the Tomlinson Review of the 14 – 19 curriculum and qualifications to developing a coherent, single qualification which could enable finer differentiation between applicants to higher education. (The Steering Group does not, however, wish to see a spurious level of precision in relation to this finer differentiation.) It would particularly welcome a broader qualification that allowed the testing of aptitude, potential and relevant skills in addition to academic achievement. Such developments may offer long-term solutions and eliminate the need for much of the additional testing carried out separately by universities and colleges;[52]

ii. In the medium term, the Steering Group welcomes and encourages the trend towards common tests, for example the Biomedical Admissions Test (BMAT) and the National Admission Test for Law (LNAT), being used or introduced across several universities and colleges.[53] Such collaboration has the potential to minimise the burden of additional testing. The Steering Group recommends that Universities UK and the Standing Conference of

51 Additional tests may be used to (i) assess the potential of applicants whose examination grades do not reflect their ability; (ii) differentiate between applicants with the same A level or equivalent grades; or (iii) assess aptitude for a specific course or profession.
52 The Steering Group notes that the validity of significantly different qualifications in predicting undergraduate performance could not be confirmed until the first cohort of students with those qualifications graduated. This means that results may not be available for another decade.
53 The BMAT is used by Oxford, Cambridge and University College London and all the Veterinary Schools for entry to medical and veterinary or physiological sciences courses. Scottish medical schools are piloting a psychometric test. The LNAT is to be used at eight English universities.

Principals work with member institutions to explore the scope for greater co-ordination of common tests. The Group also believes that reliable data on the predictive validity of a single common test for English universities and colleges would help to inform future developments. It therefore welcomes proposals for an operational pilot of US-style SATs as a potential common test in the UK, and would welcome the evaluation of other tests with this objective in mind. SATs are widely used in the United States and the results of preliminary trials in the UK are promising,[54] but the Group recognises that there may also be other possibilities;

iii. In the short term the Steering Group suggests that, wherever possible, universities and colleges should make more use of existing information to distinguish between similarly qualified applicants rather than developing new admissions tests;[55]

iv. The Steering Group asks admissions staff and relevant bodies[56] to consider the desirability and feasibility of common interviews for courses with clearly defined professional requirements, for example teaching or medicine. The Steering Group notes that some universities and colleges place particular emphasis on intensive personal engagement with applicants. This may be through a desire to support applicants, particularly those from local disadvantaged backgrounds, throughout the admissions process. It may alternatively reflect a strong sense of community within the institution: staff wish to engage personally with those whom they may subsequently teach. Interviews can also be important for applicants in their choice of institutions. The benefits of institutional interviews should be considered in any discussions about common interviews;

v. The Steering Group believes there may be scope for a more applicant-centred approach to the many forms related to admissions (for example, for financial aid, health checks, and Criminal Records Bureau checks). It suggests that UUK and SCOP take the lead in considering, with relevant partners (see footnote 56), improvements that could be made.

Post qualification applications

E11. If it could be done while maintaining holistic assessment, the Steering Group believes that a system of post qualification applications, or PQA, would both increase the fairness of the admissions process and improve efficiency. Logically, it must be fairer for applicants to make their applications, and for institutions to assess those applications, on the basis of actual rather than predicted grades. The majority of respondents (54%) to the first consultation by the Steering Group were in favour of a move to PQA and only a small

54 See McDonald *et al* (2001).
55 The Steering Group notes that various additional tests are used widely in schools and colleges. Tests such as Yellis and ALIS are not designed for use in the admissions process but it is possible that they may be of some use.
56 Including the Council for the Heads of Medical Schools, the Department of Health, the General Council for Social Care, other accrediting bodies, the Department for Education and Skills, the Standing Conference of Principals, the Teacher Training Agency, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, and Universities UK.

minority (13%) was against. The Steering Group asks the Government to take forward work with the HE sector, schools, examining bodies and other stakeholders to identify ways to resolve the practical problems identified in earlier studies, and to set a timescale for completing this work. The Steering Group also asks the Tomlinson Group to consider, in the next stages of its review, the extent to which changes to the volume and nature of assessment during the 14 – 19 phase might enable earlier publication of results in the longer term, and hence facilitate PQA.

Fair admissions and EU and EEA applicants

E12. In principle, applicants from the European Union (EU) and European Economic Area (EEA) must be afforded the same treatment in admissions as UK domiciled applicants. The Government's commitment to the Bologna Process, by which a Single European Higher Education Area is to be established by 2010, adds further impetus to the extension of fair admissions principles to EU and EEA applicants. In practice, however, this will involve complex developments across member states, including the UK. Practical considerations for universities and colleges include arrangements for interviews and other assessment, the design of assessment processes and the availability of common contextual indicators. Implications for UCAS include the setting of closing dates and management of response dates, the provision of results services and the construction of the UCAS tariff. The Steering Group recognises that the extension of fair admissions across EU and EEA nationals and UK nationals not resident in the UK is a long-term process. It recommends in the interim that within current constraints universities and colleges make reasonable efforts to treat such applicants in ways that are broadly as equivalent as possible to the way in which they treat UK resident applicants.

A central source of expertise

E13. The Steering Group would welcome the creation of a central source of expertise and advice on admissions issues. This could offer institutions broad advice on the legal framework, review and disseminate the latest research and provide specialist advice on assessment methods, including additional testing. The Steering Group believes that any such centre should be owned and supported by the higher education sector, preferably within an existing body. A possible model is one based on admissions practitioners and researchers sharing evidence and best practice across the sector, under a body led by UUK and SCOP. The Steering Group would welcome comments on this proposal, and any suggestions for other possible models for such a central source of expertise.

Section F:
Options for Assessing Merit

Introduction

F1. The terms of reference for the Steering Group include reporting on the options which English institutions providing HE should consider adopting in assessing the merit of applicants and their achievement and their potential for different types of courses.

F2. After extensive research and consultation, the Steering Group has reached three key conclusions in relation to options:

- A fair and transparent admissions process is determined not only by the choice of assessment option but also by how it is implemented: 'how you do it matters at least as much as what you do';[57]

- Most assessment options are likely to be better indicators of achievement and potential if their implementation acknowledges contextual factors (such as educational context and personal circumstances);

- Acknowledging contextual factors and considering other additional information should also help to ensure that all applicants have equal opportunity to demonstrate relevant achievements and potential.

F3. The importance of careful implementation is reflected in the detailed guidelines in Section D of this report. By contrast, the list of options below is relatively brief. The options are grouped to clarify the broad purpose of different assessment options and the relationship between them. The Steering Group asks universities and colleges to interpret and implement these options in accordance with the principles and guidelines in Section D.

List of options

(i). Formal academic achievement or equivalent

F4. This can be demonstrated through:

- Continued use of A level and equivalent grades;[58]

- Portfolios, as used for example in some creative and performing arts courses (where the relevant achievement may be in the form of specific practical or vocational skills) and in Accreditation of Prior Experiential

---

57 Responses to the Steering Group's first consultation paper focussed more on principles, processes and implementation than on assessment options. These responses informed but did not determine the list of options in this section. The Steering Group recognises that some options, while not attracting overall popular support, can contribute usefully to the assessment process in some specialist institutions or for some courses. The list of options put forward by the Steering Group was also informed by the results of the UCAS Electronic Data Transfer study – further information is available from UCAS upon request.

58 A level grades remain the best single indicator of retention and success at undergraduate level. Where a course is not oversubscribed, retention rates are high and the applicants are clearly qualified through having the actual or projected grades required, it is acceptable for no further assessment to be undertaken.

Learning (APEL);

- Reference to an applicant's longer-term educational achievement, such as GCSE grades;
- Credit earned through additional preparatory programmes.

The interpretation and weighting of formal achievement can be informed usefully by:

- Reference to educational context;
- Reference to personal context and circumstances (see also (ii) below).

A possible method of ranking or sorting formal achievement is:

- Reference to module results.

(ii). Existing evidence of skills and criteria linked to success on HE courses

F5. This assessment option focuses on skills and criteria demonstrated prior to the application. Evidence can be gathered from a broad range of contexts, for example, academic and extra-curricular, or through responsibilities at home, in the community or at work. The *Fair Enough?* criteria (including motivation, independent working and self-organisation) may provide a framework for description. Evidence can be gathered and assessed through:

- The redesign of application forms to include appropriate prompts;
- Fulfilling the requirements of compact arrangements (such as homework and attendance targets);
- Achievement at additional and non-compulsory academic support programmes (such as Saturday schools and summer schools).

(iii). Additional assessment

F6. Additional assessment is any assessment commissioned or carried out as a result of an application to an HE course. It may include:

- Structured interviews;
- Auditions;
- Demonstrations of practical or vocational skills;
- Written work;
- Generic or subject-specific tests of aptitude;
- Generic or subject-specific tests of critical reasoning.

Key points to address in carrying out additional assessment in accordance with the principles and guidelines described in Section D of this report include:

- Establishing that the method of assessment or type of test is reliable and valid;

- Providing appropriate training to staff involved;
- Giving applicants clear guidelines as to the purpose of the assessment, what is expected of them and how they can prepare.

F7. The above options for assessing merit have been included on the basis that each has the potential to be implemented in accordance with the Steering Group's recommended principles and guidelines. Since the English HE sector is diverse, individual institutions will continue to have different views of which options are appropriate and necessary. Since admissions staff will wish to ensure that criteria and processes are relevant to a course, options may also vary within institutions. The Steering Group welcomes comments on the list of options, including views on whether any additional options should be included its final report.

Section G:

Reviewing Progress Towards Fair Admissions

Introduction

G1. The Government has made it clear that it wishes universities and colleges to retain autonomy over their own admissions policies and the right to make their own judgements in assessing individual applicants. This is essential to maintaining academic freedom and should be welcomed. However, the Steering Group believes that a mechanism is needed to review progress in implementing its recommendations on fair admissions.

Options

G2. There are various options; common to all is a need to avoid an administrative burden and to place ownership of admissions policies and criteria firmly with universities and colleges. The Steering Group would welcome views on how best to review progress and encourage universities and colleges to adopt the principles recommended in its report. The options might include:

i. Institutions that wish to charge a higher variable tuition fee (subject to Parliamentary approval) could voluntarily include a section on admissions within their access agreement with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA). Access agreements will be published, so the institution's position would be publicly on the record. This section would indicate the institution's support for the principles of fair admissions and could be worded as follows:

> "We fully endorse the Schwartz principles of fair admissions. We have revised our admissions policy (attached) in the light of these principles. We have also revised our structures and processes (attached) to reflect the Schwartz guidelines and recommended options. We understand that key requirements are:
> * transparency;
> * reliability and validity;
> * selecting for merit, potential and diversity;
> * minimising barriers;
> * professionalism."

ii. Another option would be for institutions to confirm to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) that they had adopted the 'Schwartz principles' and to report on progress with implementation. Sharing of this information would enable individual institutions to assess their progress in implementing the principles in relation to peer groups.

Section H:
Next Steps

Practical implications of the draft recommendations

H1.   The Steering Group recognises that its recommendations, although having the status of guidance rather than regulation, will have an impact on universities, colleges and other bodies. The formulation of the recommendations has been guided by the need to minimise any increase in the overall cost of the admissions process to the HE sector. An initial impact assessment of the practical implications of the draft recommendations has been carried out and is available on the review website at www.admissions-review.org.uk   The Steering Group wishes in particular to consult widely on this initial impact assessment in order to develop its understanding of the practical implications and costs of its recommendations and to weigh these against the benefits it believes will flow from them. It welcomes comments on the implications identified and suggestions for different or better ways of achieving the Steering Group's aims.

Responding to this consultation

H2.   In this report the Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group has laid out in draft form recommendations which it believes will help ensure fair admissions to higher education. It wishes to consult widely, on the basis of this document, from 5 April until 28 May 2004, both formally, through written responses, and in meetings, seminars and informal discussion with people who have an interest in admissions to HE in England.

H3.   If you wish to comment on the draft recommendations, the initial impact assessment or any of the issues raised in this document, please refer to the questionnaire in the back cover of the report.

Final report and recommendations

H4.   Following analysis of responses to its second consultation, the Steering Group will make its final report and recommendations to the Secretary of State later in the year.

Responding to the Consultation

Completed questionnaires and other responses should be sent to the address shown below by **28 May 2004**. Responses may also be made on-line at: **www.admissions-review.org.uk**

Admissions to HE Consultation Unit
Level 2, Area A, Castle View House
East Lane
Runcorn WA7 2GJ

Fax: **01928 794311**

References

Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group (2003) *Consultation on Key Issues Relating to Fair Admissions to Higher Education.* Sheffield: Admissions to Higher Education Review.

Belgian Linguistics Case (1968) 1 E.H.R.R. 252

Bristol Royal Infirmary Inquiry (2001) *The Report of the Public Inquiry into Children's Heart Surgery at Bristol Royal Infirmary 1984-1995: Learning from Bristol.* London: HMSO. Available at:
http://www.bristol-inquiry.org.uk/final_report/index.htm

Chevalier, A. and Conlon, G. (2003) *Does it Pay to Attend a Prestigious University?* Research Paper 33. London: Centre for the Economics of Education. Available at: http://cee.lse.ac.uk/publications.htm (18 March 2004)

Commission on the Organisation of the School Year (2000) *The Rhythms of Schooling - a Proposal to Integrate the Stages of Learning, Assessment and Transfer with Terms and Holidays.* London: Local Government Association.

Conlon, G. and Chevalier, A. (2002) *Financial Returns to Undergraduates: A Summary of Recent Evidence.* London: Council for Industry and Higher Education.

Connor, H., Tyers, C., Davis, S., Tackey, N.D., and Modood, T. (2003) *Minority Ethnic Students in Higher Education: Interim Report.* Research Report 448. London: Department for Education and Skills. Available at:
http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR448.doc (9 March 2004)

Davies, R. and Elias, P. (2003) *Dropping Out: A Study of Early Leavers from Higher Education.* Research Report 386. London: Department for Education and Skills.

Dearing, R. (1996) *Review of Qualifications for 16 – 19 Year Olds: Full Report.* London: School Curriculum and Assessment Authority.

Department for Education and Skills (2002) *Inquiry into A Level Standards: Final Report.* London: DfES. Available at: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/alevelsinquiry/ (18 March 2004)

Department for Education and Skills (2003a) *The Future of Higher Education.* London: HMSO.

Department for Education and Skills (2003b) *Widening Participation in Higher Education.* London: HMSO.

Department for Education and Skills (2003c) *The Youth Cohort Study: The Activities and Experiences of 18 Year Olds: England and Wales 2002.* London: Department for Education and Skills. Available at: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000383/index.shtml (9 March 2004)

Department for Education and Skills (2004) *Interim Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform.* London: HMSO.

Dhillon, D. (2004) *Teachers' Estimates of Candidates' Grades: Curriculum 2000 Advanced Level Qualifications.* Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (in press).

Fernstein, L. and Symons, J. (1999) *Attainment in Secondary School.* Oxford Economic Papers, 51, pp300-321. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gibbons, S. (2002) *Neighbourhood Effects on Educational Achievement: Evidence from the Census and National Child Development Study.* Discussion Paper 18. London: Centre for Economics of Education.

Harkness, S. and Machin, S. (1999) *Graduate Earnings in Britain, 1974-95.* Research Report 95. London: Department for Education and Employment.

Higher Education Funding Council for England (2003a) *HEFCE Widening Participation and Fair Access Research Strategy.* 2004/06. Bristol: HEFCE. Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2004/04%5F06/default.asp (10 March 2004).

Higher Education Funding Council for England (2003b) *Performance Indicators in Higher Education: 2000-01 and 2001-02.* 2003/59. Bristol: HEFCE. Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/perfind/2003/default.asp (18 March 2004)

Higher Education Funding Council for England (2003c) *Schooling Effects on Higher Education Achievement.* 2003/32. Bristol: HEFCE.

House of Commons, Education and Employment Committee (2001) *Fourth Report.* London: TSO.

Joint Council for General Qualifications (2003) *GCE, VCE, GCSE & GNVQ: Regulations and Guidance Relating to Candidates with Particular Requirements: 1 September 2003 to 31 August 2004.* London: Joint Council for General Qualifications. Available at: http://www.jcgq.org.uk/publications_and_common_docs/regs_&_guidance.pdf (9 March 2004)

Lambert Review (2003) *Final Report. Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration.* London: HMSO. Available at: www.lambertreview.org.uk (1 March 2004)

Lindsay v UK (1986) 49 DR 181

McDonald, S., Newton, P.E. and Whetton, C. (2001) *A Pilot of Aptitude Testing for University Entrance.* London: The Sutton Trust.

McIntosh, S. (2002) *Further Analysis of the Returns to Academic and Vocational Qualifications.* Research Report 370. London: HMSO. Available at: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR370.pdf (17 March 2004)

National Audit Office (2002) *Widening Participation in Higher Education in England.* London: HMSO.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2003) *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators.* Paris: OECD.

Quality Assurance Agency (2001) *Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education: Recruitment and Admissions* (online). Gloucester: QAA. Available at: http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/cop/codesofpractice.htm (1 March 2004).

Shiner, M. and Modood, T. (2002) Help or Hindrance? Higher Education and the Route to Ethnic Equality. *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* Vol. 23, No. 2, pp209-232.

Strand, S. (1997) Pupil Progress During Key Stage 1: A Value Added Analysis of School Effects. *British Educational Research Journal,* Vol. 23, No. 4, pp471-487.

United States Supreme Court (2003) *Grutter v Bollinger* (the Michigan Law School case). NY: Ithaca, Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School Press. Available at: http://supct.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/02-241.ZS.html (1 March 2004).

Universities UK (2001) *Right Choice? A Follow-up to 'Making the Right Choice'.* London: Universities UK.

Universities UK (2003) *Fair Enough? Wider Access to University by Identifying Potential to Succeed.* London: Universities UK.

Walker, I. and Zhu, Y. (2001) *The Returns to Education: Evidence from the Labour Force Surveys.* Research report 313. Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills.

Yang, M. and Woodhouse, G. (2001) Progress from GCSE to A and AS Level: Institutional and Gender Differences, and Trends Over Time. *British Educational Research Journal,* Vol. 27, No. 3, pp245-267.

Appendix 1

Terms of Reference and Membership of the Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group

(Announced to Parliament, 22 May 2003)

The terms of reference of the project will be as follows:

To report to the Secretary of State for Education and Skills on the options which English institutions providing Higher Education should consider adopting in assessing the merit of applicants and their achievement and potential for different types of courses.

To report on practical implementation of such options using evidence-based good practice.

To report on the high-level principles underpinning such approaches which institutions would be expected to adopt.

The Group should consider in particular:

a) the need to reinforce public confidence in the fairness and transparency of admissions arrangements;
b) the diversity in the missions of providers of Higher Education, and of their students;
c) maintaining the autonomy of institutions in academic matters including the systems and processes by which applicants are admitted.

The report to the Secretary of State should be submitted by summer 2004 following a period of consultation with universities and the wider public.

Professor Schwartz will be supported by a steering group whose membership will be as follows:

Professor Sir Colin Campbell, Vice-Chancellor, University of Nottingham

Mrs Pauline Davies, Headmistress, Wycombe Abbey School, High Wycombe

Mr John Gardiner, Chairman, TESCO plc

Ms Janet Graham, Head of the Admissions Office, University of Cambridge

Professor Sir Howard Newby, Chief Executive, Higher Education Funding Council for England

Sir Peter Lampl, Chairman, Sutton Trust

Mr Anthony McClaran, Chief Executive, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

Mr John Morgan, Headteacher, Conyers School, Yarm, Stockton-on-Tees

Dr Bernadette Porter, Rector and Chief Executive, University of Surrey Roehampton

Dr Alan Stanhope, Principal, Cornwall College of Further Education, St Austell

In addition, Professor Schwartz and the steering group may seek specialist advice from other persons and organisations.

Appendix 2
Consultation Events

The following is a list of organisations and groups consulted through lectures and seminars during the period September 2003 to March 2004.

Adam Smith Institute
Association of Commonwealth Universities
Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education
Careers Research and Advisory Centre
Council for Advancement and Support of Education (Europe)
Council of Heads of Medical Schools
Engineering Professors Council
Fair Play on Admissions Group
Girls' Schools Association
Headmasters and Headmistresses Conference
Higher Education Liaison Officers Association
Independent and State Schools Partnership
National Union of Students
Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations
Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce
Russell Group Admissions Officers' Committee
Secondary Heads Association
Social Market Foundation
Standing Conference of Principals
Universities UK
University Vocational Awards Council

Additional events

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service: 9 Regional/Standing Groups, November 2003
AimHigher (DfES) Annual Conference, 11 December 2003
BBC Radio 4 Higher Education Debate, 31 January 2004
'Aim Higher' Conference (organised by Neil Stewart Associates), 9 February 2004

Appendix 3

Overview of Responses to the First Consultation Paper from the Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group

This appendix includes a very brief overview of all responses to the Steering Group's first consultation on key issues relating to fair admissions. The first consultation paper (published in September 2003) and a fuller analysis of responses received by the deadline (21 November 2003) are available on the Admissions Review website at www.admissions-review.org.uk Please note that the overview provided in this appendix, and the figures quoted in the main paper, include late responses. This means that the statistics quoted here, while providing a more complete picture of respondents' views, may differ from those on the website.

- 361 responses in total (335 by the deadline of 21 November 2003), with over one third of responses from higher education institutions (HEIs);
- Consensus (70%) that students should be selected on a combination of their potential to (i) excel academically, (ii) contribute subsequently to society, and, in particular, (iii) complete a course successfully;
- Overwhelming consensus (96%) that HEIs should have students from a wide range of backgrounds – but varied views on whether HEIs should choose students partly in order to achieve such a mix;
- Strong support (86%) for considering obstacles an applicant may have had to overcome, and for making lower offers for these reasons (71%) – but need for consistency noted, and concerns over legal issues and practical implementation;
- General agreement (65%) to considering applicants' educational context, but less agreement (53%) on whether lower offers should be made as a result;
- Very strong support (87%) for the principle of additional measures of assessment – but some concerns about over-assessment, standardisation and coachability;
- General view that applicants should be considered individually, taking all relevant factors into account;

- Over 70% in favour of including the following in a list of options for assessment methods: school performance data or school type; additional objective criteria (eg *Fair Enough?* criteria); interviews; explicitly considering personal background; compacts; earning credit through additional preparatory programmes; and Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL);
- Smaller majority in favour of centralised admissions (62%) and using GCSE grades (58%). Little support (34%) for use of class rank;
- Mixed views on additional testing with 55% in favour of additional testing and 45% against, and 67% in favour of aptitude testing and 33% against. Many advocated use of existing rather than new tests;
- Just over half (54%) were in favour of post qualification applications, while 34% were unsure and 13% were against;
- Measures based on the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Code of Practice on Recruitment and Admissions aimed at transparency and professionalism welcomed;
- Feedback, complaints and appeals procedures suggested by respondents;
- Universities and Colleges Admissions Service's Admissions Tutors training programme welcomed;
- Perception that the consultation focussed on the traditional 18 year old A level applicant to full-time degree courses, and therefore did not sufficiently cover mature or part-time students or those following vocational pathways;
- Concerns about legal aspects of operating a fair admissions system;
- Concerns and suggestions on practical implications of possible principles and options – fair admissions principles without fair practice could mean unfair admissions.

Appendix 4

Statement On Schooling Effects On Higher Education Achievement

The first consultation paper published in September 2003 by the Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, *Consultation on Key Issues Relating to Fair Admissions to Higher Education*, included an appendix entitled "Higher education admissions: the place of prior attainment and factors that can affect its predictive ability".[1] This appendix looked at the relationship between prior attainment and performance in higher education and at factors which might affect this relationship, including school type and school performance.

One of the key pieces of research in this area is reported in the HEFCE publication *Schooling Effects on Higher Education Achievement* (HEFCE 2003/32).[2] This report describes research to determine whether the characteristics of an applicant's school or college can be used in an assessment of his or her potential in higher education (HE). The report examines in particular characteristics such as 'school type' (state or independent) and 'school performance' (overall performance of a school relative to other schools, based on its students' average performance in examinations).

In view of the potentially controversial nature of the report's findings, and of the widespread public debate of the issues, the Steering Group looked closely at this research and other related studies and received independent expert advice on the HEFCE report. It concluded that the HEFCE research is the most rigorous analysis available of schooling effects, using a large dataset and leading-edge statistical modelling techniques.

The following statement on the findings is provided by the authors of the HEFCE report and the Steering Group's independent experts as an authoritative guide.

"Research for *Schooling Effects on Higher Education Achievement* represents the most robust available analysis on this topic. However, in order to simplify the analysis, HEFCE restricted the population to the most straightforward group of entrants.[3] HEFCE are currently investigating whether including 'gap year' and other students entering at age 19 alters their conclusions.

1 Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group (2003) *Consultation on Key Issues Relating to Fair Admissions to Higher Education,* Appendix 2. Sheffield: Admissions to Higher Education Review.
2 Higher Education Funding Council for England (2003) *Schooling Effects on Higher Education Achievement.* 2003/32. Bristol: HEFCE.
3 The population was restricted to home, English domiciled, full-time A level entrants to three or four year degree courses at English HEIs aged 18 on 31 August of the year of entry (1997). Entrants studying medicine, veterinary science, dentistry and architecture, and entrants with unknown or very low (one to four) A level points were excluded, as were students from schools that could not be categorised.

"The research for *Schooling Effects on Higher Education Achievement* provides valid evidence for the key findings:

    a. A level grades are the single most important factor in determining the expected HE achievement;

    b. The effect of school performance on HE achievement is inconsistent;

    c. Students from independent schools appear to do less well than students from other schools and colleges, all other things being equal. The size of this effect varies between the equivalent of one and four A level points;

    d. For the most highly selective HEIs, students from LEA schools do consistently better than similar students from independent schools, though the effect of having been to a further education college or grant maintained school is unclear.

"In terms of identifying ability at the top end, the research does look at top achievers and finds some evidence of a school type effect, although technical problems associated with the wide range of ability contained within the A grade band and with the existence of a top limit (30 points) to the recording of UCAS points in the data set, makes the estimation of schooling effects at the top end more difficult."

The fact that the HEFCE research is rigorous and robust does not mean that it is the definitive answer on schooling effects or that it claims to be. Nor does it set out to determine the causes of such effects. However, in accordance with the principles recommended in their second consultation paper, the Steering Group believes that providers of higher education, when reviewing their admissions policies, will wish to bear this research in mind.

Appendix 5
Legal Issues

The Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group considers that institutions will need to examine the legal implications for them before choosing to implement any of the recommendations.[1] The information provided below is of a general nature only and is provided to assist institutions with a general understanding of what the Steering Group considers to be the relevant law. This appendix is not a substitute for legal advice, which should always be taken in any particular case.

General

Many institutions are public bodies established by statute; others are chartered corporations. Some institutions have visitors to oversee and adjudicate upon the proper application of their rules. Some complaints made by applicants in relation to admissions may currently fall within the jurisdiction of a visitor.[2] Where complaints are currently within the jurisdiction of a visitor, judicial review of the decision of the visitor will be available in relation to ultra vires actions, abuse of power or procedural unfairness, but not in relation to complaints of error of fact or law.[3]

In other cases, institutions are generally treated as judicially reviewable public bodies.[4] As such, they are obliged, for example, to act fairly towards candidates for admission, and treat them in an even-handed manner.[5] They are also obliged to make clear to candidates the entry criteria they are applying, so that candidates are in a position to supply the information necessary to persuade the institution that they can satisfy them.

The Steering Group does not, however, consider that the public law obligations of institutions extend to a duty to give reasons for rejection to all unsuccessful candidates where this has involved the exercise of subjective judgment, and selection between applicants by a number of individuals. The Court of Appeal has held that where a public body is, in effect, conducting a competition between applicants, there is no duty to give reasons for rejection to unsuccessful candidates.

1 'Institutions' includes any institution providing higher education and not just Higher Education Institutions ('HEIs').
2 The Higher Education Bill provides that visitors of 'qualifying institutions' will no longer have jurisdiction over student complaints, including complaints about admissions. The Bill sets out which institutions are qualifying institutions. It is expected that the body designated by the Secretary of State to operate the student complaints scheme for England will be the Office of the Independent Adjudicator ('OIA'). However, the OIA will not deal with complaints made by applicants in relation to admissions. It is envisaged that these complaints will be dealt with via the internal complaints procedures of the institutions concerned with a right of access to the courts if complainants are not satisfied with these decisions. Institutions may wish to take legal advice on the implications of these changes for them.
3 R v Hull University Visitor, ex parte Page (1993) AC 682
4 Clark v University of Lincolnshire (2000) 1 WLR 1988, at paragraph 15
5 R v National Lottery Commission ex parte Camelot (2001) EMLR 3

It should also be noted that the courts will not adjudicate on matters of academic judgment. In general, the Steering Group would expect that the exercise of academic judgment by an institution in selecting its students would also not be adjudicated on by the courts.[6]

Equal treatment without discrimination

In addition to their general public law duties to act fairly, lawfully and rationally in the selection of candidates, institutions are subject to a number of statutory duties not to discriminate on various grounds. Currently, these grounds include race, sex, disability, sexual orientation and religion or belief. The Steering Group considers the relevant national legislation to be as follows:

> Race Relations Act 1976 as amended ('the RRA'), s. 17 (and also see s. 71, imposing a general duty on institutions as public bodies to eliminate discrimination and promote equality of opportunity);

> Sex Discrimination Act 1975 ('the SDA'), s. 22;

> Disability Discrimination Act 1995 ('the DDA'), s. 28R, s. 28S, s. 28T;

> Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003, Regulation 20;

> Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003, Regulation 20.

Further regulations are anticipated by December 2006 at the latest, to outlaw discrimination on grounds of age, in order to complete the implementation of the Equal Treatment Framework Directive 2000/78/EC.

With the exception of the DDA, which has a somewhat different structure in order to recognise the need of disabled people for reasonable adjustments to be made to avoid disadvantage to them, the discrimination legislation in general applies a two-fold definition of discrimination, as follows:

> **Direct discrimination:** where, on a prohibited ground, the discriminator treats the victim less favourably than he treats or would treat others to whom the prohibited ground did not apply, in a materially similar situation. It is important to note that (again with the exception of the DDA) it is no defence to a complaint of direct discrimination that the treatment on the prohibited ground was justified.

> **Indirect discrimination:** where the discriminator applies to the victim a provision, criterion or practice which he applies or would apply equally to others, but which puts persons of the victim's race, sex, religion etc at a particular disadvantage when compared with other persons, and which the

6 R (Asha Foundation) v The Millennium Commission (2003) EWCA Civ 88, where the competition between the applicants was for lottery funding.

discriminator cannot show to be objectively justified. In order to justify the application of a provision, criterion or practice that has a discriminatory effect on members of a particular sex, racial group etc, the discriminator must show that it was a proportionate means of meeting a legitimate end.

It follows from the above definitions that it is unlawful for an institution to treat a candidate for admission less favourably than other candidates on a prohibited ground (except disability), regardless of the existence of any benign motive or 'justification' for the treatment.[7]

In cases where a practice is alleged to be indirectly discriminatory an institution may be able to demonstrate that the practice is in pursuit of a legitimate aim. It is likely to be the proportionality of the practice in question as a means of attaining that aim that will, in most cases, be decisive of the lawfulness of the practice. Thus, the Steering Group considers that institutions should be prepared to show that their admissions practices are properly tailored to the aim pursued; are supported by evidence that they are effective in achieving the aim pursued; and that they are no more unequal in their effects than is necessary in pursuit of the aim in question.

Disability Discrimination: It is unlawful for an institution to treat a person less favourably, including in its admissions arrangements, as a result of their disability than it treats others, where this treatment is not justified. An institution must also take reasonable steps, including in its admissions arrangements, to ensure that a disabled person is not placed at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with a person who is not disabled. This applies unless an institution is justified in not doing so.

Compact schemes: The Steering Group considers that institutions should carefully consider the lawfulness of any compact scheme. The lawfulness of such a scheme will, of course, depend on its terms. However, the Steering Group considers that such a scheme may engage Article 14 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (the Convention) (see below) and other domestic legislation and as a result should be objectively justified, in that it pursues a legitimate aim and is reasonably necessary and proportionate to the aim pursued.

The Human Rights Act 1998

By virtue of section 6(1) of the Human Rights Act ('the HRA'), public authorities are under a duty not to act incompatibly with a Convention right under the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

---

7 However, section 26(1) of the SDA allows the admission of students of one sex only to single-sex establishments.

'Public authorities' are defined at sections 6(3) and 6(5) of the HRA as including any person certain of whose functions are functions of a public nature, but not when such persons are performing private acts. The Steering Group considers that, since it is strongly arguable that institutions are performing functions of a public nature, institutions should conduct themselves on the basis that they are subject to the duty under section 6(1) of the HRA when admitting students. Institutions may wish to take legal advice on whether, and how, the HRA applies to them.

A number of Convention rights may also need to be considered by institutions. These include:

Article 8: the right to respect for private and family life. Institutions may need to consider whether information of a personal nature required from candidates (such as, for example, information concerning their family situation or finances) goes further than is necessary, and could be regarded as needlessly intrusive into the students' private lives.

Article 2 of Protocol 1: that no person is to be denied the right to education. The Court of Appeal has recently held that this right is engaged in relation to higher education, as well as primary and secondary education.[8]

Article 14: the right to the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in the Convention without discrimination on any ground, such as sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status. Article 14 is engaged only where the discrimination complained of falls within the ambit of one of the other rights protected by the Convention.

EU law

The EC Treaty contains a number of provisions concerning education and vocational training (for example, Articles 3(1), 126 and 127). These articles taken together with Article 12 of the EC Treaty prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of nationality have resulted in the acknowledgement by the European Court of Justice of the principle that Member States must not discriminate against students from other EU Member States on grounds of nationality in relation to access to education courses or tuition fees.[9] In general, access to higher education must be made available on the same terms to all EU and EEA nationals. Discrimination based on residence in a particular member state could be regarded as indirect discrimination on grounds of nationality, and will be unlawful unless objectively justified.

8 Douglas v North Tyneside MBC (2003) EWCA Civ 1847
9 See, for example, Blaizot v University of Liege (1988) ECR 355.

Appendix 6

Outline of Model Institutional Admissions Policy

A. Structures and processes

Institutional context

- Institutional aims;
- Statement of how the admissions policy helps the institution to achieve its aims;
- Confirmation that the admissions policy complies with relevant legislation and is guided by the principles outlined by the Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group.

Assignment of key responsibilities for admissions within the institution

- Clarification of responsibility for institutional admissions policy;
- Admissions committee, the constitution of which should reflect relationships to widening participation, teaching, support, staff development and other activities and areas as appropriate. The terms of reference may include, for example:

  i. Overseeing the admissions process across the institution to ensure that it is in line with institutional guidelines. Where admissions are decentralised, this may involve receiving reports from faculty, school and departmental staff;

  ii. Ensuring that admissions staff are trained and receive adequate support to do their job;

  iii. Ensuring that assessment methods comply with institutional guidelines;

  iv. Ensuring compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act, the Race Relations Act and other relevant legislation, and consistency with the Quality Assurance Agency Code of Practice on recruitment and admissions;

  v. Monitoring applications and offers, reviewing admissions practice and preparing a report each year;

  vi. Reviewing the admissions policy and making recommendations as appropriate to the relevant committee or body within the institution.

- Explanation of the roles and responsibilities of:

  i. Central admissions staff;

  ii. Faculty, school and departmental admissions staff.

B. Information and assessment

Transparency

- Statement of the information provided to applicants (see main report, D4);
- Statement of institutional policy, where applicable, on the interpretation of merit and potential, and clarification of where information about course-specific interpretations is available;
- Explanation of assessment methods used across the institution, where applicable, and clarification of where information about course-specific assessment methods is available. Such information may include:

  i. The reasons for using particular methods;
  ii. The format of the assessment method;
  iii. What admissions staff will be looking for;
  iv. How applicants can prepare for the assessment.

- Statement on any special admissions arrangements.

Reliability and validity

- Confirmation that assessment methods are reliable and valid;
- Explanation of the process for approving the use of assessment methods within the institution.

Selecting for merit, potential and diversity

- Statement of institutional policy on considering contextual factors and, where appropriate, on seeking to recruit a diverse student community;
- Explanation of where to find details of course-specific interpretation;
- Confirmation that at any one stage in the assessment process, all applicants will be given an equal opportunity to demonstrate their skills, achievements and potential.

Minimising barriers

- Statement of institutional policy, where applicable, on recognising diverse learning pathways, and explanation of where course-specific information can be found:

  i. Institutional policy on accepting vocational and Access qualifications, and availability of APEL;
  ii. Note of which subject areas do/do not accept or offer these;
  iii. Note of foundation year and bridging course availability;
  iv. Clarification of credit transfer arrangements.

- Explanation of availability of financial help, as applicable, to help pay for assessment costs, including travel to the institution or assessment centre.
- Explanation of availability of advice and assistance for applicants with disabilities.

C. Appendices

Feedback and complaints

- Clarification of what feedback can be given, explanation of procedures.
- Clarification of grounds for complaint, explanation of procedures.

Admissions staff

- Procedures for appointing, training and supporting admissions staff.
- Policy on workload adjustment for academic admissions staff.

Appendix 7
Problems, Principles and Recommendations

Problem	Principles	See recommendations in the following paragraphs of the consultation paper:
Differing interpretations of merit and fairness	Transparency Selecting for merit, potential and diversity	D4(i) D12 – D17 E4; E6; E10(i); E12
Can be difficult for applicants to know how they will be assessed	Transparency Professionalism	D4; D7 D22 – D25 E2; E12
Information used in assessing applicants may not be equally reliable and consistent	Reliability and validity Selecting for merit, potential and diversity	D8 – D11 D15 – D17 E5; E6 – E7; E12; E13
Some courses have high drop-out rates	Transparency Reliability and validity Selecting for merit, potential and diversity Professionalism	D4 – D6 D8 – D11 D12 – D17 D22 – D25
For over-subscribed courses, it can be difficult for admissions staff to select from a growing pool of highly-qualified applicants	Transparency Reliability and validity Selecting for merit, potential and diversity Minimising the barriers	D4 – D6 D8 – D11 D12 – D17 D18 – D21 E10; E12
Some applicants face a burden of additional assessment	Minimising the barriers	D18 – D21 E10
Uneven awareness of and response to the diversity of applicants, qualifications and pathways	Professionalism	D22 – D25 E12
Most offers depend on predicted not actual grades	Reliability and validity	E5; E11
Relevant legislation is complex and there is uneven understanding of it	Transparency Reliability and validity Selecting for merit, potential and diversity Minimising the barriers Professionalism	D4 – D7 D8 – D11 D12 – D17 D18 – D21 D22 – D25 E8 – E9; E12 See also Appendix 5

63