



SPA Considerations for a Confirmation Action Plan

May 2012

This is an annual revision (latest update May 2012) to a document originally published for 2010 entry. It was developed from analysis of the action plans produced by participants from 59 different institutions at the SPA Managing Numbers for 2010 Entry seminar on 2 June 2010, and from SPA's continuing work on this topic.

Our thanks to all colleagues who contributed to this work.

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Please circulate and discuss this paper amongst all staff involved in the planning and strategic operation of new entrant numbers. This document is available on our website:

www.spa.ac.uk/documents/Confirmation_Action_Plan.pdf

☑ Don't panic

- ❑ Don't allow staff to feel overwhelmed or rush into poorly-informed reaction to events; gather all appropriate information and consider all rational alternatives before deciding a course of action.
- ❑ Ultimately, senior management must be prepared to make any difficult decisions that fall outside of policy or accepted practice. Ensure they are apprised of the situation well in advance and that they are familiar with your normal processes and relevant UCAS procedures/business rules, so that there is ample time to consider any policy, legislative or contractual implications. They will assess the short-term and long-term impact and will base their decision on the best interests of the institution and the sector.
- ❑ Good leadership will be key to maintaining confidence and getting prompt action.
- ❑ Identify your best experts and have them champion specific areas of concern.

☑ Plan ahead – information review

- ❑ Review your historic strategy for setting admissions targets, ensuring any trends inferred from previous years are still valid, not only at an institution level, but also for individual courses. If your admissions targets have additional numbers factored in for anticipated drop out between UF status and student number returns to HESA, don't forget to review those as well.
- ❑ Factor-in new variables, particularly changes to student number control (SNC) arrangements. Where possible, apply any new SNC exemptions (e.g. AAB+ or equivalent for England; rest of UK domicile for Scotland and Northern Ireland) to previous years' conversion to estimate how any historic trends should be adjusted in light of new arrangements. English HEIs should keep in mind that SNC exemption may be based on qualifications/subjects that do not form part of the offer, so include all relevant qualifications, including those previously taken.
- ❑ Predicting conversion from insurance may be particularly complicated. Carefully review historical conversion rates on a course-by-course basis, but pay close attention to current competitors, especially if there is a new competitor your insurance places have firmly accepted. If there are courses particularly at risk of over-recruiting or if disproportionately high numbers of insurance are firm at one institution, compare predicted grades against competitors' offers to anticipate conversion. The competition element over applicants after they have made their acceptance choices is minimal, so your opposite number at another institution may be willing to share information with you to help your predictions.
- ❑ Consider inter-related policies and practices. For example, if action taken at confirmation may give grounds for complaint or appeal, ensure staff are well aware of your complaints and appeals policy, so that they can take it into account before acting and can correctly advise applicants of their rights if asked. If your policy has a restricted number of staff authorised to consider appeals and you anticipate increased requests for appeal at Confirmation, plan this into those staff times and other duties, ensuring commitments are marked in individual diaries/calendars. If the policy permits authority to be delegated, train additional staff up in preparation. Other policies may be indirectly affected by your Confirmation plan (e.g. accommodation; equality and diversity; teaching facilities; bursaries).

- ❑ Gain a full understanding of the financial situation, working closely with your Finance and Planning staff to envisage different possible scenarios and their implications. Senior managers will need to consider a tolerance of acceptability for any overshoot, but all admissions staff, both in the centre and devolved, would benefit from appreciating the different financial factors.

☑ Plan ahead – strategy

- ❑ Consider different scenarios well in advance, assess the risks and have contingency plans prepared so they can be implemented promptly if needed.
- ❑ Be very clear on the chain of command and who is responsible for each part of the plan. If any staff, including senior management and academic staff, have responsibility over a part of Confirmation, ensure they are fully briefed on the issues, key messages and of the period they need to be available for. If there is an unavoidable situation where someone will not be available for any part of that period, their responsibilities must be properly delegated in advance.
- ❑ You should have a formal group in place to oversee the planning, target monitoring and activity for Confirmation. This may be an existing admissions committee, but you should carefully consider which additional staff should be involved. Bear in mind administrative and academic staff supporting the transition of new students. You may also wish to involve any external representatives involved in the process. In particular, if your overall student number allocation includes numbers recruited in partner colleges, those partners should be included.
- ❑ Even if you are concerned about over-recruiting, it is likely you will still be in a position where you are considering 'near-misses' to fill some courses. Exemptions may well affect how many SNC places are filled at Confirmation (e.g. a course requiring ABB or lower may have more CFs achieving AAB+ than expected). Have comprehensive criteria for choosing between potentially large numbers of near-misses for a few places. You may well need a graduated scale to cope with different scenarios and for fine differentiation you may well need to take into account factors additional to the results themselves. Given the limited time, such criteria will need to be simple and quick to apply and may need to be flexible enough to adjust if numbers are reallocated to different courses.
- ❑ If you are planning on taking good applicants through Adjustment or Clearing but you also have large numbers of near-misses to consider, set definite numbers of new applicants you plan to take and factor those into your criteria for considering near-misses. Decide whether to operate separate targets for SNC-exempt.
- ❑ Consider who is needed on the procedural, technical, support, academic and managerial sides to implement your plans. Brief them on what is required, check that they are confident they can deliver with the resources they have and make them aware of how their role fits into the wider picture for the institution. Bear in mind that it may be necessary to involve senior management if any aspect of the plan is at risk.

☑ Internal communication

- ☐ Circulate key dates and times to all staff who may be involved.
 - Remember some staff you need may have their leave and working hours managed by line managers who are not involved in admissions.
 - You may find it useful to have a contacts list or 'staff on duty' rota list for central and devolved staff to use.
- ☐ Consider all possible areas that may impact on that timeline, even if they are not involved in admissions (e.g. if you are planning on holding an open day over that period you don't want someone else running a conference in your best facilities; you may, however, want additional cleaners available).
- ☐ Consider who is likely to come into contact with enquiries.
 - Brief them on what you anticipate will be standard queries and the institution's key messages over this period. A follow up briefing may be needed as the admissions picture on acceptances develops.
 - You may decide to provide them with a reference list of possible topics and appropriate answers.
 - Ensure they are clearly aware of the limits of any information and advice they give (it is important to ensure they don't make the mistake of speculating) and that they know which experts to refer queries to that are not covered by pre-informed responses.

☑ External communication

☐ Applicants

- If you expect to be busy when results are published, consider how you will communicate with applicants and inform them of as much as possible in advance, including any dedicated contact channels (e.g. telephone number; 'confirmation@' e-mail address; sms text service). This will reduce the number of queries on the day, allow you to channel queries to relevant staff and will make those calling prepared for possible delays in getting through.
- If you are planning on moving a volume of communication electronically for the first time this year (e.g. bulk e-mails; applicant portal), check with your IT staff that the hardware and software can cope with the high peaks in demand.

☐ Schools, colleges and other advisors

- Your marketing, widening participation or schools and colleges liaison staff should have a good idea of who your key feeder institutions are and you will probably already have good links established.
- At the very least, send a letter to those key contacts making them aware of the situation, so that they can provide realistic advice to their students when results are published. You may wish to remind them to encourage use of UCAS Track (including Advisor track) rather than ring in, and give an assurance that the information on Track will be accurate so there will be no need to confirm with the institution directly.

- In recompense for cutting down on unnecessary calls, you may wish to give those key advisors a separate confidential number to use in exceptional circumstances, so that they know they can get through to someone if necessary. Make sure you clearly define the type of query such a number should be used for.

□ **Press and Media**

- It is highly likely the local and national press will take an interest in Confirmation and Clearing activity. Brief your own media or external communications team and agree the public-facing key messages they will convey.
- This may be an opportunity to put out a positive message about your institution.
- Your media team may decide to pre-empt queries and send a media release in advance, but that will be a judgement call for individual institutions to make.
- Keep in mind that the press may call several different people, so ensure they are redirected to the appropriate internal media expert. The press may even pose as applicants, but providing your processes and advice are fair and consistent you shouldn't worry too much about such 'mystery shoppers' and you definitely should impress upon staff not to try and second-guess whether or not a call is genuine.

□ **Other HEIs**

- Ideally, all HEIs will process confirmation decisions as quickly as possible. This will not only allow individual institutions to monitor numbers but will help other institutions see their conversion from insurance quicker.
- If you spot a large number of insurance who are still conditional firm at another institution, call them to find out the situation. Even if they can't send a decision to UCAS straight away, they should give you a clearer picture of what is likely to happen so you can factor it into your planning.
- Plan who you will name on UCAS' confidential contact list, make sure they are available to respond to calls, kept up-to-date and have the appropriate discretion to take action on individual outstanding decisions. The confidential contact list should only be used by UCAS and member HEIs and it is important such calls are handled by someone with the knowledge and authority to respond.
- Have a policy to accurately appraise admissions staff in other institutions of your situation if asked and to respect the confidentiality of any report they may give to you.

❑ Transparent information on the web

- Putting as much information as possible on your website could prove a valuable tool in managing expectations and controlling telephone and e-mail traffic.
- However, be careful not to allow volume of information to obscure your really important messages.
- Remember that clearly publishing that you do *not* have vacancies is just as important as listing courses that do.
- Think carefully about the layout and accessibility of the information you put up. Set measures in place to ensure information consistent across different web pages (whether central pages, course/department pages, or pages on external sites you provide information for) and that they can all be updated promptly.
- You should also take into account your obligations to adhere to information published on your website.

☑ Training

- ❑ If additional institution staff or temporary staff/students/alumni are being drafted in, ensure training is relevant to their prior experience and their new duties/responsibilities.
- ❑ Even experienced staff will need an update on the situation, key messages and changes since the previous cycle.
- ❑ If you plan to bring in external trainers (e.g. UCAS Professional Development; private consultants), book them early and be prepared with a range of possible dates as their diaries may well be full for that time of year. Ensure they are clearly briefed on your situation, strategy and key messages.
- ❑ Remember UCAS will **not** correct or amend any Confirmation decisions sent during the periods when Track is frozen prior to publication of A Level results. It is therefore imperative that all staff involved are trained and aware of the need for accuracy. If the roles of decision-makers and staff inputting decisions electronically are separate then you should consider how these functions interact and what mechanisms are in place to empower one to query the other. Admissions software should be thoroughly tested in advance and any protocols for uploads to UCAS checked. Ensure your own software is updated with new ABL codes.
- ❑ Some institutions may decide not to go into Clearing for the first time this year. However, even if you have no vacancies you may well still get a large number of calls, so ensure you have staff available and trained to handle them sensitively. You may decide to keep a separate Clearing number to prevent such calls blocking important Confirmation queries.
- ❑ Some institutions may decide to go into Clearing in a very limited capacity (e.g. only for SNC exemptions). This may also generate a large number of calls, particularly if external sites (e.g. UCAS; newspaper vacancy lists) cannot display the detailed vacancy criteria, so ensure you have staff available and trained to handle them sensitively.

☑ **Keep data up-to-date**

- ❑ Ensure your admissions statistics and figures are updated regularly, preferably in real time, so that you are always basing action on accurate data.
- ❑ Keep track of unconfirmed offers and distinguish between near-misses whom you have results for but are still under consideration and those with results outstanding.
- ❑ Have one set of data that all staff work from and agree how often it will be updated. If the master data set is to be compiled from different areas, set a standard template for how it must be collected and recorded. A single, consistent record that notes the time and date of data collection will reduce the risk of error and remove the chance of contradictory figures between teams.

☑ **Process definite decisions promptly**

- ❑ Decisions on Conditional Firms and Insurances who have definitely met or exceeded the conditions of their offers, or whose results definitely fall below your threshold for consideration, should be entered and transmitted to UCAS as soon as possible. This will keep your admissions reports up-to-date and will maximise the time available before the results publication date to concentrate on near-misses and target-planning.
- ❑ However, if your risk assessment has revealed a likelihood that some courses may over-recruit, it may be prudent also to manually count the numbers meeting their conditions before inputting. Although you are obliged to accept these applicants, you will have more options open to you before confirmation is sent to UCAS (e.g. re-allocating places from a less popular course before that course considers near-misses). In extreme circumstances, where accepting too many students onto a course would mean they would be unable to complete their studies (e.g. if there is an externally-controlled limit on placement numbers), reaching a decision on what action to take before inputting decisions will mean that all those meeting the conditions can be considered against that decision. Offering alternate courses, deferred entry or alternate course provision can all be managed more fairly under such circumstances.
- ❑ When ABL results are received it will be essential to have a senior manager, or someone with delegated authority, on hand to assess the actual situation in relation to planned forecasts and make a prompt executive decision if required.

☑ **Chase missing results early**

- ❑ You must wait until 31 August for outstanding or missing results if the applicant could still be on track to meet the requirements (e.g. offer of 300 points in 3 A Levels with results of BC and one outstanding grade). However, if the partial results fall short of specific requirements, making it impossible to meet the conditions of the offer, it is permissible to reject applicants (e.g. offer of BBB at A Level with results of BC and one outstanding grade).
- ❑ Chase missing results ahead of your main Confirmation period for all qualifications you know should have been published. BTECs, IB results etc. tend to be released ahead of both Highers and A Levels.

- ❑ Keep track of any offers based on qualifications released **after** your main Confirmation period. This may include GCSEs and Access Diplomas. If the qualification in question is not part of the UCAS ABL process, send a reminder to the applicants requesting they send results directly as soon as they have them and inform you of any delays.

☑ **Keep next year in mind**

- ❑ Decisions made this year may impact on next year. This may be direct (e.g. large number of deferrals) or indirect (e.g. rejecting high numbers from a good 'feeder' school). Naturally, you won't want to make things more difficult for next year, but if it is necessary, make a note at the time. Seemingly small actions aren't always remembered at an end-of-cycle review, so keeping a log as you go will improve planning next year, enhancing the quality of your service and your institution's reputation.
- ❑ You may also wish to keep a list of lessons learned. Unexpected situations may arise this year that aren't covered in your contingency plans. Being prepared to factor them in next year will assist your institution in being more pro-active.
- ❑ If a difficult situation has arisen this year, consider changes to policy or working methods for the start of the next admissions cycle.

☑ **Ask for advice if in doubt**

- ❑ SPA will be happy to discuss any issues of fair admissions about the Confirmation, Adjustment and Clearing periods.
- ❑ The UCAS HEI Team will be available to answer HEI queries on individual applicants or on UCAS processes and regulations.
- ❑ Colleagues in other institutions may be willing to share advice.
 - Existing networks, such as the Academic Registrar's Council Admissions Practitioners' Group, the GuildHE Admissions Network, or similar mission group forums should provide useful contacts.
 - If you predominantly recruit from the local area you may wish to establish an informal network with your opposite numbers at neighbouring universities and colleges.
 - Alternatively, you can use the UCAS confidential contacts list. However, given how busy it is likely to be, use new contacts prudently.

☑ **Associated SPA good practice on www.spa.ac.uk**

- ❑ [Planning and Managing Admissions](#)
- ❑ [Applicant Complaints and Appeals](#)
- ❑ [Admissions Policies](#)
- ❑ [HEFCE SNCs in Admissions](#)

SPA

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Summary table of variable numbers for planning against targets

Target	variables to target				Agreed Final Target
	adjustment after own students' summer resits	inflation for potential UF drop-out pre-enrolment	inflation for potential student drop-out pre-HESA return	Target reallocation to/from other courses	
	(actual/predicted) (+/-)			(+/-)	
a	b	c	d	e	f=sum(a-e)

N.B. If you are operating different targets (e.g. based on SNCs/exemptions/fee status/funding) ensure all separate planning tables are synchronised.

Ensure target and actual numbers are not duplicated and ensure if numbers move between target groupings (e.g. CF with BBB offer gets AAB; overseas applicant gets reclassified as EU; applicant changes from Nursing to Biology) they are both deducted from and added to the relevant tables as appropriate.

variables to new intake numbers										Firm numbers meeting requirements
UFs deferred from previous year	UFs from current cycle	CFs meeting/exceeding conditions	CIs meeting/exceeding conditions rejected by CF	UIs likely to convert to UF (based on historical trends and/or in-depth analysis of CF)	CFs with results outstanding (expected to convert)	Additional students progressing internally from foundation/year 0	Additional students progressing from partner institution (still to RPA)	Expected loss in Adjustment	Expected loss from release into Clearing	
		(CFUF)	(CIUF)							
h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o	q	r	s=sum(h-o) - sum(q-r)

contingency numbers		Final pre-Clearing confirmed numbers	Projected Adjustment/ Clearing vacancies (or overshoot)
near-miss CFs	near-miss CFs from other courses to consider as alternatives		
t	u	v=s+%t+%u	x=f-v