

Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme

SPA is an independent programme established in 2006 and funded by all UK higher education funding councils. We work to support the continuing development of fairness and good practice in admissions with Higher Education Institutions, Further Education Colleges and other HE stakeholders.

This factsheet gives an insight into our current work for the 2009/10 academic year. We hope you find it useful and interesting, if you would like to learn more about what we do and what we have achieved please take a look at our website www.spa.ac.uk or contact any member of the SPA team.

Janet Graham, Director of SPA

Conferences

In autumn 2009 we ran, with UCAS, two well attended seminars on Good Practice in Offer-Making. The SPA national conference held in Glasgow in December was our most popular to date with over 145 participants from around the UK. The SPA seminar on 10 March 2010 for admissions practitioners covers current issues affecting practice and procedures in admissions.

Bookings are already coming in for the joint SPA/UCAS conference *Managing Change: Improving Entry to HE for Pro-Vice-Chancellors, Vice Principals and senior managers with a strategic responsibility for recruitment and admissions* to be held on 25 May 2010 in London. Speakers include Mary Curnock Cook, the new Chief Executive of UCAS and Professor David Eastwood, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Birmingham. See our website or contact Ruth Burchell, SPA Project Officer, r.burchell@spa.ac.uk for more details.

Comments on some SPA events:

"Found it all very interesting and useful to my job... I liked finding out about other University practice, both good and bad!"

(An Admissions Practitioner, SPA National Conference, December 2009)

"This has been a very informative and useful seminar – Thank you"

(Dr Audrey Matthews, Director of Widening Participation Initiatives, De Montfort University, Leicester)



Managing expectations with record numbers of applications

UCAS data shows an increase in applications of 22.9% by January 2010. The unprecedented demand for places has meant that institutions have adopted various methods to manage numbers and planned targets in the light of restrictions on funding and student numbers in England and Scotland. Changes to requirements mid-cycle are not good practice, though SPA understands that institutions may consider they are needed for exceptional cases. Now is the key time for admissions staff to liaise closely with colleagues in marketing, planning, academic departments with large numbers of applicants etc, to manage numbers, internal and external expectations and communications. For reasons of fairness HEIs should make clear as soon as possible on their websites/ Entry Profiles any changes they make to published standard offers or processes at confirmation, clearing and adjustment.



QCF – Qualifications and Credit Framework

By the end of 2010 all vocational qualifications in England and Wales will be in the QCF, Scotland already has the SQCF. This will affect how qualifications for entry will be presented for progression to HE. SPA is working with QCDA and UCAS to get information and FAQs out to HE about this. See our website for more information.



Comment regarding a SPA visit to HEI:

“It was very helpful to get feedback from a ‘critical’ friend. In particular it was useful to hear about how others in the sector are responding to the challenges that we are facing.”

Ian Roberts, Deputy Head of Marketing Recruitment and Communication (Student Recruitment), University of Cumbria

Paperless Processing

From September 2013 UCAS will no longer issue paper copy application forms to HEIs. The UCAS Change User Group agreed a series of case studies, produced by SPA working with institutions that have ‘paperlite’ or paperless systems for admissions processing or have moved aspects of their admissions processing to online systems, would be helpful. These can be found on the SPA website at www.spa.ac.uk/national-developments/index.html.

The case studies identify issues facing HEIs in relation to this significant change, providing valuable insights into the different systems being adopted. SPA is still keen to hear from more volunteers to provide case studies; particularly from HEIs which have produced quantitative statistical analysis of improved turnaround for senior management. HEI colleagues agreed that it would be useful to have at least one tangible measure of success to use in negotiations for additional resources needed for a paperless system. If you would like to comment or volunteer, please contact Annie Doyle, Senior Project Officer, at a.doyle@spa.ac.uk.

Part-time admissions

Part-time study is high on the political agenda with HEIs being encouraged to look at part-time provision to enhance fair access, improve access for adults, allow flexible study and meet the needs of employers. SPA is developing a good practice statement and an initial paper which addresses some of the key part-time issues is at www.spa.ac.uk/good-practice/part-time.html. We have been in contact with HE providers, Lifelong Learning Networks and key HE related organisations and experts (such as the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL) and Action on Access) throughout the UK.



SPA is keen to receive more feedback on our document to ensure it meets the needs of applicants, advisers and institutions. To tell us what would make the document useful to your institution or to share good practice, contact Leslie Currie, Senior Project Officer, l.currie@spa.ac.uk. We realise that part-time study is often dealt with by different parts of institutions, so please pass this information to colleagues working in this area.

Vocational Qualifications

Not all students apply to enter HE directly from school or college and many take qualifications which are less familiar to admissions decision-makers. These different progression routes include what has been described as being less ‘traditional’ i.e. not purely academic routes.

It is important HEIs consider inclusion of these qualifications for progression to courses or programmes, particularly in relation to the provision of transparent entry requirements and offer information. Applicants need clarity to know whether their qualifications match the requirements of their chosen course. This clarity helps applicants to choose suitable courses and avoids wasting a choice on an ill-targeted application or not applying at all.

SPA has drawn together aspects of good practice in a draft statement and checklist of principles for articulating and assessing vocational qualifications for entry to HE. These will be disseminated to sector stakeholders for consultation early in 2010. To comment, share good practice or raise issues please contact Annie Doyle, Senior Project Officer at a.doyle@spa.ac.uk



Feedback to applicants

SPA's good practice statement on feedback to unsuccessful applicants is on our website. In February 2008 SPA and the Delivery Partnership made the recommendation that HEIs review their feedback procedures and make updated policies available on their websites from December 2008. Such policies could be just a short paragraph within the main admissions policy. A recent review of a sample number of institutions by SPA revealed policies on feedback were not available or difficult to find on some websites. In the light of requests for feedback likely to come this spring, institutions may wish to check their policy and consider addressing this issue for the benefit of applicants and their advisers.

Unleashing Aspiration: fair access to the professions

On 18 January the Prime Minister announced the Government's response to the Alan Milburn report on Fair Access to the Professions, Unleashing Aspiration, and the push for increased social mobility with HEIs urged to take into account the educational and social context of students' achievement in their admissions process to widen access. HEIs may find it helpful to consider:

- what contextual data is available;
- how they can use contextual data as part of widening access and admissions activities;
- how this impacts on admissions processes;
- the transparency of their procedures on their website/ in Entry Profiles,

as part of their annual monitoring and review of admissions policies and statistics. The report is available at www.bis.gov.uk/unleashingaspiration. The Government responses to the Millburn recommendations are specific to England; however the challenges are common across the four countries of the United Kingdom. SPA is working with HEIs on contextual data issues, see section below.

Contextual Data

Contextual data issues continue to generate interest with several reports and recommendations on social mobility, lifelong learning and progression to HE emerging from across the UK.

Following discussion at a number of events SPA has produced key principles around the use of contextual data as part of the assessment of an individual's application. Work is being undertaken to develop these, together with evidence from HEIs, into a draft good practice statement to be circulated and agreed with the sector. The need for reliable and valid data, particularly educational but also socio-economic, is being taken forward by SPA working with colleagues in HEIs and UCAS, in discussion with all UK administrations.

Future work will explore additional data from other sources (HESA, the funding councils etc) and via MIAP. Further research in the use of contextual data by HEIs and others could identify new and positive ways to use it. Additional information is on our website or contact Janet Graham, Director of SPA, j.graham@spa.ac.uk.

Disabled applicants

The Equality Challenge Unit has highlighted the HEFCE review of policy on, and an evaluation of the provision and support available to, disabled students in higher education. Significant progress in support for disabled students has been made and further work is needed to move towards disability equality. The review is at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09%5F49/



The revised QAA Code of Practice, Section 3: Students with disabilities will be published early in 2010 and is at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/default.asp

Issues raised in the review of policy and the Code of Practice will need to be addressed during the admissions process.

“We found the visit very useful and helpful, enabling us to reflect on our practice. As a result we have reviewed our website, we are also looking at giving more details of student responsibilities and at a statement for looked after children.”

Marion Lowe, Registrar and Clerk to the Governors, St Mary's University College



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

For more information about the SPA Programme please contact

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Applicant Experience Strategy

SPA views a good applicant experience as interactive participation and engagement before, during and after admissions, rather than a passive, linear journey through a process. Our research on the applicant experience strategy can be found at www.spa.ac.uk/applicant-experience, it includes a definition of the applicant experience; flowcharts for mapping institution-applicant interaction against admissions processes; and recommendations of good practice on the pre-application stage. Work on the application, post-application and transition stages will follow throughout 2010.

SPA has given presentations and workshops on this issue throughout the UK and it has proved to be of interest to practitioners throughout HEIs and encouraged joined up thinking with other colleagues involved in the admissions process.

We have visited institutions to discuss an applicant experience strategy as part of a review of current practice. We are keen to hear from any institutions who may consider this approach or to share good practice to use as case studies. Please contact Dan Shaffer, Senior Project Officer, d.shaffer@spa.ac.uk.

Key Messages from SPA:

Since 2006 SPA has engaged with issues which are relevant to widening access, student recruitment and admissions to support HE institutions. Information on all of these can be found on our website:

- Good Practice statements on interviews, admissions policies, criminal convictions and feedback to applicants;
- Guidance on issues such as the age of admission, native language qualifications and accelerated learning;
- Entry Profiles and the need for them to be clear, comprehensive, of high quality and updated regularly;
- SPA's important work on admissions tests and the need for HEIs to be clear about their validity, purpose and justification;
- Much of this work builds on the need for transparency of policies and procedures outlined in the principles in the Schwartz Report, and its review from 2008, managed by SPA, which are hosted on our website.

The SPA Team is always happy to discuss these and other issues with admissions professionals. Please do get in touch.

The SPA team



From left to right:

Leslie Currie – Senior Project Officer
Sheila Ham – Administrative Support Officer
Dan Shaffer – Senior Project Officer
Ruth Burchell – Project Officer
Janet Graham – Director
Annie Doyle – Senior Project Officer