

# Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme

SPA was established four years ago and is recognised by universities, colleges and key stakeholders as having a positive impact in developing and supporting fairness, professionalism and good practice in higher education admissions, student recruitment and widening inclusion. We work throughout the UK as a shared service providing impartial and independent advice. SPA is an autonomous Programme with a team of six staff, funded by all UK higher education funding councils. We are based at, but separate to, UCAS in Cheltenham. This fact sheet gives an insight into current issues in admissions and our achievements towards our objectives. We hope that you find it useful, if you would like to learn more about what we do and how we can help you, please visit our website [www.spa.ac.uk](http://www.spa.ac.uk) or contact any member of the SPA team.

**Janet Graham, Director of SPA**  
October 2010

## Good practice and planning 2011 Entry

In June 2010, UUK wrote to member Vice-Chancellors and other executive heads to encourage, "Positive and proactive steps for 2011 entry." With applications to HE continuing to be buoyant against a backdrop of the recession, tighter fiscal controls from funding bodies and within institutions throughout the UK, constraints on full time undergraduate numbers and the need for institutions to seek additional funding streams, the management and planning for the undergraduate intake in 2011 is a crucial part of every institution's strategy.

Many institutions have experienced increased competition for entry to undergraduate places and have responded by changing their traditional recruitment/selection practices. SPA will be working closely with the sector throughout the 2011 admissions cycle to embed good practice in managing entry numbers and the clear and transparent publication of entry requirements. Events such as the joint SPA/UCAS 'Admissions and Recruitment: Planning for 2011 and beyond' on 28 September 2010 support institutions in forming action plans for 2011. SPA staff are happy to discuss any individual institution's queries on planning 2011 entry.

*"We found our discussions with you very helpful in guiding our continuing commitment to fair access as we grapple with an exceptional increase in applications this year and what seems likely to be a very different landscape"*  
Dr J L Rees, Vice Principal (Academic Quality & Customer Service), Edinburgh Napier University

## Confirmation, Adjustment and Clearing 2010

The SPA Senior Project Officers are very grateful to the Universities of Bedfordshire, Liverpool, Bournemouth and Edinburgh Napier for inviting us to observe and work-shadow their staff over the Confirmation and Clearing period. We experienced key operational and planning meetings, offering help and advice where appropriate. Given the nature of such meetings, specific details must remain confidential, but the many principles of good practice observed and practical lessons learned will be used to inform our advice on planning for 2011 entry.

SPA staff were answering telephone queries from applicants and HEIs between Thursday, 19 August and Monday 23 August as part of the UCAS Helpline and HEI Team. This provided valuable experience in dealing with the volume and range of queries handled by UCAS at such a crucial time.

Our thanks to all the staff in HEIs and in UCAS who worked in such a professional and dedicated manner and congratulations to all the new students they have helped enter higher education.



## HE in FE

We have furthered our research on HE in FE admissions, through collaboration with organisations promoting access to HE in FE and via visits to individual colleges to share good practice. Please contact us if you have any HE in FE admissions queries.



*“We found the visit from SPA to be invaluable in preparation for IQER. Reflecting on their visit we revised and improved our HE strategy. This has had a positive impact on our practice.”*

Mary Herbert, Acting Director of Campus Weybridge (Adult Skills and HE), Brooklands College



## Current issues in admissions and key messages

- With increased applications against capped places and financial stringency, recruitment and admissions has continued to maintain a high profile in the media and SPA has been consulted on many developments. We understand the challenges colleagues face and work with senior managers and admissions staff to meet these by reviewing policies, practices and structures and discussing specific queries.
- Alan Milburn was appointed to lead on social mobility by the Coalition Government in August; his earlier work on Fair Access to the Professions supported the use of contextual data in admissions to HE.
- In August HEFCE produced a research report 'Understanding the needs of users of public information about higher education' ([www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2010/rd12\\_10/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2010/rd12_10/)). SPA urges institutions to make their entry requirements and selection and decision-making processes clear to applicants via Entry Profiles, websites etc..
- SPA's commitment to diversity, equality and widening inclusion is evidenced in our work with the Equality Challenge Unit to produce guidance on 'Equality Impact Assessments and Admissions' (<http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equality-in-admissions>).
- The UK should lead on professionalism and good practice in admissions to HE - or be equal to the best in the world. In April the Director visited Australia, New Zealand and the USA, meeting colleagues from institutions, government, and admissions organisations to discuss best practice and current developments. The findings will feed into our research and work with UK institutions.
- SPA is committed to a UK-wide role, working with the four administrations and funding councils, attending UCAS Practitioner, Standing and Qualification and Progression Groups and participating in events relating to policy in individual administrations.



## External Evaluation of the SPA Programme

The interim evaluation report by Professor Geoff Layer (Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Bradford University) focused on the impact of SPA on HE provider institutions across the UK. The report assessed the views of key sector personnel and the extent to which SPA influenced provider institutions' admissions policies and practices. Based on analysis of a survey of institutions and case studies, this positive report was welcomed by the SPA Steering Group in June. It demonstrated that although a relatively young organisation, overall SPA is making a significant impact and is clearly valued. It was unanimously agreed that SPA should continue for a further phase and a funding model be developed.

## Applicant Experience Strategy – The Application Stage

SPA considers a good applicant experience in terms of the interactive engagement before, during and after admissions, our research on the applicant experience can be found at [www.spa.ac.uk/applicant-experience](http://www.spa.ac.uk/applicant-experience). It includes information on designing an applicant experience strategy for institutions to map their pre-entry engagement, either to embed the applicant experience within their existing student experience strategy or to highlight it as a distinct institution strategy.

Information on the application stage published in August 2010 considers the purpose of an application, identifying engagement and identifying change. It includes considerations for institutions in setting quality thresholds for suitable applications as an aid to reviewing the suitability of the application process and accompanying information and advice.

We have visited institutions to discuss this strategy as part of their own practice reviews and are keen to hear from any institutions who may consider this approach or wish to share good practice. Please contact Dan Shaffer, Senior Project Officer, [d.shaffer@spa.ac.uk](mailto:d.shaffer@spa.ac.uk).

## Contextual Data in admissions

SPA has developed principles of the use of contextual data in admissions which were circulated to institutions in June and are on our website. SPA worked with a number of institutions to identify an initial 'basket of data' covering educational and socio-economic data from publicly available sources. Good practice is being developed to support institutions on what data can be used, how it is used and the what research and analysis institutions will need to do to demonstrate using such data will add value to the admissions process.

The Director gained the agreement of government departments throughout the UK to supply the data. UCAS would now be working with the UK administration statisticians and others to provide, for free, an initial set of contextual data to institutions from 2011, for 2012 entry. Institutions should assure themselves that data they used is based on analysis and evidence at their own institution, demonstrating it adds value to the admissions process.

## Part-time admissions – Good Practice Statement

A key area of interest to government and the HE sector; part-time admissions provides a way to widen access, improve flexibility and help meet the UK's skill and employment needs, however, there is little established good practice when it comes to recruitment and admissions.

SPA produced a note examining central issues in part time admissions which was discussed with contacts in government, funding councils, specialist part-time recruiting institutions, as well as key individuals at conferences. Our "Good Practice Statement" is based on discussions, feedback and supported by extensive research; it is available on our website at [www.spa.ac.uk/good-practice/part-time.html](http://www.spa.ac.uk/good-practice/part-time.html). The statement explores issues including the definition of 'part-time', information for part-time applicants, relations with employers and the application process. Underlying all is the principle that part-time applicants deserve the same level of information, consideration and support as their full-time counterparts. Work will continue and the statement will be brought to the attention of a wide ranging audience.

## Vocational Qualifications

SPA's work with the Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) in England to raise the level of knowledge of vocational qualifications for progression to HE within HEIs has identified the development of some clear progression routes for students with vocational qualifications.

SPA has worked with VETNET ([www.vetnetln.ac.uk](http://www.vetnetln.ac.uk)) as part of our objective to raise awareness of vocational qualifications within HE admissions. VETNET has developed progression routes into veterinary and animal related HE programmes, and its success has ensured it continues as a subscription-based association.

Progression agreements are based on activities undertaken by HEIs to support students from specified level 3 vocational qualifications. Activities relate to different stages of the

## Outcomes from Paperless Processing Seminar – 3 June 2010

This participative event provided opportunities for delegates to question the case study institutions, UCAS representatives and representatives from some software houses which provide technology to support admissions processing. There was also a group work session in which delegates discussed and shared issues relevant to their own institutions. Summary outcomes will be disseminated to stakeholders in the autumn.



Protecting  
Vulnerable Groups  
Scheme

CHECK TO PROTECT

## Vetting and barring scheme update

New arrangements for registration under the new ISA/VBS safeguarding schemes by Institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland were put on hold in June 2010, following the government announcement of a review. Meanwhile, in Scotland the "Protecting Vulnerable Groups Scheme" will commence in November 2010.

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



## 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

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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student lifecycle from pre-application, through the admissions process and supporting retention following entry to HE, including a commitment to monitor and review the agreements.

VETNET progression accords ease progression into certain subjects at HE by offering specific guidance for vocational students. Colleges clearly state activities underpinning the agreements and list specific entry requirements. Formal agreements ensure colleges preparing students have a clear understanding of the requirements for success at HE level.

## Events and Conferences

In response to demand, SPA ran two seminars in June: “Managing Numbers for 2010 entry” and “Paperless Processing in admissions”. Over 190 delegates attended from 68 different institutions. These participative events produced key points for HEIs and sector organisations; the most recent was the publication of ‘Considerations for a Confirmation Action Plan’.

In September, SPA and UCAS co-hosted a new event ‘Admissions and Recruitment: Planning for 2011 and beyond’ to support institutions in planning and managing admissions for the 2011 intake. Next year SPA will host an event examining the role of academic staff in admissions and in July 2011 will contribute to a research symposium on contextual data and its use in admissions and widening inclusion.

See [www.spa.ac.uk/about-us/spa-conferences/index.html](http://www.spa.ac.uk/about-us/spa-conferences/index.html) for details of future conferences and outcomes from previous events.



*“I spoke to so many people willing to share their experiences and practices in such a friendly and open manner. The organisation of each seminar was excellent as I had the opportunity to sit, listen and learn from some wonderfully experienced people.”*

(Julie Isherwood, Admissions Officer HE, Myerscough College, June 2010)

## Admissions Tests – Survey Results

The results of SPA’s admissions tests research have remained largely unchanged since 2007. Used by a very small proportion of courses (0.8% of the 43360 UCAS courses in 2011) and a small proportion of institutions (21% of the 306 HEIs in UCAS for 2011), the figures confirm that tests are not a big part of HE admissions decision-making.

SPA’s questionnaire explored issues including: additional information provided to HEIs by the national tests; evidence of predictive value; rationales underpinning institutions’ own tests. A good response was received and initial analysis indicates:

- Differences between tests declared to UCAS and confirmed by HEIs e.g. STEP and TSA;
- The majority of institutions’ own tests were for literacy and numeracy: assessing applicants without GCSE Mathematics equivalence; providing additional applicant information; meeting nursing and midwifery council guidelines;
- Reasons for using the national tests included: differentiating between equally well-qualified applicants; the demonstration of skills not tested by other pre-HE qualifications.

Findings will be followed up and disseminated to stakeholders.

