



Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme

SPA is an 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 and helps universities and colleges maintain and enhance excellence and professionalism in admissions, student recruitment and widening inclusion. SPA works closely with institutions offering Higher Education programmes and other stakeholders to provide resources for institutions which wish to develop and update their admissions practice and policy and enhance their quality, transparency, reputation and fairness.

Since its inception in mid 2006 the SPA Programme has become an objective, authoritative and enduring source of evidence and advice about admissions matters. The SPA Steering Group acknowledged this and the External Evaluator for SPA, Professor Geoff Layer, has stated *'the team is to be congratulated for the progress it has made to date in securing sector ownership.'*

SPA will build upon the Programme's successes to date in its future development as the leader in good practice and professionalism in admissions. There has been a momentum for change in institutions over the last year which indicated a real interest in the broader SPA agenda.

To take this strategic leadership role forward to promote change in HEIs and to ensure underpinning by good practice and professionalism, SPA will work with Pro-Vice-Chancellors and senior staff in HEIs as well as admissions tutors and administrators. This will be at institution visits, via the Higher Education Academy networks and centres and through existing networks and HE missions groups and the policy makers in each of the UK administrations.

Feedback from the HEIs we have visited has been positive and some quotes are included here.

HE recruitment is driven by the big HEIs. It was useful to have the opportunity to outline how different it is for an HE within FE institution which has much smaller HE numbers and a very different applicant base. The visit was very helpful especially as we have an institutional QAA review next year and we are currently reviewing our Admissions Policy.

The combination of both the visit and the SPA conference in Llandrindod Wells has been very timely and will provide very useful guidance for our Admissions Policy review process.

Gill Bosson - Llandrillo College

A really useful look at what the University is doing right, what areas we can develop etc. regarding admissions. Janet was able to give some good tips on preparing for a new cycle, and we discussed actually publicising some of our good practice areas (i.e. criminal conviction procedure should be part of Admissions Policy etc.) We re looking forward to the information on good practice in interviews. We re interested in raising the profile of admissions professionals generally.

Olivia Ramsbottom - University of Derby

Achievements to date

This publication highlights some of SPA's achievements in fulfilment of our objectives, which include:

- Visiting over 100 universities and colleges in the first two years (34.8% of the 311 HEIs in the UCAS scheme, representing about 60% of applications)
- Auditing the use of admissions tests, and considering issues relating to their rationale, purpose, validity, manageability and impact
- Working with the UK HE sector-led Delivery Partnership, particularly in encouraging HE to develop more detailed Entry Profiles on UCAS Course Search and in good practice and policy in providing feedback to unsuccessful applicants
- Assessing, with UCAS, the current data and statistics available from a range of sources available to practitioners to support professional decision making
- Informing the UCAS CPD programme for HE staff; feeding in aspects of good practice and topics for training, and discussing the importance of training for professionalism with HEIs
- Looking at initiatives implemented by the UK's different administrations and their impact on admissions
- Examining admissions policies in terms of good practice relating to content and transparency, via web-based research and discussions with HEIs, to develop guidance on admissions policy.

Conferences

Since 2006 SPA has attended over 70 conferences and events - many of which had a SPA speaker or workshop. Of SPA's own conferences our Welsh conference attracted 57 participants while our conference in Scotland had an attendance of 75, with those attending coming from higher education, schools and widening inclusion organisations. Both received an enthusiastic reception. Participants learned about the work of the Delivery Partnership and attended workshops on the QAA Admissions Code of Practice, equality and diversity matters, good practice in interviews, the applicant experience, applicant feedback, criminal convictions processes and policy and 14-19 Curriculum developments throughout the UK, as well as networking with colleagues.

Our Northern Ireland seminar in June 2008 involved 65 participants from schools and colleges as well as all four higher education institutions and there was useful discussion between the two sectors. 71% of participants considered the seminar to be 'good' or 'very good' and over 82% said it had met their expectations fairly well, well or very well, which SPA judged to be successful for a first event of this type with a mixed audience.

An admissions seminar in Cheltenham in June 2008 gave an update for admissions practitioners on SPA's current work with an opportunity for discussion and an exchange of views on issues of common concern. There were presentations by SPA staff on the need for more transparency in admissions policies and on good practice in connection with criminal convictions and interviews. This was a highly focussed event for admissions staff and over 92% of participants rated the seminar as 'good' or 'very good' with 88% indicating the seminar had met their expectations well or very well.

Interviews ..Good Practice

Interviews are an important – and often controversial – part of the admissions process, particularly in some high-demand courses and courses with professional-body requirements. SPA is currently working on a good practice statement relating to interviews which will cover recommendations including interview arrangements, training, transparency and fairness.

The draft of the statement is available on the SPA website at: <http://www.spa.ac.uk/good-practice/interviews.html>. Information from HEIs' policies, conferences and events has been analysed to inform the statement and the revised version will be circulated for comment via admissions mail bases, with a view to the finalised Good Practice Statement being available on our website www.spa.ac.uk.

Criminal Convictions Policy ..Good Practice

Whenever an HEI receives an application it considers whether or not there are any issues related to criminal convictions which it should consider. This has many aspects – the enhanced disclosure needed for professional courses, an institution's duty of care to protect all members of their community, the concern of institutions to combat extremism. One of our objectives is to produce a statement of good practice giving guidance on the wider legal, administrative and social environment and giving practical examples of the procedures and good practice which HEIs can adopt.

SPA's research has included discussions with Governments and official bodies throughout the UK and with specialist HE organisations, such as the accommodation officers association ASRA. Desk based research has covered websites and publications and reviewed practice and procedures at HEIs. Issues raised include the changes in the administrative and legislative framework relating to the protection of vulnerable groups, the impact of Age Discrimination legislation and ways in which clearance for professional courses can be streamlined.

The draft guidance on good practice will be circulated for comment via admissions mail bases and we look forward to colleagues' valuable comments and input. The finalised Statement is available on our website.

Schwartz Report Review

The 'Schwartz Report' - Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice - was published in September 2004; it can be found at <http://www.admissions-review.org.uk/>. The Schwartz Report reached the opinion that a fair admissions system is one that provides equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of background, to gain admission to a course suited to their ability and aspirations. It also stated that a fair system should ensure that the factors considered in the assessment process are accurate and relevant.

DIUS commissioned SPA to manage the research team reviewing the implementation of the Schwartz Report recommendations. All HEIs in the UK had the opportunity to feed into the review and demonstrate their developments in

the visit was a useful reminder to ourselves about areas that we need to work on.

Margaret Parratt - Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh

Very helpful, processes relating to the implementation of the new CRM for enquiries and applications plus paperless admissions systems were discussed. Policies required for the public domain are currently under formulation and reviews of our website content in line with other major changes are under way.

Bev Woodhams - University of Greenwich

New standard operating procedures were being prepared prior to the visit and we have now embedded these into the day-to-day work of the Unit.

Furthermore, as a result of preparation for the visit additional changes have been instigated including establishing an Admissions Forum whereby policy issues related to admissions can be discussed and debated with nominated Faculty staff on a quarterly basis and plans are also underway for a University-wide Admissions Conference later this year.

Ioan Evans - University of Glamorgan



The SPA team



From left to right:

Sheila Hayler – Administrative Support Officer

Leslie Currie – Senior Project Officer

Janet Graham – Director

Annie Doyle – 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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fair admissions over the last three years. The research survey was circulated in March 2008 throughout the UK and 160 survey returns were received, a good response. Of these 94 were HEIs, with 74 from England, 11 from Scotland, six from Wales and three from Northern Ireland. Analysis of the survey responses together with a review of HEI websites to investigate the accessibility of admissions information and policies was undertaken in April/May. Over 50 HEIs volunteered to be case study institutions to highlight their changes and development of good practice over the last three years and from these ten HEIs in England were followed up. The final report went to DIUS in the of Autumn 2008 and can be viewed on our website.

Looking ahead

The Schwartz Report identified an on-going need for a centre for expertise for admissions, and the SPA Programme was set up in 2006. SPA was funded for two years initially to 31 July 2008 and we have secured funding for a further three years until 31 July 2011. The Chief Executive of HEFCE, on behalf of all the funding councils, stated:

'We are pleased with the progress of the SPA to date and believe that the work undertaken during its first two years of operation has and will continue to give the programme a profile and presence in the sector.'

SPA aims to promote change in HEIs underpinned by good practice, transparency and fairness. We will build on our success to date as the leader in professionalism in admissions by working with Pro-Vice-Chancellors and senior staff in HEIs as well as continuing to work with admissions tutors and administrators. SPA's plans for the next three years include:

- Exploring issues around the 14-19 curriculum relating to good practice in progression and admission to HE
- Examining vocational, skills and work based learning routes into HE, including the role of compacts and progression agreements, foundation degrees and employee/employer engagement
- Working with the organisations involved in equality and diversity issues on matters relating to equality of opportunity and how this impacts admissions
- Continuing to develop its role in good practice, fairness and transparency relating to widening access/participation and in linking schools and colleges to HEIs
- Exploring and developing good practice around what makes a good applicant experience in order to develop HEIs' recognition of the strategic importance of recruitment, admissions and widening access to the institution
- Examining admissions processes and procedures for part-time applicants and establishing and analysing an evidence base of current practice to review equality of opportunity and good practice
- Continuing to take cognizance of the policies and strategies of the individual administrations in the UK.

To support the expansion of the Programme two new members of staff will join us. Dan Schaffer from Aston University as Senior Project Officer in December 2008 and Ruth Burchell as Project Officer who joined us in October 2008 both of whom have extensive experience of working within the higher education sector.