

# Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme

SPA is the independent and objective voice on UK higher education (HE) admissions. It leads on the development of fair admissions, providing an evidence base and recommendations for good practice. SPA works closely with institutions offering higher education programmes and other stakeholders to provide resources for institutions wishing to develop and update their admissions practice and policy and enhance their quality, transparency, reputation, fairness and professionalism in admissions, student recruitment and widening inclusion.

Established for three years, SPA has become an authoritative and enduring source of evidence and advice about admissions matters. The SPA Steering Group acknowledged this and the forthcoming external evaluation process will examine the impact the Programme has had on institutions' admission policies, procedures and practices and will inform SPA's work for the future.

The SPA Steering Group has been fortunate since its inception in being chaired by Sir Muir Russell, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Glasgow. Sir Muir will be retiring at the end of July and we would like to thank him for his contribution to SPA and his support for the Programme and the six staff at SPA. Sir Muir welcomed the Chair designate and conference plenary speaker, Professor David Eastwood, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Birmingham at the SPA conference in Manchester. The presentation focussed on the importance of admissions and student recruitment within the institutions' strategic vision.



From left to right Professor David Eastwood, Janet Graham, Director of SPA, and Sir Muir Russell at the SPA Conference, Manchester June 2009.

The momentum for change and modernisation in admissions over the last year has increased, and there is a real interest in the broader SPA agenda which includes the applicant experience and the use of contextual data as two main themes.

**The SPA team visits HE providers as part of their ongoing research to establish an evidence base of good practice. We offer advice and guidance if required and feedback continues to be positive:**

“The advice the team gave us on reducing emphasis on paper based systems was very helpful. Hearing about their experiences elsewhere and practice in other institutions was illuminating.”

Renate Divers, Head of Registry,  
Ravensbourne College of Design &  
Communication, Kent

“I found the visit incredibly useful in that it allowed someone slightly removed to make observations and identify areas where we could change, but also where we were doing well.”

Chris Alcock, Admissions Manager,  
Staffordshire University



## The Applicant Experience

SPA's work since March 2009 has been to define what we mean by the applicant experience. SPA believes that experience is based on purpose; that it has direction and moves towards outcomes. The applicant experience starts with early engagement through widening participation/access, and aspiration raising activities, moves through application to post application including offer making and on to transition into the institution. Students contribute financially, academically and culturally to the value of their institution and are likewise enhanced by their time there. This mutual benefit should not be left to chance, but be embedded within an admissions strategy.

A good applicant experience prepares, informs and provides equality of opportunity to enter higher education. It should match the student's aims, abilities and aspirations with the character of the institution. This will improve student retention and enhance the strategic mission of the institution, and so is a precursor to the student experience.

In contrast, a poor applicant experience is detrimental to both the applicant and the higher education provider and may perpetuate barriers to entry, or disengage potential applicants. SPA believes the applicant experience lies at the heart of a fair admissions system and will be seeking institutions' comments on its work to date and examples of good practice from institutions who have or are working towards an integrated admissions strategy involving widening participation/access, marketing, student recruitment, admissions and transition activities.

## Contextual Data

SPA has been working to establish current practice in the use of holistic assessment and contextual data and at the request of the former DIUS, submitted a paper on the use and principles of contextual data to the National Council for Educational Excellence HE Ambassadors Group. This relates to recommendation six of their implementation plan of February 2009: "HEIs should continue to use, and where possible expand the range of, all the information available to them to identify the best students with the greatest potential and ability to reach the highest academic achievement."

A discussion on the use of contextual data, held at the Russell Group Heads of Widening Participation Practitioners meeting was followed up by discussions with the universities of Manchester, Leeds and others and in a workshop at the SPA National Conference. A case study from the University of Oxford was presented on how contextual data is used as part of the assessment as to whether an applicant should be invited to interview. Over 40 admissions, recruitment, marketing and progression professionals from HE providers and from sector bodies attended the workshop. Input from participants and the discussions with institutions will contribute to the principles of the use of contextual data for publication by SPA in July 2009 and work on developing an evidence base for good practice.

## Conferences and events

SPA events continue to be well received with our Welsh conference in Cardiff attracting over 60 participants from across the HE sector and 100% of attendees rating the conference 'good' or 'very good' at meeting their expectations. In January SPA held its first joint conference with UCAS on Modernising Admissions to HE in a Changing Environment. It aimed to bring HE provider senior staff and other colleagues together to discuss and hear about changes in admissions and the applicant experience and how this may affect institutional policy and strategy. There were over 120 participants and was well received with 93% evaluating the day overall as being 'good' or 'very good'.

So far this year SPA has attended over 45 other conferences and events many of which have had a SPA speaker or workshop; and over 100 meetings, forums and networks. Our workshops and presentations continue to be considered as informative and useful by colleagues in the sector and provide an opportunity for SPA to network and keep in touch with topical issues in admissions.

138 people attended SPA's largest national conference yet "The Applicant Experience: Who benefits from the admissions process?" held in Manchester in June. Feedback showed that 80% of respondents evaluated the day as being 'good' or 'very good'. Some topics covered were suggested by sector colleagues and others concerned new and developing areas in admissions that SPA is working on, including, paperless admissions, contextual data, part-time admissions, vocational qualifications and progression and equality impact issues. Sir Muir Russell highlighted SPA achievements to date and future long term objectives; the conference produced stimulating debate, providing SPA with suggestions to take forward.

Our next conference will be in Glasgow on 3 December 2009, please see our website for details.

### Admissions Policies – Good Practice

The Schwartz Report in 2004 acknowledged that admissions to HE were 'generally fair', but stated that 'While universities and colleges generally publish their admissions policies as well as admissions criteria and processes for individual courses, the level of detail varies'. The public and government interest in this area is giving institutions added impetus to highlight and clarify their good practice in admissions policies and processes to prospective applicants, via their websites.

In January institutions in England were asked to provide Widening Participation Strategic Assessments by HEFCE and OFFA. While acknowledging that institutions offering HE have academic freedom to determine and apply the criteria for the admission of students, they also have the responsibility to make these clear and transparent, and the assessments have to include a high level statement on admissions.

SPA has been developing guidance to assist and support UK HE providers to develop further their good practice and professionalism when considering, reviewing, updating, publishing and disseminating a transparent and fair admissions policy; a draft was circulated in March 2009. It proposed that institutions consider a wide range of policies and provides detail to develop the precepts of the QAA Code of Practice on admissions (2006). Following feedback and suggestions from colleagues in institutions it has been revised and it is being used, not only to inform Strategic Assessments but throughout the UK when policies are being reviewed. The latest version can be found on our website at <http://www.spa.ac.uk/good-practice/admissions-policies.html>

### Admissions Tests

One of SPA's objectives has been to monitor the use of admissions tests by HE providers for admission to full-time undergraduate courses, and to consider issues related to the validity and rationale underlying the use of tests.

The information is revised and published on our website each year to ensure it is as accurate as possible. We have identified a total of 84 tests in use in the UK, as declared to UCAS for 2010 entry and from SPA's research and discussion with institutions. Although this an increase of 17 tests on the 67 recorded last year, institutions generally state this is explained by efforts to improve transparency about the use of tests as part of the admissions decision-making process.

Admissions tests are still a small part of HE sector admissions decision-making. They are used by about 0.7% of the 48,237 courses currently in the UCAS scheme and this percentage figure has stayed the same since last year. About 21% of the 304 HE providers in the UCAS scheme for 2010 entry use tests and for a variety of purposes; this figure is an increase from 16% shown in the 2009 analysis, and mainly explained by increased transparency by those HE providers using their own tests rather than one of the main tests (such as BMAT, GAMSAT, LNAT, STEP and UKCAT).

Information relating to admissions tests is available on the SPA website at <http://www.spa.ac.uk/admission-tests/index.html>.

## SPA Conferences feedback

"Well organised and structured. Good thought-provoking speakers"

Mary Brittain, Head of Schools, Colleges & Community Outreach, Nottingham Trent University



"Both workshops very useful and brought together different aspects of Admissions, WP and Government agenda"

Monica Kulkarni, Schools Liaison Officer, University of Westminster



"I have gained knowledge and inspiration regards managing change related to the applicant experience"

Steve Minney, Student Recruitment Officer, Swansea University

## The SPA team



From left to right:

**Annie Doyle** – Senior Project Officer

**Janet Graham** – Director

**Ruth Burchell** – Project Officer

**Sheila Ham** – Administrative Support Officer

**Dan Shaffer** – Senior Project Officer

**Leslie Currie** – Senior Project Officer

SPA welcomes discussion with staff in all sectors to share good practice and professionalism in admissions, student recruitment and widening participation

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## Good Practice in Interviewing Applicants to HE

There has been considerable interest from the sector in SPA's Good Practice Statement on Interviewing Applicants for undergraduate university and college courses or programmes (published December 2008). On request, SPA has visited several institutions to discuss interviews with academic staff actively involved in the process, and with colleagues working in admissions offices. Examples of excellent practice throughout the sector continue to be identified, and visits to institutions have been a two-way activity, with SPA staff refining their ideas about interview good practice and helping colleagues to reflect and review their interview process and practices.

Positive feedback from institutions visited by SPA staff continues to be received:

*"For academics and support staff involved with interviews, it gave them an opportunity of attending a session where current practices and procedures could be discussed as well as getting advice and feedback from SPA on ways of improving how interviews could be structured in order that they are fair, transparent and consistent."* Sheila Kay, Admissions Manager, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen

The Good Practice Statement has also been used a basis for workshops on Interview Skills, delivered by an external provider at London South Bank University. These concentrated on the effective completion of interview documentation, ensuring good rapport with interviewees and ensuring interviewers have good questioning skills.

*"The Good Practice Statement is a very comprehensive guide that covers process, legislation and skills. It is an integral part of delivering my Interview Skills workshops which include mock interviews with actors as interviewees."* Robert Still, Independent Recruitment Consultant working with London South Bank University

SPA would welcome any comments about or feedback on the Good Practice Statement.

## Criminal Convictions

SPA's Criminal Convictions Guidance (published December 2008) covers both the admission of students who have committed criminal offences in relation to the institution's 'duty of care' and also admission to courses which require applicants to have enhanced disclosure through an official body such as the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) and registration with organisations such as the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA).

We work with colleagues from institutions, UCAS, UUK and GuildHE on issues surrounding criminal convictions in relation to HE admissions policies and practice. We have dealt with enquiries on integrating criminal convictions checks with interviews and requests for 'good practice' examples of correspondence with unsuccessful applicants. These enquiries provide SPA with information on the current issues and problems faced by the sector when dealing with criminal conviction matters.

SPA is acutely aware of the significant importance of the setting up and implementation of the ISA and the vetting and barring scheme. We have been working closely with HE practitioners and colleagues at UUK and GuildHE contributing to their discussions with the Department for Schools and Families (DCSF) and the developing ISA. SPA has contributed to recommendations of good practice and we will continue to make institutions aware of new developments throughout the UK.

We continue to collaborate with HE providers and UCAS in looking at the "criminal convictions question" in UCAS Apply, examining how it can be improved to further meet the needs of institutions. SPA is fully involved in developments including discussions with the UK Information Commissioner concerning possible changes to the question.