



Supporting Professionalism in Admissions

The UK's independent programme for good practice
in higher education admissions

Annual Review

2010 - 2011



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For availability in other formats contact enquiries@spa.ac.uk

Introduction

Welcome to the fifth Annual Review of the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme.



Professor Sir Steve Smith,
Chair of the SPA Steering Group and
Vice-Chancellor, University of Exeter

The SPA Programme has developed over the last five years to become the impartial, central shared source of expertise on realising and maintaining the principles of fair admissions. SPA promotes this message to senior managers and practitioners, and urges them to enhance professionalism and effect change in admissions policy and practice within their institutions, using SPA's wide range of good practice statements, advice and guidance.

I would like to thank my predecessor, Professor David Eastwood, who chaired SPA over the last two years, through the successful granting of additional funding to 2012 and the acknowledgement of the impact of SPA through the external evaluation review. This is an excellent achievement and the SPA team will continue to build on their work; sharing and promoting good practice across the UK and assisting and advising HE providers through the challenges to come.

I am pleased to be chairing the SPA Steering Group at this time of tremendous change in higher education and in admissions, the role and need for SPA has never been greater. Please take a look through the Annual Review which highlights our successes, key areas of our work and our objectives for 2012.

If you would like more information about the SPA Programme and the work of the team please visit our website www.spa.ac.uk.

Steve Smith

Chair of the SPA Steering Group and
Vice-Chancellor, University of Exeter

Summary of key outcomes and achievements 2010-11

- The work of SPA on contextual data and the applicant experience strategy has contributed to several high profile committees and groups, including work on social mobility issues and the National Scholarship Programme Working Group in England
- SPA contributed to and co-sponsored the successful international research conference organised by the University of Manchester: *The evidence base for fair admissions: can we achieve excellence and social justice?*
- Our range of good practice statements included:
 - recommendations for Planning and Managing 2011 Admissions, which continued to be an important issue throughout the year;
 - additional case studies on how HEIs have introduced paperless admissions processing, which HEIs have noted as particularly helpful;
 - considerations for centralising admissions, which was produced in response to specific enquiries from HEIs;
 - a guidance note on the admission and recruitment of refugees and asylum seekers, written in close consultation with expert bodies;
 - guidance on the timing of disability considerations within admissions processes, which evoked a number of responses from HEIs deciding to review their practice.
- SPA continued to increase its presence within HE in FE, including through discussions with the regional groups of the Association of Colleges, the QAA HE in FE Group and the Chair of the Association for Collaborative Provision of HE in FE (ACP).
- SPA identified 114 tests in use for 2012 entry, an increase of 24 over last year. Institutions generally cited more information on their use of tests being made transparent to explain this increase. Only 0.9% or 349 courses out of over 38,000 courses in UCAS use tests.
- 48 institutions were visited to support them to address queries and issues, this also enabled SPA to gain evidence of current practice for analysis towards good practice development.
- The team continued to provide advice and guidance in response to queries, 79% of which were from HE, including HE in FE. 14% concerned good practice issues, and 11% planning and managing numbers.

The SPA Programme

SPA is the UK's independent and objective voice on higher education (HE) admissions that is free to HE providers. We are a central shared source of expertise and advice on strategy, policy and practice on admissions issues. Funded by all four UK HE funding bodies, we were established in 2006 following the Schwartz Report "*Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice*", (2004) and our work is underpinned by the five principles of fair admissions identified in the report.

The team has extensive practical and managerial experience in the HE sector, in admissions, student recruitment, education liaison and widening inclusion in a wide range of institutions. We are active participants at meetings and networks throughout the UK; and regularly deliver plenary presentations, workshops and are members of panels at key HE Conferences.

Our guidelines for good practice assist institutions in maintaining and enhancing excellence and professionalism in admissions, from pre-application to transition into HE. Our good practice advice is based on desk-based research, visits to institutions, discussion with practitioners, senior staff and stakeholders at events and meetings throughout the UK.

If there is any aspect of admissions, policy and practice, including the current changes and challenges facing HE admissions that we can help with please contact us at enquires@spa.ac.uk.

"In an environment where both applications and applicant expectations are at all-time highs, SPA continues to play a key role in ensuring that admissions processes are fair, professional, and responsive. SPA's work on the use of contextual data and in assisting universities that were moving from being recruiting to being selecting institutions was critically important.

As we move into a new era with enhanced fees, partial deregulation of numbers controls, and potentially big shifts in applicant behaviour, SPA's focus will be on working with the Sector to meet these new challenges and to secure the UK's enviable reputation for admissions processes that are professional, fair, flexible, and sensitive to potential and well as prior achievement".

Professor David Eastwood, Vice-Chancellor, University of Birmingham, and former Chair of the SPA Steering Group



Visits to institutions offering higher education

SPA visits provide an excellent opportunity to see how HE providers manage their admissions processes and enable us to add a practical context to our work. In return we can offer advice based on our extensive experience and research.

The structure and length of visits varies, however. We feel it is important to meet with one or more senior members of the institution to enable us to understand the commitment to professional admissions at a strategic level. In addition we seek input from Admissions

Tutors and academic colleagues as it is vital to gain their perspective of the admissions processes. A SPA visit encourages discussion between colleagues from admissions, recruitment and widening inclusion on key topics regarding institutional admissions processes and current national admissions issues.

We offer institutions the opportunity to consult, share and discuss good practice. As we are neither an auditor nor regulator discussions can take place in an informal and confidential setting. After a visit we complete a brief

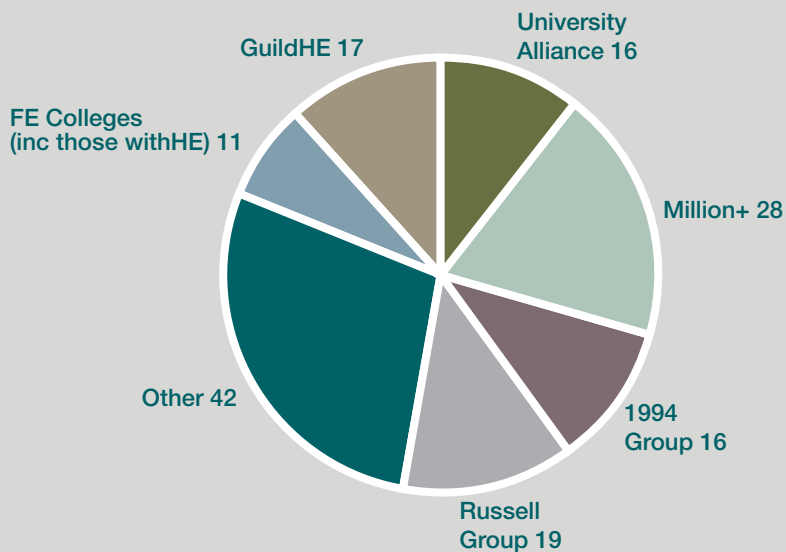
report summarising the institution's admissions processes and policies which, with agreement, is then used to inform our work and research. The report also outlines key areas of advice or areas of work for SPA to take forward. We ask the institution for feedback on our visit and all comments are considered by the SPA team.

Since the SPA Programme was established the team has visited 149 HE providers across the UK. This represents over 49% of the member institutions in the UCAS scheme and above 85% of UCAS applications.

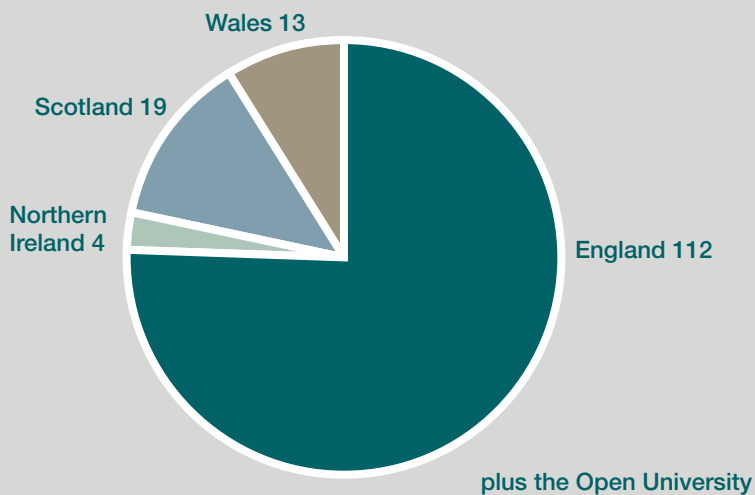
“Sometimes when you are so involved you can't see the solution to a problem and keep carrying on as normal as though it is the nature of the job and there is nothing we can do about it, until a third party like SPA comes in and either state the obvious or provide a smart solution.”

Gurjit Nijjar, Recruitment Manager, Admissions,
Staffordshire University

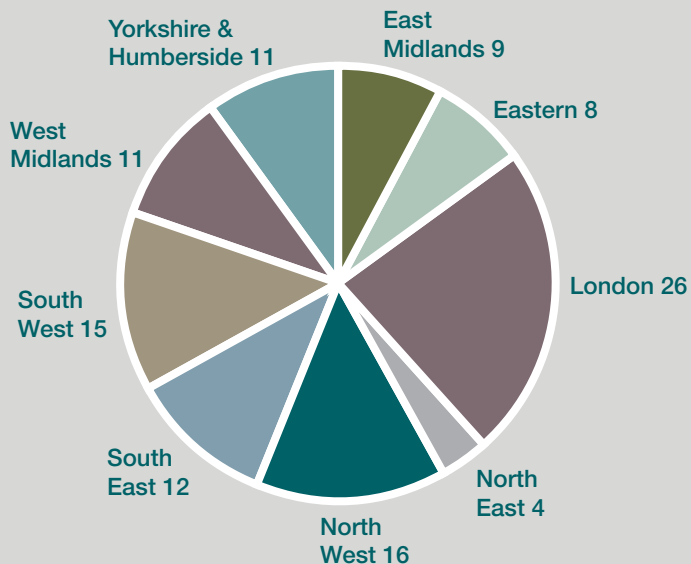
Total number of institutions visited by group



Total number of institutions visited by country



Total number of institutions visited in England by region



Across the UK and International

In 2010/11 there have been many changes in public policy across the UK that have impacted on admissions. These developments have meant a busy year for SPA in contributing to policy discussions and developments with all administrations. SPA has provided colleagues in HE with advice and guidance on the impact they will have on admissions at their institution. SPA staff are regularly present at HE admissions events, delivering keynote presentations and workshops at national and regional events.

Northern Ireland

During the 2010/11 year SPA staff attended the UCAS Northern Ireland Standing Group and the Director met with staff from DELNI and DEL to discuss contextual data and SPA's role working in Northern Ireland. A meeting was also held at Queen's University Belfast to discuss the Applicant Experience Strategy and contextual data.

We have recently considered the implications for Northern Ireland (NI) of rest of UK students applying to NI HEIs following the changes to student finance arrangements.

Wales

SPA has worked closely with colleagues in Wales, responding to a wide range of queries from individual Welsh institutions on topics including: contextual data; criminal convictions; disability; gathered field; interviews; offer-making; and qualifications. Our advice has been highly valued and continues to provide an efficient source of expert good practice for the sector. SPA has also provided advice and update reports through the UCAS Welsh Standing Group and through meetings with HEFCW and DfES (formerly DCELLS).

SPA responded to the HEFCW consultation on Foundation Degrees in Wales in January 2011 and highlighted this important policy area to admissions practitioners.

Scotland

In Scotland SPA focussed on Curriculum for Excellence, contextual data, advice to individual HE providers and articulation and data issues. Under Curriculum for Excellence SPA has concentrated on working with HE providers and the Government to clarify the impact on admissions policies and requirements, to meet the needs of a newer, more flexible, curriculum. SPA looks forward to building on this in the coming year.

England

SPA continued to visit HEIs and contributed to a number of policy initiatives including: information and advice to OFFA on the use of contextual data by HEIs; membership of the National Scholarship Programme Working Group; information for Alan Milburn and the Deputy Prime Minister's Office with regard to social mobility and admissions and a number of consultations including on the Key Information Set, Ofqual and on vocational qualifications.

International

SPA built on its international experience and reputation on fair admissions discussing holistic assessment and fairness mechanisms in the UK with the Netherlands Ministry of Education, providing input to a Chinese delegation at UUK with regard to admissions and co-sponsoring the international research conference on Fair Admissions organised by the University of Manchester.

Good Practice

Good practice in HE admissions is at the heart of the SPA Programme. One of the ways we promote professionalism, transparency and fair admissions is through research and development of our good practice statements, briefings and guidance.

Our outputs are frequently used by HEIs across the UK, who find them useful not only when reviewing and updating their admissions processes, policies and procedures but for training purposes.

1. Contextual Data use in admissions

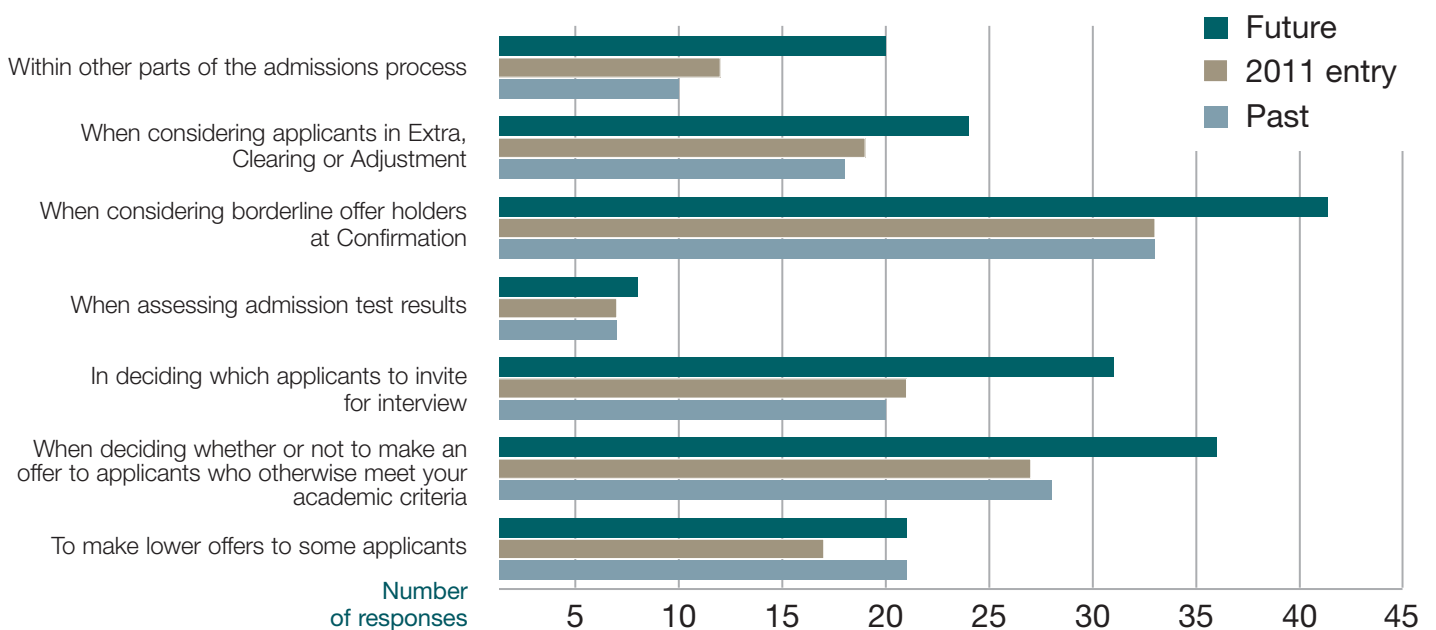
The agreement that SPA gained from all the administrations round the UK to provide an initial set of contextual data came to fruition with UCAS working to produce a data set from September 2011 for 2012 entry. Around 257 HEIs have signed up to use this data via UCAS.

The SPA survey of HEIs and HE in FE providers on the use of contextual data within admissions elicited 93 institution responses from users and those not using contextual factors. The survey demonstrated that institutions of all types in all parts of the UK use contextual data, with the Russell Group, the non-

aligned institutions and FE colleges being the biggest users of those responding. Institutions were also asked about the use of contextual data in part-time and taught postgraduate admissions, and future use in both showed an increase. 41.5% of respondents indicated that they used contextual data currently or in the past, nearly 63% said they planned to use contextual data in the future.

There continues to be considerable interest UK wide in the use of contextual data, i.e. putting attainment in the context of the circumstances in which it has been obtained. However, there is not a

How contextual data is used past, present and future



shared understanding across the sector of the purpose of contextual data, the methodologies used, and the added value. The institutional research base to date has been detailed, but typically considers HEIs in isolation and as a consequence has given a fragmented view of the sector-wide picture. SPA's national research project aims to provide consistent descriptions and assessment of contextual data

usage with 15 volunteer HEIs to examine methodology, use and added value. The researchers will complete their report for SPA by December 2011, any transferable methodology and uses will be shared with the sector.

SPA has continued the dialogue between the school and college sector, FE and HE institutions with UUK, GuildHE and UCAS through the national contextual data group that SPA chairs.

In 2011/12 SPA will work with institutions, Governments and UCAS to build on the initial data via UCAS to explore whether new data can be included in the future.

“Once again SPA has been very supportive and has worked with staff within the University at both operational and strategic levels. Its role in liaising with the Departments of Education and Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland regarding the use of contextual data is particularly welcomed”.

Jennifer Dwyer, Head of Admissions and Access Service,
Queen's University Belfast.

2. The Applicant Experience Strategy

SPA has now completed its major two-year project on reviewing the engagement activity between applicant and HE that allows institutions to manage the applicant experience and plan a seamless transition into the student experience. In 2010-11 SPA researched the post-application and transition stages of the experience, building on the previous year's work on the pre-application and application stages. Many institutions tend to divide their staff duties and operational structures according to these stages. More significantly the cross-over between these stages represent key conversion points that need to be well managed to maximise the predictability of progressing the most suitable students.

The **post-application stage** was published in June 2011. However, details from the draft version were presented at the UCAS Admissions Conference in April 2011 and to the AUA/SPA Special Interest Group in May 2011. These groups provided formative feedback in preparing the final paper and accompanying case studies. A template for evaluating engagement in the post-application stage

appeared of particular practical interest, with one institution stating that they planned to use it straight away in reporting to their Vice-Chancellor.

The **transition stage** was published in September 2011, although most of the research was conducted within the 2010-11 review period. This included a table of considerations to reduce common causes of non-commencement and improve retention. It highlighted the admissions responsibilities in managing the lead into the student experience and in addressing causes of student drop-out before entry.

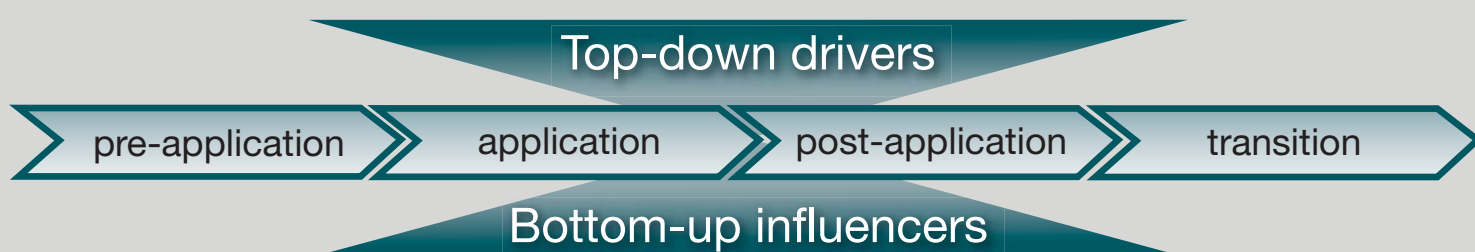
SPA's examination of each stage has added substantial content to the applicant experience strategy map, which was developed at the request of institutions wishing to review their engagement activities. The collated guide to managing the applicant experience, including definitions, mapping exercises, engagement models, recommendations and case studies, is available on our website in the applicant experience section. Each stage can be considered in isolation by staff with specific responsibilities within that area, but would best be viewed as pieces within a co-ordinated strategy.

“We found using the SPA guidance invaluable in reviewing our applicant experience. Taking time to thoroughly review this part of the admissions process can pay dividends at an Institutional level. Identifying the role of each person involved clearly shows where improvements can be made and recognition of key communications that have a high response rate have proved very useful in improving our applicant experience.”

Liam Owens, Head of Student Recruitment,
Edgehill University and Chair of HELOA.

SPA's guide to managing the applicant experience, which includes SPA's focus on this topic in 2011-12 will shift towards providing a framework to facilitate integrated practice within institutions and between partners, to help ensure the applicant experience is managed as efficiently, constructively and fairly as possible.

If you would like to share any examples of integrated working between staff responsible for different stages, or if you are interested in developing your own integrated approaches in 2011-12, please contact Dan Shaffer, Senior Project Officer at d.shaffer@spa.ac.uk.



3. Admissions Tests

SPA's admissions tests work continued in 2010-11, including:

- updated information about appeal mechanisms following discussions between SPA and the main test bodies;
- a detailed analysis of the admissions tests questionnaire responses;
- information in relation to which institutions are using which tests within the admissions process - updated on the SPA website in June 2011;
- the SPA definition of an admissions test and what makes a "good test";
- information about the reliability and validity of tests;
- information in relation to research into the use of the UKCAT.

Our statistical research into the number of admissions tests in use has confirmed a largely unchanged picture over four years - admissions tests continue to be a small element within the admissions decision-making process. The percentage of courses requiring applicants to undertake a test has remained relatively constant during the period of SPA's research – 0.7% for 2009 entry, 0.7% for 2010 entry, 0.8% for 2011 entry and 0.9% for 2012 entry to HE, continuously less than 1% of the total number of courses in the UCAS scheme. There are 349 courses of the 38,147 in UCAS for 2012 entry which have a declared test.

Since the research began in 2007, the number of tests as declared by HEIs on UCAS Course Search has increased – from 67 for 2009 entry to 114 declared as being in use for 2012 entry. Each year we have contacted those HEIs where the test has appeared on UCAS Course Search for the first time,



and those who replied stated that the test was not new but that the HEI was now being more transparent about its use.

Working with HEIs in relation to the use of tests has helped colleagues understand why they must be clear about the rationale underpinning the use of a test and why they must set this usage against the SPA criteria for a good admissions test. More information about SPA's work on admissions tests can be found on our website.

From 2011-12 UCAS will undertake the admissions tests data collection exercise, updating the number of tests in use at UK HEIs. SPA will continue to discuss test issues with the main test bodies and with HEIs, and will keep a watching brief on admissions tests research.

4. Admissions Structures

As part of work by HEIs to increase efficiencies, some have reviewed structures and processes and considered which of the different admissions decision-making models best fits their needs. SPA has worked closely with a number of HEIs as they have considered moving to a more fully centralised admissions decision-making model. This work has included being asked to attend institutional meetings on this topic and make presentations to academic and administrative staff, outlining the potential benefits and issues for consideration.

In May 2011 SPA drew up a summary paper based on these interactions and discussions which is available on our website under Good Practice –

Centralising Admissions. The work included the identification of some areas of good practice and considerations which SPA has shared with the HE sector and which HEIs have used as part of their process reviews.

Work in this area will continue in 2011-12, to include considerations around good practice in delivering an efficient and effective admissions service, including what makes a good admissions office.

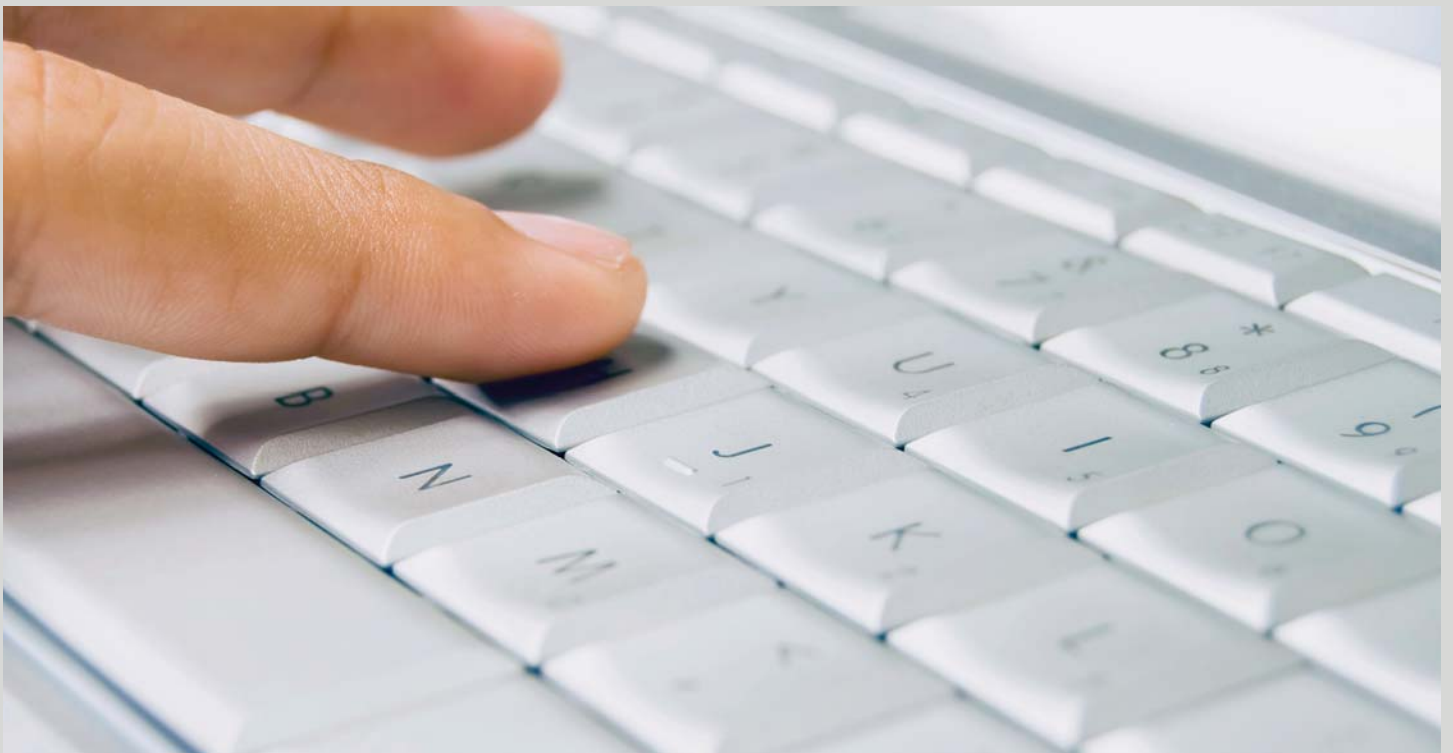
The existing guidance will be reviewed and updated during 2011-12, and if you would like to share your experience of moving to a different admissions decision-making model please contact Annie Doyle, Senior Project Officer at A.Doyle@spa.ac.uk

5. Paperless Admissions

Since the announcement by UCAS that from 2013 they would no longer produce paper copy application forms, a series of case studies produced by SPA working with HEIs that have 'paperlite' or paperless systems for admissions processing or have moved aspects of their admissions processing to online systems, have been published on the SPA website. These identify issues facing HEIs in relation to this significant change, providing valuable insights into the different systems being adopted.

SPA suggests that the development of paperless/'paperlite' systems is an ideal opportunity for HEIs to review and analyse business practices, process and policy. As well as the case studies our work in this area included: presenting workshops at the UCAS Admissions Conference and at the SPA Conference in Birmingham; working with UCAS to produce and publish on the SPA website a set of FAQs about paperless processing, facilitating a workshop at an HEI to review their business process workflow as part of their

Paperless Project (SPA's external input had a significant impact on the session); and responding to an increasing number of enquiries about the issue.



6. Vocational Qualifications

During 2010-11 SPA's Vocational Qualifications good practice statement and checklist was updated and circulated to stakeholders for comment. The statement is available on the SPA website under Good Practice – Vocational Qualifications.

This work concentrates on the wider issue of encouraging good practice in admissions decision-making, so that everything a learner is offering, their qualifications and other relevant work experience, Accredited Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), Accredited Prior Learning (APL), Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL), or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), skills or relevant contextual factors is considered.

SPA's definition of a vocational qualification is a qualification relating to a particular line of work or a specific job, career or profession, with an emphasis on the assessment of practical skills and knowledge. As part of fair admissions and good practice, admissions staff should ensure that applicants with all types of qualifications and experience, which may include vocational qualifications, and/or applicants without the usual level and/or volume of formal qualifications, are provided with equality of opportunity in terms of progression to HE.

SPA will continue to work with HEIs to encourage consideration of vocational qualifications, work-based learning and skills for progression to full-time and part-time courses from applicants as part of fair admissions and good practice.



7. Part-time Admissions

Part-time students are affected by policy developments at government level, by changes in funding and by what institutions offer.

In September 2010 SPA issued a good practice statement on admissions to part-time courses which reflected current best practice in a changing area. It also gave guidance both on the principles which should apply and on practical steps which HE providers could take to make

admission onto part-time courses both fair and efficient. SPA followed this up with a short checklist of key points in January 2011.

Throughout 2010-11 SPA worked closely with colleagues interested in part-time issues, including consultants for BIS's major study, UCAS colleagues involved in the Admissions Process Review and organisations such as the Universities' Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL). SPA

presented at important conferences and met with key HE providers. In this complex and changing area, continuing informal contact between those involved is vital, as is our work in bringing people together. The statement will be kept under review in 2011-12, particularly in the light of any changes to funding for students and institutions.

8. Planning and Managing Admissions

SPA's joint event with UCAS, Admissions and Recruitment: Planning for 2011 and Beyond in September 2010, was held in recognition of increased demands on many institutions to manage high volumes of applications, predict conversion rates and meet target entry numbers. This innovative event was timed to allow institutions to consider and implement good practice for the start of the 2011 entry admissions cycle. The discussions and input from over 60 HE providers fed into the SPA Considerations for Planning and Managing 2011 Admissions document which outlines four key planning steps (Overview; Review; Predict; Enact) and the core collaboration needed. A similar event hosted by the University of Ulster in April 2011 focused on Managing Numbers in Northern Ireland.

SPA's good practice was reviewed in October 2011 and updated for future admissions cycles. The new SPA Considerations for Planning and Managing Admissions document is available on our website under Good Practice – Planning and Managing Admissions. This general guidance will be supplemented with recommendations on topics specific to each new cycle.

SPA produced a significant and well received briefing paper on the impact of HEFCE's student number control arrangements on admissions and ran a number of surgery sessions for HEIs. We also responded to numerous queries from across the UK concerning fairness in number controls for students under the different student funding arrangements across the four UK administrations.

9. Admissions Processes

The admissions process is at the centre of SPA's work, from setting criteria based on accurate data to considering applications and making clear and accurate offers. If good practice is followed in this area, applicants are clear what is required of them and HE providers get the right number of students with the potential to succeed.

In the past year all areas of SPA's work have had an impact on admission processes, from paperless processing to an

integrated strategic approach. Specifically, SPA prepared a paper on the key relationships in the admissions process, between applicant, HE provider and UCAS, discussing issues and recommending good practice. As part of our work looking at the structures to support good practice in admissions, we surveyed institutions to better understand where decisions were being made, centrally, devolved to academic units or in a mixed system.

In the coming year SPA will continue looking at admissions processes and decision making. Guidance is likely to include target-setting in the light of new student number controls while another important area will be good practice advice for smaller HE providers appropriate to their smaller resources.



10. Disability and admissions

In response to a number of requests from HEIs and evidence of disparate practice, SPA published guidance on the timing of disability considerations within admissions processes in February 2011. The publication included implications and interpretation of the Equality Act, considerations for reviewing the treatment of applicants, and concerns in withdrawing an offer because of a disclosed disability. This work was supported by a consultation group, consisting of HEI admissions staff, student support practitioners and Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) advisors. SPA received several queries in response to its published guidance, as institutions reviewed their current practice. The paper has been more widely circulated to professionals via the National Association of Disability Practitioners and Action on Access, including a presentation on the paper's considerations at the Action on Access National Disability Forum. The guidance is available on the good practice section of SPA's website.

SPA has further developed its collaboration with ECU, sharing expertise within this cross-over area. Dan Shaffer sat on ECU's project advisory group for disabled students' data as a critical reader of the final guidance paper. We will continue to work closely with ECU in 2011-12, supporting their expertise in equality issues as they consider further implications for the admission of protected characteristic groups.

11. Refugees and asylum seekers in admissions

Refugees and asylum seekers are some of the most vulnerable of all applicants to HE. Institutions look at all aspects of an application and try to take into account all of an applicant's circumstances. Providers and government agencies suggested to SPA that they would find it useful to have detailed guidance on what information should be provided and what should be considered in an application.

SPA worked with partners including the Welsh Assembly Government, the Refugee Council and the Refugee Assessment and Guidance Unit (RAGU) to identify key issues including information for applicants, fee and funding issues, qualifications, English Language, transition and support, contextual factors,

outreach and links to useful organisations. The guidance was circulated to relevant stakeholders including admissions offices, funding councils and government contacts. In the coming year SPA will review and update the guidance note.

“Once again we have been able to call upon sound advice and guidance from SPA as we face the challenges of HE Admissions in an ever-changing environment”

Andrew Hood, Admissions Manager,
University of Glamorgan

Communications and Publications

Communicating good practice, fairness and professionalism is a core part of our work. This is achieved through our website, via SPA events, networking within the sector and those involved in public policy, regular updates to UCAS correspondents and printed publications.



1. SPA Website – www.spa.ac.uk

As one of SPA's principal forms of communication, the website is constantly developed. It is a valuable resource providing information about our research and the good practice and ongoing professionalism found during our visits and activities.

This year we surveyed users of the website which resulted in a major project to review content and completely revise the navigation, which is underway. Over the 2010-11 year our analysis showed that the number of single visits to the website remained steady with 10,074 new visitors and 9,136 returning visitors, the five most popular topics included:

- Home Page
- Good Practice
- Contextual Data
- Planning and managing numbers
- SPA Conferences

2. Printed Publications

Our printed publications aim to reach all levels of staff at institutions and organisations across the sector. We have received positive feedback from colleagues, who find SPA's publications a useful update on our latest work and an aide memoire to good practice and topical issues regarding admissions to HE.

3. Electronic Communication

SPA regularly sent out communications. There were 32 throughout the year on topical issues, recent work and important information for the attention of UCAS correspondents plus emails to other contacts including JISC mail and the widening participation network. We issued our first electronic Newsletter which from 2011-12 will provide colleagues with our very latest information and news.

If you would like to receive the admissions email correspondence from SPA and are not a UCAS correspondent please contact Ruth Burchell at R.Burchell@spa.ac.uk.

SPA Events

SPA events enable us to disseminate good practice across the sector and provide a forum for networking and discussion between colleagues from across the UK. Over the last year SPA has held four events across the UK and welcomed 251 participants in total. SPA events continue to grow in popularity and are relevant and topical, with over 200 individual institutions having attended at least one SPA event since 2006.

In September 2010 SPA held a joint event with UCAS in Leeds entitled 'Admissions and Recruitment: Planning for 2011 and beyond', which facilitated discussion on the key issues and challenges in admissions for 2011 and the construction of an action plan. The event was well attended with over 60% of delegates stating they would definitely use the points raised at the event in planning their admissions strategy for 2011.

Feedback from the event included:

“Well worth attending. The overview, advice, interaction and discussion were really helpful at this precise time. Can return, review and plan as cycle gets underway”

Our event in Cheltenham for HE admissions practitioners, disability support staff with Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) staff discussed the timings of assessment and academic decisions for applicants with disabilities. This proved a popular event with stimulating discussion which informed the published, 'SPA recommendations on the timing of disability considerations within admissions processes'. The recommendations were well received and further strengthened SPA's links with the ECU.

In April 2011 the SPA seminar in Northern Ireland, in association with the University of Ulster, provided HE staff with an opportunity to examine the specific topic of managing numbers within admissions. It looked at common areas of concern, discussed potential scenarios and how they would affect existing policy and practice. The workshops on the applicant experience, contextual data and part-time admissions proved very popular. There were 60 participants from seven different HE and FE providers and DEL's Head of the Widening Participation Regional Strategy for Northern Ireland.

“Lively discussion and debate and sharing and exchanging of information between different institutions supported by guidance on best practice from SPA presenters”.

Lynda Saberton, Administrative Officer,
University of Ulster.

'Good Practice in challenging times: Managing the present, looking to the future: working together to find solutions' was held at the University of Birmingham in May 2011. It addressed key topics and issues in the sector through discussion and gave a strategic overview of challenges. Participants examined the most common queries received by SPA and raised these at a question and answer session with a panel of sector representatives. The day provided SPA with key topics of concern to take forward and participants left knowing what the challenges were and areas where SPA could support them.

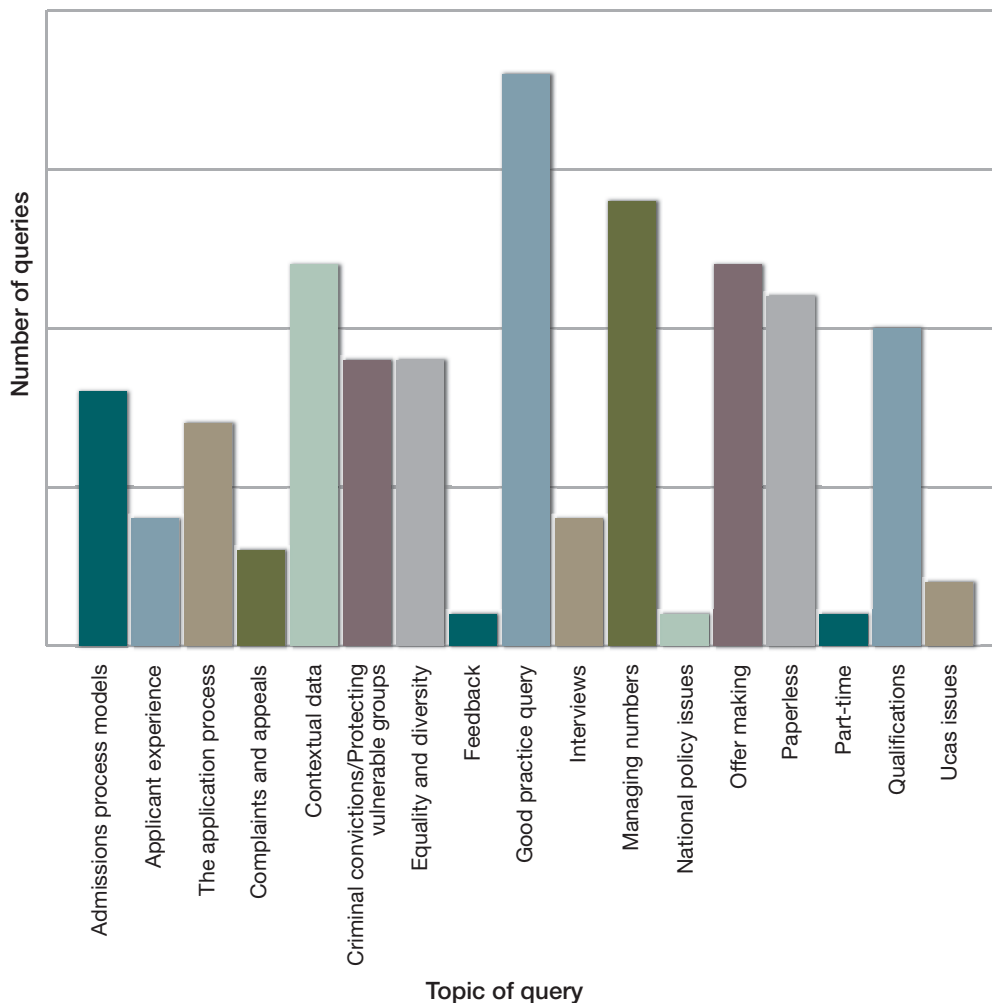
In all, SPA staff have made 44 keynote speeches and presentations at major national events, SPA and other conferences round the UK and attended a further 28 as participants.

Enquiries

A significant part of SPA's work is to answer queries and questions from SPA stakeholders across the UK. These can be on any aspect of HE admissions, and SPA will answer them as comprehensively as possible or forward the enquirer to someone who can answer. We view this as part of our ongoing mission to support the development of professionalism in HE admissions. This is an important and frequently used service that has increased as SPA is now well established. We record the enquiries received and analysis shows that since 1 August 2010 we had 126 enquiries, 75% of which came from HE providers with the remaining 25% shared across our key stakeholders.

The graph below shows the most common, and the wide range of topics that SPA staff have responded to over the last year.

Number of queries 1 August 2010 - 31 July 2011



What SPA can do for higher education providers

SPA is a free resource to HE providers throughout the UK; we are autonomous and provide impartial and independent advice on a wide range of areas including:

- discussion and identification of areas of good practice at institutions;
- supporting institutions as a 'critical friend', holding discussions in confidence about areas of policy, strategy or issues relating to fair admissions, including internal restructuring. The SPA team has expertise in managing admissions from both the strategic and practitioner view points;
- external review of individual admissions policies and related areas;
- involvement and response to national policy issues for the benefit of the sector. At a strategic level through interaction with policy-makers and senior managers in HE; at practitioner level via publicised guidance through our recommendations and good practice statements;
- sector wide events, publications, good practice statements and advice and an information-rich website;
- dealing with enquiries, questions and issues from the HE sector and other stakeholders.



“Just a short note to thank you for the outstanding piece of work that you did for me a week or so ago with regards to other universities policies re criminal convictions. The level of research that you did and provision of samples from other universities took a significant workload away from me at a very busy time in our Admissions cycle.”

Robin Gordon, Head of Admissions, Recruitment & International Office, University of Glasgow

The future of SPA

External Evaluation

The 18 month evaluation of SPA culminated in a positive final report to HEFCE in July 2011. It highlighted SPA's achievements and made a number of recommendations. SPA was recognised as being well-embedded and credible by the sector, its resources widely used with an appetite for more. It noted that SPA was influential in helping many institutions respond to admissions issues and in many cases it was seen as an essential service: the general view from the sector was a strong desire to see the programme continue. Recommendations included membership of the Steering Group be reviewed and further impact measures developed. The full External Evaluation report is available on the SPA website.

“SPA has reviewed the admissions landscape and been an effective contributor to policy fora and there is significant evidence that it has helped HEIs shape their responses to new national agendas. SPA has steered practice and significant change within the sector and admissions work in particular.”

Professor Geoff Layer, Vice-Chancellor at Wolverhampton University and previously SPA's External Evaluation Manager.

“SPA continues to be an invaluable resource for advice on every aspect of admissions and best practice. Involving the professionalism and expertise of SPA staff in an essential part of our policy review strategy.”

Jason Norris, (former) Admissions and Recruitment Manager, University of Dundee.

The Future of SPA

The SPA team and the Steering Group have reviewed what SPA does in view of the enormous changes the UK HE sector is facing in terms of fees, funding, the economic climate, changes proposed at UCAS and the pre HE curriculum. The Programme has become well recognised over the last five years and its mission is now to champion fair admissions and access to HE by developing and leading on good practice in the recruitment and selection of students. SPA has funding to 2012 and is working with our Chair to secure a long term future.

A step change in what SPA does is needed and we plan to do this through three strategic aims:

- (1) Development of HEIs' good practice and professionalism in admissions. SPA is the only organisation in the HE sector with recognised expertise to produce and disseminate new good practice.
- (2) Fair admissions, access and social mobility. SPA's good practice enables it to be uniquely placed to review and promote fair admissions and support developments in fair access and social mobility in the HE sector.
- (3) Integrated strategic approach to admissions. HEIs will be able to use our good practice and our proposed tool kit for smarter working through this period of transition to the new financial and policy arrangements within the context of their own institutions.

Who does what in SPA?



Janet Graham, Director

Janet provides strategic leadership for the Programme, working and liaising with senior figures across the HE sector and those involved in public policy as well as those working in admissions. Janet leads SPA's work on the principles of fair admissions and contextual data use within admissions, managing SPA's research project examining the use of this data. Janet initiated and convenes the AUA-SPA Special Interest Group on the Applicant Experience which encourages a wider range of staff to work effectively and smarter together. She regularly contributes at conferences and to policy developments throughout the UK.

Contact: j.graham@spa.ac.uk 01242 544919

Leslie Currie, Senior Project Officer

Leslie joined SPA in 2007 and leads on SPA's good practice on part-time admissions and the review of feedback for unsuccessful applicants. His work on admissions policies and criminal convictions policy and procedures is well respected. Other areas include the contractual nature of offers made by institutions via UCAS, and he works closely with the Equality Challenge Unit on equality and diversity issues.

Contact: l.currie@spa.ac.uk 01242 544757

Annie Doyle, Senior Project Officer

Annie also joined SPA in 2007, and leads on good practice in interviewing applicants and the development of paperless admissions systems.

Her work also includes the use of admissions tests, managing SPA publications and website development. Most recently Annie has been working on good practice around vocational qualifications and admission to art and design courses.

Contact: a.doyle@spa.ac.uk 01242 544777

Dan Shaffer, Senior Project Officer

Dan joined the team in late 2008 and has responsibility for developing the Applicant Experience Strategy and the production of guidance for planning and managing numbers following successful events on the topic. His ongoing responsibilities include issues around the admission of those with disabilities, offer-making on new qualifications and good practice associated with non-academic conditions in offers.

Contact: d.shaffer@spa.ac.uk 01242 544895

Ruth Burchell, Project Officer

Ruth joined SPA in 2008 and has responsibility for the design and organisation of all SPA publications and the development of the website. Ruth coordinates the organisation of all SPA events from content to logistics. She initiated and developed the SPA database that captures the Programme's evidence-base for SPA's good practice, advice and guidance. In support of Senior Officers, Ruth undertakes desk based investigations and assists in the production of good practice statements and guidance.

Contact: r.burchell@spa.ac.uk 01242 544681

Sheila Ham, Administrative Support Officer

Sheila has been with SPA since 2006 and is PA to the Director. In addition, Sheila provides administrative support to the team and coordinates logistics for the Steering Group meetings. She also has responsibility for the technical updating of the SPA website and contributes significantly to its design and development.

Contact: s.ham@spa.ac.uk 01242 544891

SPA Steering Group

The Steering Group comprises representatives from across the education sector and from all four UK administrations; it provides direction and guidance in setting our objectives. It meets quarterly to:

- Discuss issues and areas of work for the team to take forward;
- Agree SPA's annual operational plan and budget, subsequently forwarded to the HE funding councils for approval;
- Monitor SPA's progress against the objectives and review the outcomes.

SPA is pleased to welcome Professor Sir Steve Smith, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Exeter who took over chairmanship from August 2011 and we thank Professor David Eastwood for his support and guidance as Chair for the last two years.



The following organisations are represented on the SPA Steering Group:

(in alphabetical order)

Academic Registrars Council - Admissions Practitioners' Group (ARC-APG)

Association of Colleges (AoC)

Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)

England - Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)

GuildHE

GuildHE Admissions and Recruitment Network

Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC) / Girls' Schools Association (GSA)

Higher Education Academy

Higher Education Funding Council England (HEFCE)

Higher Education Funding Council Wales (HEFCW)

Northern Ireland - Department for Employment and Learning (DELNI)

Scottish Admissions Practitioners' Group

Scottish Government, Directorate for Lifelong Learning

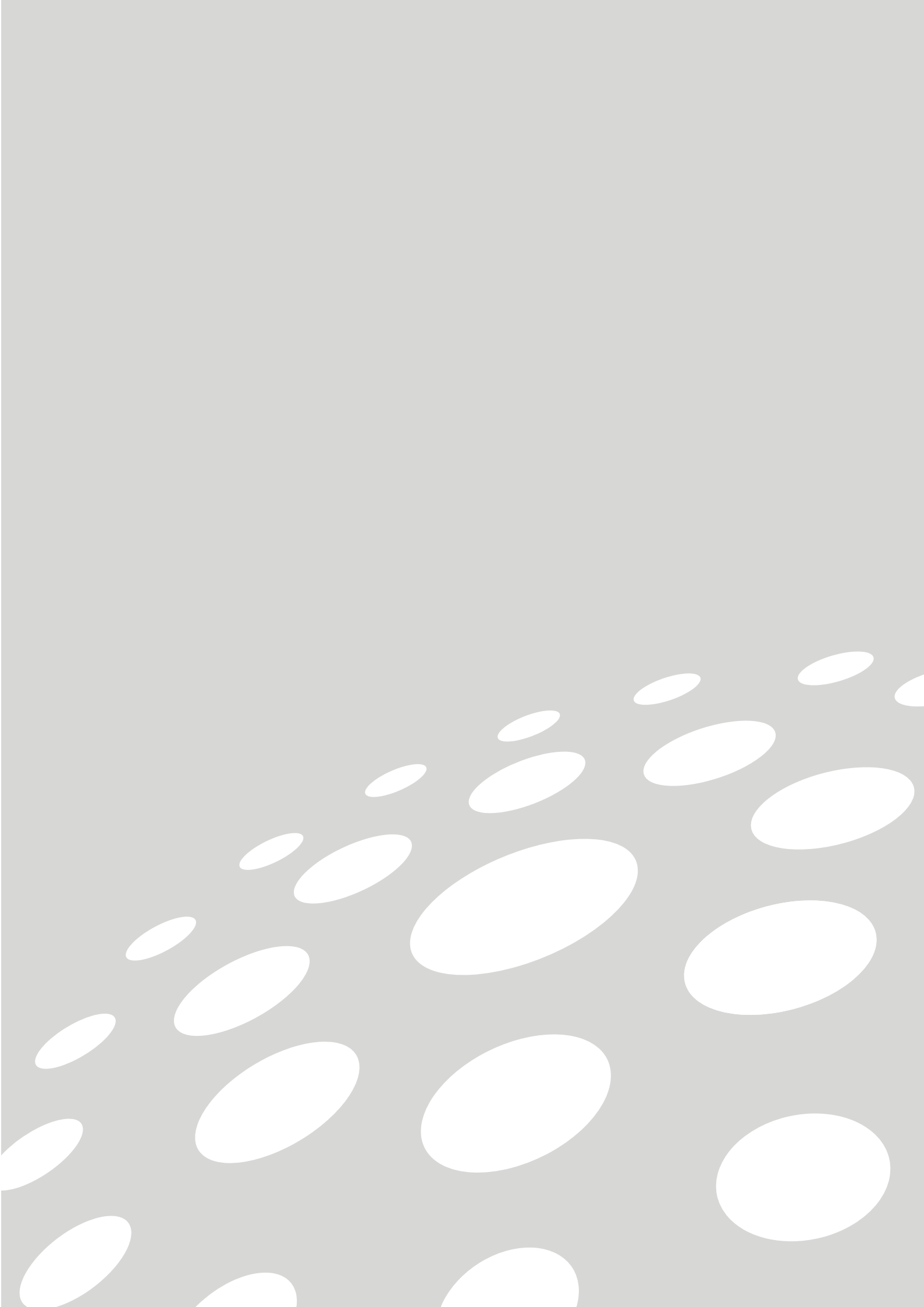
Scottish Funding Council (SFC)

Sixth Form Colleges' Forum (SFCF)

UCAS

Universities UK (UUK)

Welsh Assembly Government - Department for Education and Skills (DfES)





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