

Fair admissions to higher education  
- a review of the implementation of  
the Schwartz Report principles three  
years on:

Report 3: Themes and good practice  
case studies

Centre for Education and Inclusion Research, Sheffield Hallam University and  
Institute for Access Studies, Staffordshire University

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## CONTENTS

	Page
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 Background	4
1.2 Aims	4
1.3 Methodology	5
1.4 Themes	5
<b>Theme 1: Institutions and the Schwartz Report</b>	<b>6</b>
i. Responses to the Schwartz Report's recommendations and principles	7
ii. Impact of the QAA code of practice on admissions to HE	8
iii. Summary	9
<b>Good Practice Guide 1:</b> Reviewing institutional admissions policy in light of the Schwartz Report (Durham University)	10
<b>Theme 2: Staff training and Continuing Professional Development</b>	<b>12</b>
i. Staff development and training of admissions staff	12
ii. Training for interviewing applicants	13
iii. Summary	15
<b>Good Practice Guide 2:</b> Developing an interview training scheme at a single-subject institution (Plymouth College of Art and Design)	16
<b>Theme 3: Pre-HE curriculum changes since the Schwartz Report</b>	<b>18</b>
i. Institutional perspectives	18
ii. Summary	21
<b>Good Practice Guide 3:</b> Understanding vocational qualifications (University of Bolton)	22
<b>Theme 4: Publicity and Transparency</b>	<b>23</b>
i. Entry Profiles	23
ii. Transparency for applicants	24
iii. Summary	26
<b>Good Practice Guide 4:</b> Sharing information in the development of Entry Profiles in a decentralised system (University of Hull)	27

<b>Good Practice Guide 5: Professionalism and transparency (South East Essex College)</b>	29
<b>Theme 5: Assessing contextual factors</b>	<b>31</b>
i. Criteria and weighting	31
ii. Summary	34
<b>Good Practice Guide 6: Contextual factors and transition support (Newman University College, Birmingham)</b>	35
<b>Theme 6: Admissions and the institutional mission</b>	<b>37</b>
i. The importance of admissions to the institutional mission	37
ii. The relationship between staff in admissions, student recruitment and widening participation	38
iii. Summary	42
<b>Good Practice Guide 7: Strategy linking responsibility for student recruitment, admissions and widening participation (University of Warwick)</b>	43
<b>Glossary of terms used in this report</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Appendix 1 – Sampling framework</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Appendix 2 – Job roles of interviewees</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Appendix 3 – Interview question schedules</b>	<b>51</b>

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) commissioned this review in response to one of the Schwartz Report's (2004)<sup>1</sup> recommendations to Government that a further review be undertaken after three years. This review was managed by the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme through a research team based at Sheffield Hallam University. The first report, of a series of three reports, summarises the evidence reviewed to examine how the principles outlined in the Schwartz Report have been implemented and what changes have occurred in admissions processes in higher education (HE) to support the Schwartz Report's five principles. The second report set out the full research findings and this, the final report, analyses the information gathered from ten case studies of English HE provider institutions, drawing out the themes emerging from the research and providing a series of good practice guides.

## 1.2 Aims

This report, based on ten case studies, is designed to assist Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Further Education Colleges (FECs) in their planning and further development of good practice and fair admissions and to provide evidence to inform the SPA Programme in its work of supporting HE providers to achieve this. Evidence from the case studies can be used to gauge the extent to which the Schwartz Report principles have been implemented, identify changes that have occurred in admissions processes since the Schwartz Report, and to what extent these changes can be seen as direct or indirect responses to the Schwartz Report's principles. Central to the case study element of the research has been a concern to assess how and to what extent institutional policy development has supported the five principles of fair admissions: to be transparent and provide consistent information to applicants; to select students who are able to fulfil their potential; to use reliable and valid assessment methods to assess applicants' potential; to minimise barriers to participation; and to enhance the professionalism of admissions decision-making by institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice (Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group – 2004) – hereafter known as the 'Schwartz Report'

### **1.3 Methodology**

Each case study consisted of interviews with, on average, five individuals who had senior management responsibility for admissions, widening participation, marketing, student affairs, as well as those with responsibility for operational management of policies and some responsibility for admissions to non-centralised academic subject areas. In total 50 individuals were interviewed (see Appendix 1, Table 3 for a breakdown by level of responsibility). The case study visits also included further data-gathering where appropriate and more in-depth desk-research was conducted into the course and 'information for applicants' pages of institutions' websites.

### **1.4 Themes**

The main themes identified in this report are presented in six broad thematic sections encompassing the five principles and the organisational structure of institutions:

1. Institutions and the Schwartz Report;
2. Staff training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD);
3. Pre-HE curriculum changes since the Schwartz Report;
4. Publicity and transparency;
5. Assessing contextual factors;
6. Admissions and the institutional mission.

In addition to the six thematic sections the report presents seven 'good practice guides' designed to illustrate how institutions have approached particular aspects of the admissions decision-making process within their specific contexts.

## ***Theme 1: Institutions and the Schwartz Report***

1. This section reports on how case study institutions operate in relation to a) the Schwartz Report principles and recommendations and b) admissions policy more generally. In most cases the Schwartz Report was considered by the executive group and usually also an academic board, senate (or equivalent committee) within the institution, with responsibility for summarising the findings and reporting back devolved to relevant officers of the institution. Institutional staff involved included Registrars and Deputy Registrars, Heads of Admissions, Heads of Student Services, Directors of Teaching and Learning and those with responsibility for Student Affairs, Equality and Diversity, Recruitment and/or Marketing.
2. In most cases the Schwartz Report was circulated widely for discussion and responses varied reflecting the differences in the structure and mission of the institution. In institutions with decentralised admissions systems the academic subject area representatives on the academic board would also have an interest in how the institution viewed the Schwartz Report and the extent to which they would change their school/department's admissions procedures. For most institutions there were no immediate resource implications, and in some cases this meant that discussion could take place across a wider group within the institution. For example, at the University of East London (UEL) the Report went to both the Central Management Team (comprising Deans of Schools, Directors and the Vice-Chancellors Group) and the Academic Board, because there were no identified resource implications.
3. The number and type of committees varied depending on institutional structure. For example, at Durham, the Report was discussed at Senior Management level, but also by Registry, the Academic Office, the office of the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning and the Learning and Teaching Committee. At Plymouth College of Art and Design, a single subject FE college with HE provision, the Report was considered by the Student Support and Learner Services Standing Committee of the Academic Board, with input from the Head of Student Affairs and the Academic Director of HE, all of whom report to the College Senior Management Team. Among case study institutions, monitoring, usually on an annual basis, occurred within these structures.

**(i) Responses to the Schwartz Reports' recommendations and principles**

4. Responses to the Schwartz Report's recommendations and principles were partly governed by institutional missions and strategy. This variation in perspective led case study institutions to demonstrate a general tendency to welcome or highlight aspects of the Report which they thought were already in place. As a result of this institutions tended to downplay its impact as a Report that drove them to question or review their practices. For example, institutions offering mostly recruiting courses (e.g. University of East London (UEL), Bolton, South East Essex College and Plymouth College of Art and Design) viewed the Report to some extent as endorsing their existing practices as 'student focussed anyway [and thus] fairness is less of an issue as fewer get turned down' and 'second nature to us' (UEL). Newman University College placed a strong emphasis on being a widening participation institution, and, like Bolton, declared that as they were already centralising their processes the Report had less impact on them. Interviewees at Newman thought that the consensus at the time (2004) was that the political sub-text of the Schwartz Report was that specific HEIs had specific problems and the review was aimed at those institutions. Therefore, from this perspective the review would not impact greatly on the widening participation approach adopted at Newman. South East Essex College expressed a similar view:

*"I think that we had a lot of the principles, without actually calling them that, already embedded in our practice. In answer to how did we respond? Probably minimally, because actually we were already doing things that we could benchmark against the principles" (Senior Manager responsible for Registry, South East Essex College).*

5. Equally, institutions with a different balance of recruiting and selecting courses (Nottingham, Durham, Warwick, Hull and Royal Holloway) chose to emphasise aspects of the Schwartz principles that accorded with their own strategic plans. For example, Nottingham and Royal Holloway echoed Bolton and Newman in citing their centralised admissions decision-making processes as evidence that they were 'moving towards Schwartz anyway' (Senior Manager with responsibility for Admissions, Nottingham). Royal Holloway also expressed this view:

*"We want to operate a fair admissions policy and we want to widen participation so the principles and recommendations of Schwartz are completely relevant" (Senior Manager with responsibility for Admissions, Royal Holloway)*



6. Generally, then, case study institutions from across the range tended to highlight aspects of the Report that they thought reflected well on existing practice. However, two institutions in particular chose to emphasise the exceptional nature of their context: Durham, a selective institution which defines itself as 'a federation of departments' noted that:

*“We have been mindful of the environment in which the university operates and the type of students it admits so we always have to consider if things are appropriate for Durham” (Senior Manager with responsibility for Registry and Admissions).*

7. The second institution to emphasise its own context, Plymouth College of Art and Design, was concerned about the perceived pressure on Art and Design institutions to use alternatives to interviews such as electronic portfolios (see Good Practice Guide 2, below). As a recruiting, single-subject specialist FE institution which draws a third of its intake from its own FE students and almost all from the local region, Plymouth College (in common with UEL, Bolton and Newman) was not concerned by other aspects of the Report.

**(ii) Impact of the QAA Code of Practice on Admissions to HE**

8. Case study institutions noted that Section 10 of the revised Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Code of Practice on admissions to higher education (2001 and its revised version, 2006) generally had a greater influence on policy and practice than the Schwartz

Report, partly because for some institutions (e.g. UEL) the Code contains formal practice recommendations that allow institutions to measure up against the precepts. For other institutions the QAA's quality audit role means that the Code was taken account of in a way that a report such as the Schwartz Report was not. At Hull for example:

*“We’ve analysed what we do against the Code... because it’s obviously what we’re then formally audited against. We do have an internal audit process as well where they pick on certain aspects which the QAA Code [highlights] just because of the nature of audit.” (Senior Manager with responsibility for Admissions, Hull).*

9. At Newman there is a general perception that the Code is embedded in their admissions policy and that this had a more significant impact than the Schwartz Report:

the institution reviews and assesses practice against the Code which in turn provides the framework for a system of monitoring and improving procedures. At other case study institutions it was noted that the Code had more influence on specific issues such as feedback to applicants. This stimulated a schedule of activity at UEL and South East Essex College designed to more closely match other institutions' work on mapping their processes to the precepts of the Code. At Newman, senior management commented that the Code was more important than the Schwartz Report because the College is accountable to the QAA. This was also noted by a Senior Manager with responsibility for Admissions at UEL: "We see Schwartz as guidance, the QAA as, 'you have to do this'".

10. In other case study institutions, the Code either played an equal role in highlighting areas of concern, or in the case of Durham played a role in stimulating a review of admissions policy (see Good Practice Guide 1, below). Elsewhere the Code was treated in the same way as the Schwartz Report, as a guide to good practice with which institutions could compare current practice, although several institutions took the opportunity to report that they did not wait for reports such as Schwartz to provide a better and fairer admissions service.

**(iii) Summary**

11. Case study institutions tended to react to the Schwartz Report from their own perspectives and chose to emphasise recommendations and principles that reflected what they were doing well. The Schwartz Report is credited with adding to the evidence base and to the general intellectual framework in which reforms to admissions policy and practice were presented, as demonstrated by the policy review being undertaken at Durham; elsewhere the language used was of the Report helping 'push things through' and of it being 'useful to focus people's minds'. However, on specific issues the QAA Code of Practice and SPA (especially in relation to feedback to applicants) were seen as more important drivers of change.

## **Good Practice Guide 1:**

### **Reviewing institutional admissions policy in light of the Schwartz Report - Durham University**

**Durham University had 29,640 applicants and accepted 3,651 students through the UCAS system in 2007. Durham has a relatively decentralised system (with admissions decision-making in academic schools) at present but is in the process of ensuring greater consistency across the institution. The admissions policy statement is on the institution's website and can be accessed via the homepage. It has Entry Profiles for 64% of its courses (UCAS 2008).**

Durham University is currently (May 2008) engaged in a major review of admissions policy as part of a process by which major institutional policies are reviewed approximately every five years. Though not stimulated directly by the Schwartz Report, the Durham review is informed by many of the issues raised in the Report, such as the need for greater transparency, the move towards centralisation, the move away from interviewing applicants and the need for increased selector training for those schools that do continue to interview. Several other key drivers are also apparent: the changing qualifications environment, the revisions to the QAA Code of Practice (2006), Key Performance Indicators that HESA has set Durham in relation to the make-up of its student body; and the refocusing of its OFFA Access Agreement. Although these wider factors have a significant impact on the development of admissions policy at Durham, the Schwartz Report has a presence in much of the thinking that has gone into the review, beyond its specific recommendations:

*“The Schwartz Report was useful to focus people's minds.... There was external reasoning why we wanted to do certain things, it was not just the whims of individual people in the university who thought that it was a good idea, it [Schwartz] was actually consistent identification of good practice, practice that was the result of quite significant consultation and research, was not just plucked out of the air, and was again appropriate to the environment in which we are now working.” (Senior Manager responsible for Admissions).*

Centralisation is one of the major concerns of those responsible for admissions at Durham, partly because of the traditional autonomy that departments have enjoyed (Durham describes itself as a federation of departments). Senior managers do however recognise the need to formalise working practices that have developed on an ad hoc basis in relation to admissions:

*“We think there are very important elements of good practice in what we do and some areas where we were lagging behind good practice. We hadn't codified [our practices] and therefore relied on informal procedure culture within the university to underpin and embed our admissions practices, and we are at the point in time where we have to make sure that our culture and our practice is explicit, written down and we have a consistent approach” (Pro-Vice Chancellor, Teaching and Learning).*

In the Durham context, this will take the form of locating responsibility at the lowest appropriate level consistent with effective decision-making, which in practice means that decisions are decentralised but in accordance with centrally agreed procedures and policies:

*“Ultimately, subject tutors within departments must have responsibility to make decisions and judgements about aptitude, and about students that can best benefit from the Durham experience in the context of policies relating to a fair process that is auditable. [This means ensuring there are] ...checks and balances on the system and that it is not open to either procedural or other irregularities. In this context we have very clear reference points, Schwartz is one of those but there are others that we need to take into account when shaping our own principles” (Pro-Vice Chancellor, Teaching and Learning).*

One area where there has been some difficulty agreeing a University policy is the interviewing of applicants, for example chemistry and computer science (where applicants do not have computer science A levels) and tutors believe it is difficult to gauge the aptitude of applicants for these courses without interview. Here the Durham review will result in new principles for interviewers, which have drawn on guidance from SPA amongst other sources.

Transparency is another aspect of the Schwartz agenda that Durham's review will address, ensuring that 100% of courses have Entry Profiles for the 2008/09 academic year, working on 'Frequently Asked Questions' for course information web pages and the How to Apply section of the website. For the Pro-Vice Chancellor, transparency is a matter of being explicit about policies on matters such as the university's attitude towards the Advanced Diplomas and whether interviews and tests are used as part of the selection process.

## **Theme 2: Staff Training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD)**

13 This theme comprises of two sections, the first covering staff development and training activity carried out within admissions teams, the second looking at the specific issue of training staff who interview applicants which is of particular importance to admissions tutors in decentralised decision-making schools/departments/faculties (where interviews can be more prevalent, e.g. education, medicine, veterinary science, law and chemistry). Staff development in the first section is largely concerned with the dissemination of information from admissions teams to other staff members, while in the latter section the staff development of those interviewing applicants is of importance to wider aspects of the 'fair admissions' agenda: transparency; consistency; validity; reliability; and equity. This is the subject of Good Practice Guide 2: *Developing an interview training scheme at a single-subject institution*.

### **(i) Staff development and training of admissions staff**

14 Staff development is carried out by all of the case study institutions and covers issues such as new qualifications, equality and diversity, and aspects of management information systems. Sessions are usually annual at the beginning of each admissions cycle, though they can be *ad hoc* where appropriate. At Bolton, for example, the Senior Manager responsible for Admissions and Recruitment has organised a series of bespoke events:

*"I've run two specific staff development events on Schwartz and fair admissions, in 2005 and 2006. Last year I ran some 14-19 development workshops about admissions, changes in level 3 qualifications and I've just repeated that this year"*  
(Head of Recruitment and Admissions).

15 Similarly, at Nottingham staff development activity includes dissemination to non-admissions staff via a newsletter three times per year and "bespoke training sessions for staff to make schools aware of, for example, Advanced Diplomas, changes to A levels, the Extended Project" (Undergraduate Admissions Manager, Nottingham). At Newman, dissemination is in the form of a cascade system down from the Deputy Registrar who passes information to Heads of School to pass down to staff; there are plans to improve this by involving all staff in training.

16 UCAS training schemes and conferences play a role in staff development for most of the case study institutions: admissions staff at UEL are involved with UCAS Wider Picture; Warwick were involved in the pilot of the UCAS CPD programme but did not participate in the assessed component as they have their own extensive staff development programme; admissions staff at Newman have all used the UCAS CPD programme and attended training sessions at UCAS (one admissions decision-maker is a member of the UCAS Tariff Advisory Group); staff at Nottingham and Durham have also used the UCAS CPD programme in addition to Durham using outside training organisations on occasion.

17 In largely non-centralised admissions systems (e.g. Durham and Bolton) there is perhaps even more emphasis on dissemination of information. Bolton has an Admission Tutors forum for its five academic schools:

*“We have an umbrella group covering admission across the whole of the university. That’s been running now for about five years. The idea is that through that group we can disseminate best practice and we can address issues, such as entry criteria for specific subjects” (Head of Recruitment and Admissions).*

18 At Royal Holloway, which has a combination of centralised and decentralised admissions, sessions are held to update and inform staff about policy changes, for example admissions plenary sessions at which Admissions Tutors are briefed about new qualifications and initiatives such as the Schwartz Report recommendations (Head of Registry, Royal Holloway).

19 At Durham dissemination relies on admissions staff attending conferences and those staff that are members of good practice groups sharing this information with colleagues in the institution’s departments. An annual meeting of all admissions staff takes place every September to share developments and good practice. Major developments are also shared with all admissions staff via papers produced from the central admissions office.

**(ii) Training for interviewing applicants**

20 Training staff to interview applicants is clearly an issue of importance to those institutions or courses that interview applicants because, although the practice of

interviewing applicants occurs less often than previously, there are certain subject areas where it is either mandatory for entry to a course (e.g. teacher training, youth work) or still prevalent despite misgivings within the sector about reliability and equity (art and design, medicine, veterinary science, law and chemistry). From the 'fair admissions' perspective, issues of concern include transparency and consistency of approach. Good Practice Guide 2 explores these issues in more detail at Plymouth College of Art and Design.

21 For institutions that are not single-subject and that have a mix of centralised and decentralised admissions systems, training for interviewing applicants may be split between the central admissions team and staff in faculties, departments or schools. At Warwick the central admissions team does not contribute to the training of individual staff involved in interviewing, but shares good practice with departments and plan to enhance this further. The central admissions team finds it more effective working on a one to one basis with departments that interview, aiming to raise awareness about some of the issues involved in widening participation and informing the department about specific interviewing methodologies.

22 At Nottingham, the academic schools within the institution tend to have significant autonomy and carry out interview training themselves. However, the academic schools reported that they use "structured interviews so they have ideas of what questions to ask and how to ask them and they have record sheets and are given guidelines on how to mark them so they are done fairly" (Admissions Officer, devolved school, Nottingham). Durham introduced admissions selector training focussed on new selectors in 2005, and the Senior Manager with responsibility for Admissions noted that they have on occasion offered refresher courses for all staff. A review of staff development and training provision will be included in the general review of admissions policy at Durham.

23 Newman interviews applicants for selecting courses (teacher training, and some Foundation Degrees) to identify specific attributes. This is particularly relevant for teacher training where interviews are used to assess an applicant's vocation for and commitment to teaching. Training academic staff to interview applicants is provided by the departments involved, but the Senior Manager with responsibility for Registry is advocating involvement of the central admissions team in this process. Training which is delivered in schools involves observation of a number of interviews and focuses on issues around equality and diversity.

**(iii) Summary**

24 There appears to be significant staff and CPD activity taking place in case study institutions. However there is variable coverage wherever decentralised admissions systems exist. This may be entirely appropriate as much of the work carried out by decentralised admissions decision-makers in schools or faculties can be specialised in nature, often relating to training for interviewing applicants (see Good Practice Guide 2) or to other subject-specific issues relating to the profession. In all the case studies there are systems in place to cascade or otherwise disseminate new information down to the most appropriate level.



## **Good Practice Guide 2:**

### ***Developing an interview training scheme at a single-subject institution - Plymouth College of Art and Design***

**Plymouth College of Art and Design had 616 applicants to its higher education provision and accepted 145 students from the UCAS system in 2007. Admissions is centralised, although art and design academic staff currently offer interviews to all applicants and in practice very few are not offered any kind of provision at further education or Foundation Year level. The College's admission policy statement was not found on the institution's website as part of this research. It has Entry Profiles for 98% of its courses (UCAS 2008).**

As an Art and Design specialist FE college with higher education (HE) courses, the College has a particular interest in the need to retain interviewing of applicants, an interest general among Art and Design providers. Staff interviewed were aware of the potential for bias in the interviewing process, e.g. citing recent research by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) about the skewed social class intake of the discipline, and were also aware of alternative methods (e.g. electronic portfolios). However, the College has a particular context formed by its position as a recruiting institution, interviews all applicants and which offers FE, level 0 and HE courses; in practice almost all applicants are offered a place at an appropriate level.

The College acknowledges that e-portfolios have some advantages, e.g. they can save the applicant incurring travel time and costs. The Senior Manager with responsibility for HE courses noted that, by using the electronic portfolio option in line with the UCAS streamlined service, some Art and Design institutions have moved to a position where they do not interview at all: 'I would be reasonably happy if we moved in that direction although I think it comes at quite an expense'. A potential disadvantage in using electronic portfolios rather than interviews is the perceived erosion of equitable access:

*"The potential disadvantage of electronic portfolios is [if using them] disenfranchising student groups; we like to assume a lot of young people have access to IT and are familiar with it, but this is not always the case. Plymouth, for example, has a lower than average access to IT in the home, we also have more mature students who might not be as familiar with the technology - we want to ensure that all our processes are open to all and would not want to create extra barriers." (Senior Manager with responsibility for Student Services and Marketing).*

Another aspect of the desire to maintain interviews at the College is the need to demonstrate to potential applicants the benefits of studying Art and Design to HE level at a specialist rather than non-specialist institution:

*"It is a two-way process - for the students to find out more about the course and us about them, and we like them to see the environment of a specialist college as opposed to a non-specialist institution." (Senior Manager with responsibility for Student Services and Marketing).*

In addition to the fairness and the importance of applicants seeing the College, there is a further intellectual rationale for such institutions to retain interviews: it is important to meet the individual that has created a portfolio

*"as it is often the only way you can tell, what you are looking for is spark of creativity"  
(Senior Manager with responsibility for HE).*

The issue was therefore how best to ensure that interviews were carried out in as consistent and equitable a manner as possible. In 2005 Student Services initiated a questionnaire for applicants as part of the College's Quality Service Review, one of the first acts of the incoming Head of Admissions and in accordance with the desire to make the application service as transparent as possible. The questionnaire asked applicants various questions about finding the college, including questions designed to explore the applicant's experience of the interview process. Analysis of the responses over a period of time revealed inconsistencies in the way interviews were being carried out by different members of academic staff.

As a result outside contractors were employed to deliver training on the type of questions that should be asked at interview (the Senior Manager with responsibility for Admissions noted some initial resistance amongst staff to this). As part of an ongoing quality review the interview recording practices used by various academic staff in the College were analysed:

*"Up until about two years ago there were about five different forms [for interviewing] for the various courses that had all evolved themselves so we brought those together and looked for good practice in what we were actually recording, and those fields that were actually relevant" (Senior Manager with responsibility for HE).*

Now all courses use the same interview question schedules and practices. The following comment was also made:

*"A lot of discussion is taking place about moving away from having just academics and course leaders doing interviews and having some of them done centrally, and we spend a lot of time training them in terms of supporting them, taking account of diversity, a whole range of things that you want them to cover in interview." (Senior Manager with responsibility for HE).*

Interview technique training is to be introduced in the 2008/09 academic year because

*"at the moment there are so many people involved it is difficult to know how they are being conducted" (Senior Manager with responsibility for HE).*

### **Theme 3: Pre-HE curriculum changes since the Schwartz Report**

25 Curriculum change at secondary and FE level provide a further set of issues where the responses to questions were primarily governed by the institutional perspective, with strict dividing lines between selecting and recruiting institutions (and also between selecting and recruiting courses within institutions). At one end of the spectrum there are institutions such as Plymouth College of Art and Design, where all applicants are asked to interview regardless of their prior qualifications, and UEL, where the admissions team regularly refers to an updated list of qualifications mapped to entry criteria because of the huge diversity of their intake. At the other end of the spectrum, case study institutions such as Nottingham, Durham and Warwick are more circumspect about some of the new qualifications that are available to applicants, although Warwick is informally involved with its local Lifelong Learning Network (LLN) to encourage progression from vocational routes via its Lifelong Learning Department. In total, six of the case study institutions reported involvement with their local LLN: South East Essex College; Nottingham; UEL; Newman, Hull and Warwick.

#### **(i) Institutional perspectives**

26 For selecting institutions the current (May 2008) emphasis is on assessing the impact of the 14-19 Advanced Diplomas. Although many courses will be accepting relevant Diplomas with particular elements of additional and specialist learning, staff at Nottingham are still considering the Diplomas as an entry route to courses which do not have subject-specific entry requirements. Similarly, Durham is 'mindful about the changing environment as regards qualifications, the diversity of those'. A Pro-Vice Chancellor at Durham expressed this in terms of the ongoing policy review (see Good Practice Guide 1):

*“We aim in the review to give more depth to the range of qualifications we use and how they affect our offer because previous practice had been driven by two elements, A levels and the International Baccalaureate. A host of other new UK qualifications require us to take a view and interpret them to ensure our admissions tutors actually understand them. That is an example where we have to take a shift in practice, we can't simply continue as we did and only have two or three traditional forms of entry to the university” (Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Teaching and Learning, Durham).*

27 Warwick noted it had been among the first of the research intensive universities to be involved in the first wave of Foundation Degrees and it was emphasised that the Vice-Chancellor has stated the institution welcomes the Diploma developments. Warwick expects to make offers to suitably qualified applicants offering Diplomas in appropriate subjects but is likely to require applicants to be taking specific additional specialised learning to meet course entry requirements (May 2008). Academic departments have a named contact in the central admissions office and there is a close relationship with the central team. This team holds annual briefings and is responsible for keeping decentralised academic departments up to date on changes.

28 Warwick reflects the general perception amongst Russell Group institutions that the application and admissions decision-making process is becoming more complex because of the diversity within the pre-HE curriculum. Partly due to its academic focus, Warwick notes that it is difficult to advise applicants who contact them about Advanced Diplomas, particularly given that information is still emerging (May 2008)<sup>2</sup>.

29 Another general concern is that some applicants do not receive accurate information, advice and guidance in school or college. A case study interviewee from Chemistry noted a greater diversity of subjects coming through and that this can be problematic if applicants choose inappropriately. If an applicant had dropped mathematics it would depend upon when it was dropped; if it was possible for the applicant to continue studying mathematics the institution would recommend this. In relation to all of these issues, the importance of publicity and transparency in entry criteria and admissions decision-making is crucial for applicants.

30 For less selective institutions the ways in which they deal with diversity in entry qualifications presented may be different. Plymouth College of Art and Design is beginning to note a rise in home tutored applicants and others that have attended Rudolf Steiner schools, both of these groups of applicants are unlikely to hold any recognisable qualifications. UEL reviews new qualifications as they emerge and agrees entry points for courses. These are held in the centrally delegated part of their IT system. They have

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<sup>2</sup> As at October 2008 Warwick has a positive statement on their website and on the UCAS Course Search website with regard to the acceptability of the Advanced Diplomas.

documentation on all current home and EU qualifications and have also developed further documentation which contains "most qualifications from most countries and what we would expect from each country to attain entry to different levels in our university; this came from the International Office originally" (Senior Manager with responsibility for Admissions). Good Practice Guide 3 demonstrates how changes to the pre-HE curriculum have impacted and are being considered by the University of Bolton).

31 The remaining case study institutions (South East Essex College, Hull, Bolton and Newman) whilst having some matters in common with UEL in the ways in which they deal with qualifications, emphasised the importance to them of vocational qualifications and in many cases the importance of prior experience. At South East Essex College many applicants are attracted to the institution partly because:

*"we've got professional courses, we're now running counselling, social work, that's attracting people who have been out in the industry practising, but haven't got formal qualifications necessarily" (Senior Manager, Student Support, South East Essex College).*

32 At Bolton there is a tradition of providing courses that map against vocational qualifications because of the institution's technical college origins. NVQs and BTEC Nationals are common currency. A Senior Manager with responsibility for Recruitment and Access, an advocate of the 14-19 Diplomas, noted the misunderstandings about vocational qualifications in the HE sector generally:

*"I sit on regional 14-19 development groups and I'm also on the Qualification and Curriculum Authority approvals committee for the creative and media diploma, so ... the university is quite well represented in the developmental remit" (Senior Manager with responsibility for Recruitment and Access, Bolton).*

33 At Newman, another active widening participation institution, many current students applied with vocational qualifications and the Principal noted that for this reason the institution will also welcome the Advanced Diplomas. Newman works with the local Lifelong Learning Network to develop progression agreements in the region. One admissions decision-maker noted a problem with some applicants entering vocational qualifications under a range of different qualification names.

34 At Royal Holloway significant emphasis is placed on ensuring there is parity of esteem between A-level and other pre-HE qualification routes to ensure fairness to applicants:

*“We have structured our Admissions and UK Recruitment team so that the team responsible for widening participation recruitment work closely with Admissions. For this reason we engage collectively with vocationally driven initiatives and consequently are unlikely to be taken by surprise by any new initiatives” (Head of Admissions, Royal Holloway).*

**(ii) Summary**

35 It is apparent that institutional attitudes towards the various curriculum changes which have occurred since 2004 are driven by their specific institutional missions. Durham and Warwick have both stated their support for Advanced Diplomas (while indicating they would probably need additional qualifications or cite some exclusion) but are equally concerned with qualifications that help differentiate between high-achieving applicants, such as the International Baccalaureate and the Cambridge Pre-U. Institutions with mostly recruiting courses emphasised the importance of vocational qualifications and often the prior working experience of applicants, emphasising the institutions' vocational ethos and origins as former technical colleges.

## **Good Practice Guide 3:**

### **Understanding Vocational Qualifications - University of Bolton**

The University of Bolton had 6,367 applicants and accepted 734 students from the UCAS system in 2007. Bolton in the main operates a centralised admissions system. The admissions policy statement was not found on the institution's website as part of this research. There are no course Entry Profiles, however, staff are working to achieve 100% by the required deadline (UCAS 2008).

Bolton offers a number of vocationally oriented courses and the strategic plan illustrates this as a core part of the institution's intake:

*“There will always be places at Bolton for students, who learn for learning’s sake and have no interest in a career related to their study, but the university’s strategic and resource decisions will be based on supporting career-motivated students to develop into competent, confident and committed professionals” (strategic plan 2006-2012, The professional university, University of Bolton, 2006).*

Contributing to this strategy Bolton's core intake is local, often mature and career orientated. This places the university in a position to understand the range of both vocational and academic level three qualifications.

*“We have always had a very open approach to vocational qualifications because many of them map on to our courses. We have a vocational enriched curriculum here at the university. This is partly because of our heritage; the technological side of higher education, going back to textiles, engineering and those traditional STEM<sup>3</sup> subjects. We don’t have any problems with vocational qualifications” (Head of Recruitment and Admissions).*

*“One of the things that we are particularly strong on is assessing entry qualifications that are not A2 levels. Our staff have a wealth of experience in NVQs and BTECs so we can get an application with these as entry qualifications and we can make a quick decision because we know exactly what they are, what their value is and understand that just because something doesn’t follow exactly the same syllabus as the A2 doesn’t make it less of a qualification”. (Head of Recruitment and Admissions)”.*

Staff development opportunities are key to the maintenance of this level of knowledge and keeping abreast of new developments. These are delivered regularly by the Head of recruitment and Admissions. New information is disseminated further through meetings of the group of admissions decision-makers:

*“We can talk about the need for consistency, because consistency even within the same subject area is not always the case, depending on which academic member of staff was contacted. So being able to address those sorts of issues, particularly now, with the new changes to the 14-19 curriculum, and the introduction of the new Diplomas, the Admission tutors forum has been a great vehicle for disseminating important information. So it’s a useful umbrella group that we can use to address particular issues, such as how we’re going to apply new admissions regulations for the new 14-19 Diplomas.” (Head of Recruitment and Admissions).*

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<sup>3</sup> STEM is an acronym for science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects.

## **Theme 4: Publicity and transparency**

36 This section explores two publicity and transparency issues; the development and use of Entry Profiles and how institutions view and approach the issue of transparency both generally and in particular with regard to feedback to applicants. The picture varies across the case study institutions, and several reasons are given for this; the decentralised structure of some institutions makes consistency difficult in this area; one case study college that has largely indirectly funded provision does not have access to all the necessary information; and one Russell Group institution voiced concerns about an imbalance between providing sufficient and offering too much information. Good Practice Guide 4 looks in more detail at the experience of developing Entry Profiles at Hull and Good Practice Guide 5 looks at how transparency is handled at South East Essex College.

### **(i) Entry Profiles**

37 Entry Profiles are course-specific profiles written by institutions. They are available on the UCAS Course Search website and are intended to assist in the clarity of information available to prospective applicants. The Delivery Partnership Steering Group/SPA key benefits paper<sup>4</sup> states that: "They should include the details of what is required for entry, such as qualifications, grades, admissions tests, interview, questionnaire, etc. together with features about the course, details of the admissions process for decision-making, e.g. if a decision is made on the application plus test, or the application plus test plus interview. They should include any particular skills and competencies applicants need for the course. Entry Profiles should also cover if any 'contextual factors' are considered in admissions decision-making, such as the performance of the school attended".

38 Most of the case study institutions make use of Entry Profiles; however, the research found that the development of Entry Profiles is variable at this stage (although data from SPA highlights that 78% of full-time undergraduate courses in the UCAS scheme had Entry Profiles in place as of September 2008). The case study research suggests that this variability is partly related to how each institution is organised. At Plymouth College of Art and Design the Entry Profiles are all handled by the Marketing

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<sup>4</sup> Delivery Partnership Steering Group/ SPA: Entry Profiles – Key messages and benefits for HEIs, November 2007



Office, while at Nottingham they are being produced by the undergraduate Admissions team also and are in place for most courses. The central decision-making team at Nottingham also have responsibility for updating Entry Profiles annually. One Admissions Officer at Nottingham reported on a survey of admissions hotline staff which found that applicants were put off by long Entry Profiles. Having undertaken their own research on Entry Profiles in the sector generally the central decision-making team recommended that they contain shorter, snappier and more marketing-focussed information for applicants in future.

39 Durham plans to move from 85% of courses with Entry Profiles to all courses in time for the 2008/09 admissions cycle. One central admissions decision-maker at Warwick felt that Entry Profiles could be a barrier preventing applicants from developing a relationship with the institution via its own web-pages (although applicants can access web pages directly from the Entry Profile).

**(ii) *Transparency for applicants***

40 All HE providers have received and have access to the statement of good practice on feedback to unsuccessful applicants which was produced by SPA and agreed and circulated by the Delivery Partnership, UUK and GuildHE. The statement includes a requirement on HE providers to have updated feedback policies in place by December 2008. The statement noted that feedback should be provided to applicants on request. All the case study institutions identified the importance of transparency with regard to feedback policies and procedures, although how this operates in practice and the specific issues arising are determined by the nature of the institution's applicant profile. For recruiting institutions such as Plymouth College of Art and Design the recent drive has been to ensure that policies and practice are now formalised in the student handbook which is available to applicants on request. The Senior Manager with responsibility for Admissions highlighted the role of Service Level Agreements and Operational Plans in the way the College organises its publicity, but noted that information about which contextual factors are considered is on the website but is not in the prospectus and only sometimes included in Entry Profiles.

41 At Nottingham the Manager of Undergraduate Admissions reported that there had been a significant amount of work on making policies transparent in recent years:

*We have a centralised admissions team who deal with the [admissions decision-making] process; we have a marketing and recruitment team who deal with paper and online prospectuses, and an international office that does its own recruitment. [The centralised team] has been working closely with [the marketing and recruitment team] to make entry requirements open and transparent (Manager of Undergraduate Admissions, Nottingham).*

*“We have written our own Code of Practice which was published ahead of the QAA 2001 one and made some amendments pre-Schwartz; since the 2006 revised document we have only made minor amendments especially on feedback, which is in line with SPA/Delivery Partnership recommendations and this is published on the web” (Manager of Undergraduate Admissions).*

42 However, at one of the few remaining autonomous academic schools at Nottingham, Medicine, where admissions decision-making is carried out within the school, the cost of providing feedback for over 500 unsuccessful applicants each year has meant that, aside from requests for further information under the Freedom of Information Act (FOI), a decision has been made to offer only one first level feedback letter. Durham also mentioned FOI requests as a driver:

*“We took the decision to publish [Undergraduate Admissions Statistics] for two reasons; firstly obviously it is good practice to keep people informed about levels of competition and that people will see how great the competition is and assure them there isn't any bias against a certain group of applicants; secondly, the driver was that FOI requests could ask for this information anyway so why not provide it as a matter of course. We have spoken with other organisations (not just universities) who have said that if they are requested any information by FOI request they publish it for all to see as a matter of course” (Senior Manager responsible for Registry and Admissions, Durham).*

43 More widely Durham's ongoing admissions policy review will enhance transparency for applicants. This will include the production of Guides for Information, Advice and Guidance staff in schools and for Applicants - which identify issues applicants have, what they need to know, how to make decisions about which course to apply for, and how to make an application. In addition, and as part of a wider review of marketing at the university, a Frequently Asked Questions web page will be produced.

44 Hull is another case study institution where marketing staff are heavily involved in deciding how applicant information is presented:

*“I think we have seen a lot of improvements over the last three or four years in the way which [applicant information] has been presented. In the admissions office web pages we have ... the Equal Opportunities policy, [and information about] how to work with applicants with disabilities.... there’s been a complete revamp of the prospectus formats, which obviously is driven through marketing rather than just masses of module descriptions which it perhaps used to be...” (Senior Manager responsible for Admissions, Hull).*

45 At South East Essex College information in the form of portfolios/essays is presented for the increasing number of applications from mature applicants or applicants without formal qualifications (especially to their part-time provision). The University of Warwick sound a note of caution about the validity of transparency of contextual information:

*“There is a fine balance between transparency and providing too much information resulting in formulaic submissions. It is not helpful to be transparent about the level of weighting for criteria because the overall judgement has to be holistic” (Pro-Vice Chancellor, Warwick).*

### **(iii) Summary**

46 As noted above institutions vary in how they approach the broad issues of enhancing transparency in relation to their policies, and once again this is determined by their mission. All case study institutions are more transparent than previously and, as has been noted, at least one Russell Group institution expressed caution about the weighting of contextual data and in this sense has reservations about too much openness. In relation to Entry Profiles there is certainly some evidence that the combined impact of the Schwartz Report, SPA and the Delivery Partnership has greatly increased their development, although institutions may have reservations about the resource implications.

## **Good Practice Guide 4:**

### **Sharing information in the development of Entry Profiles in a decentralised system - University of Hull**

The University of Hull had 15,960 applicants and accepted 4,196 students from the UCAS system in 2007. Hull has a relatively decentralised system (with admissions decision-making in academic departments) at present but is in the process of centralising. An overarching admissions policy statement was not found on the institution's website as part of this research but there are a range of specific guidance points. It has Entry Profiles for 94% of its courses (UCAS 2008).

The University of Hull has high levels of information sharing and this enables and facilitates professionalism in a number of key areas, not least in the development of Entry Profiles. The institution utilises its committee structure to discuss admissions policies and related developments:

*“We have a Student Recruitment Committee, which [central] admissions and faculty admission tutors are part of and things like [Entry Profiles] may well be discussed at or be fed back into that meeting. We have regular admission tutors meetings; we have regular faculty admission tutors meetings. No changes are ever made without consulting us” (Admissions Officer).*

*“We regularly have admission tutors meetings. As a faculty, admission tutors meet in our departments. This time of year leading up to Clearing we meet more and more and we also have student recruitment conferences every couple of months at which anything that needs to be shared, developed, investigated, we meet together about it” (Admissions Tutor, Health and Social Care).*

The central team works closely with admissions decision-makers within the departments which have enabled the admissions team to prepare Entry Profiles more efficiently. Hull now has Entry Profiles for 94% of courses but was slower in developing them in the past largely due to the allocation of resources. Entry Profiles have been developed on behalf of the department using information from the web, departmental pamphlets and prospectuses, and are sent to the department for approval. However, one post has been created within the centralised admissions team to work specifically on developing and updating Entry Profiles and to create Entry Profile templates including generic information on the institution, its two campuses and the region.

The main project for 2008/09 is to work more closely with the devolved departments to incorporate specific and up-to-date information about the department and the course within the Entry Profile structures. This close working of central admissions and the departments has proved successful so far:

*[Entry Profiles developed in this way have] “been really well received and I think part of that is the process we’ve put in place for someone else initially drafting them on behalf of the department” (Admissions Officer).*

The combination of admissions decision-making through central and departmental based

processes was seen to be a positive way of managing the changes in admissions criteria, including the way in which admissions-related information is cascaded through the institution:

*“It is a huge task. We’ve got an Entry Qualifications Group in a couple of weeks to consider another list of qualifications which we’ve picked up from the tariff, we’ve picked up from a bulletin from UCAS about new A\*, AS level courses so we try and keep on top of that as much as we can and feed it down through to Departments via the Faculty Admission Tutors on that group and using the internal Portal, [we often have to] do some digging around on websites so that we can give the information to the admission tutors” (Admissions decision-maker).*

Clearly information sharing systems can work in a largely decentralised system, but at Hull the view is that a centralised admissions service can improve the flow of information within the institution as well as to applicants, particularly in relation to Entry Profiles:

*“I think you get great benefits from having a central service in being able to do that kind of thing and sharing it around the university, I don’t know how you would get on if you had individual Colleges setting their own policy” (Head of Admissions).*

## **Good Practice Guide 5:**

### **Professionalism and transparency at South East Essex College**

**South East Essex College had 970 applicants and accepted 355 higher education students from the UCAS system in 2007. It has a largely centralised system with some input from academic departments, a system that has evolved from its further education provision. The admissions policy statement was found on the institution's website and can be downloaded or viewed as a PDF from the home page. It has Entry Profiles for 60% of its courses (UCAS 2008).**

In 1999 South East Essex College signed a partnership agreement with the University of Essex, which has enabled an extended range of undergraduate courses to be developed. A large proportion of the intake is locally based with many students progressing directly from FE that is also provided by the institution. As HE provision has grown the institution has started to attract students from further afield. The College believes that it has been able to transfer many of the good practice processes it developed for FE admissions in implementing HE admissions procedures. There is a positive approach to partnership working both with external bodies such as the Lifelong Learning Networks and internally between FE and HE staff. This also means that students can be mentored directly from FE into HE:

*"I think there are quality services embedded in what we do as a college from the FE perspective that as we've grown in HE have been carried through" (Head of Student Support Services).*

Transparency is a crucial aspect of the admissions process at South East Essex College. Although admissions decision-makers are largely based in academic departments, all applications are returned to a central admissions department where applications are checked to ensure consistency. Short-listed applicants will usually be asked to attend an interview. Additionally, at interview, all Art and Design applicants will be required to present their portfolios and all Performing Arts and Photography applicants will be required to attend an audition. Where interviews are conducted, tutors are required to complete a standard interview report form which is then also assessed by the central admissions department. All interviewees are advised of the decision on their application on the day of their interview; this allows tutors to provide individual feedback, support and advice if the applicant is unsuccessful. Where students require additional support before gaining access to the course of their choice, alternative courses may be recommended. Alternative courses are also suggested when places cannot be offered on the applicant's first choice of course.

The College continuously evaluates its transparency of procedures. Among methods employed is the use of 'mystery shoppers' who attend open days and recruitment events to assess the transparency of the information available to potential applicants. An induction survey is carried out among students who take up their place to determine their experience as an applicant and a survey will be carried out during 08-09 among applicants who do not take up their place, to identify the reasons why and any negative experiences the applicant perceived during the

application process. The College's admissions policy is currently being updated and will be provided at two levels, one for applicants and one for College staff. The applicant admissions policy will include an explanation of the application process.

Transparency is also important after the acceptance stage, especially for students with specific needs. Support offered for students with disabilities is based on information identified or sought at the application stage; applicants are then invited to speak to Student Support about their requirements on the day they attend their academic interview. This enables the institution to be very transparent about what it can offer in terms of individual learning support:

*“They [applicants] get all of the information during the application cycle including what they are able to access and what they can ask for, and obviously they have that period during the application process to contact the central Registry team or our Student Support Services team. The support teams are also accessible for those that attend open days” (Head of Student Support Services).*

Professionalism is ensured in part through staff development opportunities which are held twice a year:

*“I would say we probably have all of the HE staff together for staff development events that relate directly to admissions at least twice a year. And then we have a range of sub groups and we have our HE academic development board which is one of the key college committees it also has a staff development focus to it, its membership allows that dissemination and that meets five or six times a year. And the admissions tutors are also effectively members of that as well, they're involved in the policy making decisions” (Head of Higher Education).*

A centrally based admissions decision-making team ensures consistency is viewed as highly beneficial. The team contributes to the sense of professionalism and enables staff development activity:

*“I think because we run the whole process centrally there are ample opportunities for us to bring people together and carry out some staff development activities ... I think there's a lot of opportunity for us to identify what staff development would be helpful through the HE Recruitment Task Group and other groups and action this as necessary at key times in the academic year through our suite of staff development activities and one-to-one training. (Deputy Registrar).*

## **Theme 5: Assessing contextual factors**

47 There are a number of ways in which case study institutions may use contextual factors in admissions decision-making; two of these are by interviewing applicants and by adjusting offers for certain applicants because of mitigating social or personal factors. Among case study institutions three state that they do not consider contextual factors: University of East London (UEL), Plymouth College of Art and Design and South East Essex College; while Nottingham, Hull and Newman consider contextual factors for some courses or at some, in certain circumstances. Interviews are carried out at the majority of the case study institutions in some subject areas (including all applicants at Plymouth College of Art and Design, a single-subject Art and Design College). However, this picture is ambiguous because most institutions invite applicants to Open Days which may take the form of 'group interviews' where a group of applicants speak with an admissions decision-maker, discuss the course and the institution without necessarily knowing that this may form part of the selection process.

48 At the case study institutions two types of interview were identified, one which is used for admissions decision-making and one which is used for recruiting prospective students. In some instances an interview will be used as a marketing tool to encourage an applicant to accept the offer. Interviews were also seen to have an impact on retention rates i.e. applicants would be less well informed about what to expect if they had not been able to see the institution and talk to a member of staff.

49 The majority of case study institutions also take account of contextual factors to inform support measures required to enable accepted applicants in their transition to HE: this may include bursaries. (Good Practice Guide 6 looks at how transition support is operationalised at Newman University College).

### **(i) Criteria and weighting**

50 Nottingham publishes information on its website (How to Apply) which makes it clear that an applicant's examination grades may be valued more highly if: achievement has been in 'difficult personal or educational circumstances'; the applicant is a first generation entrant to HE; the applicant is eligible for the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA);



the applicant has been in care in the last three years; the applicant is a member of the traveller community; the applicant has refugee status, or if they have care responsibilities.

51 Hull stresses the flexibility afforded to admissions tutors in its largely devolved system:

*“We don’t have a routine for highlighting particular schools or colleges or people in care or anything like that because we do look at everybody. The tutors have an opportunity to look at the whole application so they can see if there are particular factors being talked about in personal statements that references care in the family or needing to work and balance study and work etc. and they will sometimes adjust the offer levels for people if they’re attempting an awful lot of other things as well” (Senior Manager responsible for Admissions, Hull).*

52 Hull operates in a context where there is a realisation that published entry requirements, in terms of precise grades, may be varied in some subject areas:

*“It’s important to remember that published offer levels are a guide and are very much a marketing tactic in some areas. They don’t necessarily represent the level at which someone needs to be achieving to do well on the programme, bearing in mind all of the additional support available to our students. We’ve got a good record of taking people in from a wide range of backgrounds and for them doing very well once they’re here. The tutors have got the opportunity to adjust offer levels accordingly and we will also look very, very carefully at people’s attainment once the results come out in the summer” (Senior Manager responsible for Admissions, Hull).*

53 A Senior Manager responsible for widening participation at Nottingham expressed the belief that many admissions staff in both centralised systems and devolved schools would have welcomed some clearer guidance from the Schwartz Report on flexibility of grades accepted, for example whether institutions should offer a range of grades within a band, e.g. from AAB to ABC.

54 Newman, an institution with a tradition of decentralised school-based admissions, was the third case study institution to acknowledge that contextual factors were taken into account. Academic staff still have ownership of their courses and entry requirements but

the process has been standardised. Newman is moving towards centralisation to enable fair admissions and in an attempt to ensure consistency across departments. The Senior Manager responsible for Admissions reported that the institution was working towards these changes as a response to the Schwartz Report and that a reorganisation had created her current post by splitting Admissions from Registry. Previously, admissions decision-making at the academic school level meant schools were all applying different approaches to making offers which were not always fair or transparent; this has been replaced by a degree of collegiate working between the Admissions Office and the schools.

55 Among case study institutions which do not take contextual information into account in applications, several, e.g. Plymouth College of Art and Design do make adjustments to bursaries and other forms of support if an applicant is accepted. Durham will accept participation on its outreach activities as a 'tie-breaker' if there are a number of identically suited applicants. UEL is an institution that particularly emphasises its student support mechanisms. UEL accepts a wide range of qualifications at various levels and commented that it does not have to mitigate the balance of its intake when justifying its non-use of contextual factors. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor reported that:

*[We] make decisions on a support-blind basis because of equity and then offer places and give the support needed once they are accepted; we gather data in relation to our benchmark performance, on educational background, socio-economic background, we have all that but we don't use that as part of our assessment of applications because there isn't any need in a sense. If you look at our student body it is certainly one of the most diverse in the UK, you name the criteria and we will almost always be outside the sector norm for it: over 60% of our students are from Black and Mixed Ethnicity groups; we have a gender split in line with the rest of the sector; overall UEL students are older and more part-time, they are poorer, from lower socio-economic groups and arrive with lower cultural capital, we know all of that - we are proud of our students and proud of being able to add value" (Deputy Vice-Chancellor, UEL).*

56 UEL is able to take a robust line on the decision not to use contextual factors because of its particular context. UEL has a highly diverse student intake and also has a high prevalence of late summer recruitment; applicants to mainly recruiting institutions in

London typically apply for HE places much later in the cycle, during the mid- to late summer period; the nature of applicants is also more varied with far more having English language support needs and therefore UEL has devised a series of numeracy and English tests. In terms of support, UEL also offers a wide range of Foundation Year courses, and bespoke short courses such as *New Beginnings 2* which takes place over 14 weeks.

Admissions at UEL therefore face particular challenges relating to transparent entry requirements, given this varied intake:

*[It is all about the] “student focus - we were responding to their needs and we respond to them as much as national change - every year through Clearing (up to 50% a year are through Clearing or 'late summer applications') so every year we are able to refine that process so that ‘at risk students’ (those that come late and leave early) are better supported. ...all this is right up there as part of core values of the university ...it starts way back with the work our Senior Manager responsible for widening participation does pre-application, it is about flagging up what people need, to come to open days, see Entry Profiles, see examples of some of our students” (Senior Manager responsible for Admissions).*

57 Warwick, along with Plymouth and Durham, are among other institutions which emphasise the level of additional support in the form of outreach or alternative courses at Foundation Year level and transitional and ongoing support for successful applicants.

## **(ii) Summary**

58 As has been noted in many areas of admissions practice, behaviour is determined in relation to whether institutions (and more often individual schools or courses within them) are recruiting or selecting. However, in relation to using contextual information, whilst the selecting/recruiting dynamic remains a factor, the relationship to widening participation and the wider institutional characteristics are equally important; this was noted particularly at UEL.

## **Good Practice Guide 6:**

### **Contextual factors and transition support - Newman University College, Birmingham**

**Newman University College had 2,742 applicants and accepted 651 students from the UCAS system in 2007. Newman is moving from a decentralised to a centralised system. The admissions policy statement was not found on the institution's website as part of this research. It has Entry Profiles for 88% of its courses (UCAS 2008).**

Newman University College is a small institution with a strong widening participation ethos. The College operates a holistic admissions process which aims to look at the individual holistically. As part of this approach, the College offers a Certificate in Higher Education (CertHE) course which, in effect, operates as a retention strategy that is activated before a student begins to struggle. The CertHE has been developed to support those applicants who have potential but may not have the necessary entry requirements and is aimed:

*“particularly at those students where the Sixth Form College tutor rings and says ‘this student has not done well because of their circumstances’ and [the situation is] either she goes into HE now or she’s going to go to work and be lost to HE” (Principal).*

In response the College invites applicants in to talk about the course, the factors which have affected their attainment, and their perception of their own potential to succeed. The decision to offer the CertHE can also be made by the Deputy Registrar if an applicant does not achieve the offer grades, or to mature students who do not have the requisite entry qualifications. The CertHE would then be discussed as a way of offering additional support. It is also designed to offer a very personalised approach to supporting individual students, a way of "giving people a chance but not setting them up to fail" (Principal).

The aim of the CertHE is to try and avoid the build up of re-sits which, in conjunction with other problems, may overwhelm students until they reach a point where they drop out of HE. The College has also appointed a Transitions Tutor responsible for monitoring students and developing the CertHE. The Tutor surveyed students about the issues that were problematic in terms of staying on the course and also staff about their perceptions of study habits that impacted upon students' ability to engage with the subject. Newman is piloting diagnostic testing with new entrants with a view to creating a more individualised programme which will focus on specific issues being identified for each student. Students will then only undertake the components of the course they require.

Other changes have been made as the CertHE has evolved in response to issues identified as problematic by staff and students. Initially, the CertHE was offered as a pre-entry requirement, but this created an additional expense for many students. The course is now offered to students on combined honours courses where there is a slightly higher withdrawal rate. Currently around 50 students a year take part. Due to difficulties in physically bringing

together students on diverse courses the College has also created an online facility which is primarily a transition course covering a range of academic skills, referencing, essay planning and time management. Initially, achieving student engagement on the transition project was problematic because participation was seen as an additional burden. However, this perception has changed as students have progressed and see it is worthwhile and participation is valued in terms of the study support it offers. Feedback to the transition tutor suggests that students do not feel there is any stigma attached to participation.

## **Theme 6: Admissions and the institutional mission**

59 This section explores two main issues; the importance of admissions to the institutional mission and strategic vision and/or plan; and the importance of the relationship between admissions, student recruitment staff and widening participation. How institutions demonstrate their missions and strategy and the extent to which admissions is expressed within these is explored, including specific detail on how relationships are expressed in practice.

### **(i) The importance of admissions to the institutional mission**

60 Each of the case study institutions emphasised the link between fair admissions and the institutional mission, although in practice this link was sometimes implicit rather than consistently explicit in published documents. For example Plymouth College of Art and Design has fair admissions as an aim on its website, although it is not part of the Mission Statement. Nottingham has fairness and a widening participation statement in the corporate plan and they will be highlighted in the revised OFFA access agreement. The Senior Manager with responsibility for widening participation reported:

*"Fair Admissions has been quite a big part of our mission since I was employed in my current widening participation role eight years ago".*

61 Durham noted that:

*"we have a university mission that incorporates widening participation. Part of our mission is to have a diverse student intake and therefore create opportunities for those that can benefit from the Durham experience to show their potential" (The Senior Manager with responsibility for Registry and Admissions).*

At UEL fair admissions, as part of a widening participation strategy is part of the core values of the university, with admissions central to all they do.

62 At South East Essex College, which has a long history of FE but is a relatively new HE provider in partnership with the University of Essex since 2001, there is:

*“Very strong equality of opportunity, the principles of Schwartz are embedded within all processes at the College. We’ve done a lot of work in the last couple of years in joining up the different aspects of admissions such as, trying to join up marketing, student support, registry, the course team functions, those are working very well I think now as a team so that the applicant gets a joined up experience” (Senior Manager responsible for Admissions, South East Essex College).*

63 Bolton cited the award of an external Quality Mark for recruitment and admissions as evidence of the commitment to fair admissions; similarly, case study interviewees at Hull reported that marketing had provided the impetus for the change in prospectus formats. Warwick has a commitment to diversity as part of its university strategy and also highlighted the importance of the quality of applicants:

*“Admissions is key to this and, while the strategy doesn’t refer to fair admissions explicitly, it has the specific objective of making Warwick accessible for everyone who has the potential to benefit – which is a widening participation objective, but is also about fair admissions in reality” (Senior Manager responsible for Student Recruitment and Admissions, Warwick).*

64 Newman, a small, Catholic University College, created to serve the local community, places a strong emphasis on being a widening participation institution. However, as much of Newman's provision is of teacher training programmes, applications and admissions procedures for these programmes are determined by the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) criteria.

**(ii) *The relationship between staff in admissions, student recruitment and widening participation***

65 The general perception from case study institutions was that centralisation had enhanced the degree to which admissions decision-makers worked in conjunction with staff in student recruitment, marketing and widening participation and increased integration was cited by an institution (Durham).

66 The relationship between admissions and other aspects of the institutional mission was expressed in various ways by case study interviewees. Some, such as Nottingham,

Durham, Plymouth and UEL stressed the importance of their wide range of courses at different levels (e.g. Foundation Year courses) as the key link between admissions and widening participation; Nottingham and Durham both highlighted the role of the OFFA access agreement; South East Essex College and Hull the importance of marketing; and Bolton, Royal Holloway and Newman the general widening participation ethos of the institutions. The Senior Manager responsible for Admissions at Plymouth expressed fair admissions as the institution's practice whereby all Art and Design applicants, even if they are not yet at the appropriate level to be accepted on to a degree course, are offered a Foundation Year course or a place on an FE course:

*“everyone gets an interview and that is fair, even if they don't get what they want they get offered something else, or a referral if they have more specialised needs and support than we can offer” (Senior Manager, Admissions).*

67 At Nottingham the Senior Manager responsible for widening participation noted that since that role was created in 2000 there had been broad acceptance of the need to address widening participation in admissions policy:

*[at that time] “we had 10 applications per place and it seemed to me the last thing we wanted was more applicants, so I worked on admissions policy first off and this has been a really core part of our widening participation policy since then” (Head of Widening Participation, Nottingham).*

68 Another aspect of the Nottingham context has been the ongoing centralisation under the central decision-making team and the adoption of Service Level Agreements (both of which pre-dated the Schwartz Report). These developments have resulted in admissions becoming more central to the aims and objectives of the institution and have encouraged liaison with marketing and widening participation, especially around the time of the Schwartz Report.

69 Durham is prominent amongst those institutions that interpret widening participation as providing increased opportunities for non-traditional applicants:



*“Point of departure is that we have to see what is best for Durham - we have one of the most successful Foundation Centres in the country (90% of which are mature students doing a Year 0) offering direct progression onto degrees - we have about 80 home and 100 overseas students and we have one of the highest progression routes from this onto degrees in the country” (Pro-Vice Chancellor, Teaching and Learning, Durham).*

70 Durham is also continuing to increase its interaction with the local region, representing a shift away from more general widening participation outreach activities:

*“We think we have spent too much time on general awareness and aspiration raising activities [rather than] having enough focus on trying to make sure that Durham broadens and diversifies its intake.” [There are] “several dimensions to that; one is a much greater need to have a local and regional focus than perhaps in the past” (Pro-Vice Chancellor, Teaching and Learning, Durham).*

71 UEL, which has a diverse student community, also offers a wide range of sub-degree courses, backed up by a high level of transition support. Centralisation has been the key to this:

*“We made radical changes in how we handle admissions at UEL in 2002/03 in that we have delegated more decision-making to the admissions team in the Corporate Marketing and International Office because it improves consistency, fairness” [and] “speed of decision-making” (Deputy Vice-Chancellor, UEL).*

72 At South East Essex College there has been a similar emphasis on uniting previously autonomous units:

*“We’ve done a lot of work in the last couple of years in joining up the different aspects of admissions so in trying to join up the marketing, the student support, the registry, the course team functions, those are working very well I think now as a team so that the applicant gets a joined up experience. As I say, we’ve paid a lot of attention to that. I think there are things that we can still do better and I’m sure there are things that we can still do smarter but we’re well on the way I think” (Senior Manager responsible for Admissions, South East Essex College).*

73 South East Essex College also stressed the importance of external funding from Aimhigher which has enabled significantly more outreach and information, advice and guidance work with local schools (Manager responsible for Information, Advice and Guidance):

*“Probably the best sort of example about activities would be where we have had Year 9’s in to do themed curriculum based activities, such as a science activity last year. We asked the schools what they thought their students would be interested in and they highlighted science and forensics. The students were able to come in over a period of two days, find out about lab practice and law and then put those things into practice by solving a notional crime, it was a murder. On day three they’re then taken by coach to the University of Essex in Colchester for a third day of activities around science” (Information, Advice and Guidance Manager, South East Essex College).*

74 Bolton reported that widening participation and fair admissions are central to and inextricably linked to the ethos of the institution which they believe is expressed through the co-operation of academic staff across the institution:

*“We do a lot in terms of widening participation as a university; we have a dedicated widening participation individual but we” [also] “have good support from all our academic schools” (Senior Manager for Admissions and Registry, Bolton).*

75 At Newman this widening participation ethos is partly due to the vocational emphasis of much of the provision. The Senior Manager responsible for External Relations at Newman is working with the local Lifelong Learning Network to develop progression arrangements relating to parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications, with the aim of increased transparency demonstrating the move from FE to HE. The Principal commented that as an institution, Newman is now more focused on an effective admissions system, particularly as the sector becomes more competitive in terms of attracting students in a time of falling demographics. In this context “effective” refers to the admissions process and the applicant experience of this process. Although applicants have greater direct links to universities (via UCAS and institutional websites), competition can limit the opportunities individual institutions have to impress applicants and demonstrate their strengths.

### **(iii) Summary**

76 As has been noted, case study institutions vary to some extent in how and where they express the linkages between admissions policy and practice to their mission and strategy statements: It is not always clear how this integration is monitored in relation to the institution's mission and values (see Good Practice Guide 7). It is clear that institutions of all types find it possible to engage with the Schwartz Report's notion of fair admissions: as well as through widening participation and diversity, by pointing to performance indicators and benchmarks that are relative to institutions with similar intakes rather than relative to a sector wide statement of how such complex arrangements should be demonstrated and monitored. There are complex and increasing interactions between admissions, widening participation and marketing, both in the interaction of staff and policies. There seems to be a trend for centralised admissions services to reflect institutional missions and the marketing, recruitment and widening participation imperatives.

## **Good Practice Guide 7:**

### **Strategy linking responsibility for student recruitment, admissions and widening participation - University of Warwick**

**The University of Warwick had 33,756 applicants and accepted 3,717 students from the UCAS system in 2007. Warwick has a largely centralised admissions system. The admissions policy statement was not found on the institution's website as part of this research. It has Entry Profiles for 97% of its courses (UCAS 2008).**

During 2007 and 2008 the University has worked to develop a new vision, informed by a process of consultation resulting in changes to the institutional strategy. Warwick aims to be one of the world's top 50 universities by 2015 judged by the quality of its research and the quantity and quality of student demand. Although the strategy does not refer to admissions explicitly, it is a key facet of the University's objective to make a Warwick education accessible for everyone with the potential to benefit. This is a widening participation objective that is by necessity underpinned by fair admissions. A large number of the University's courses are centralised in terms of admissions decision-making, however, a few departments remain decentralised. The Pro-Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning emphasises that it is not University policy to 'coerce departments if the current system appears to be working'.

The Director of Student Admissions and Recruitment at Warwick has responsibility for widening participation, UK recruitment and admissions, providing an overarching view of policy and strategy within these areas to support the University's aims. The Director commented that:

*"the close integration of admissions and widening participation means that decision-makers are sensitive to widening participation at the point at which it counts - admissions. Less integrated models might do lots of aspiration raising work but this isn't always followed through"* (Director of Student Admissions and Recruitment).

Warwick stated that its approach supports widening participation, evidenced by the fact that their position against Performance Indicators sits well in comparison with institutions with similar applicant profiles within the Russell Group. This has been achieved without progression agreements or compacts and by very careful and holistic consideration of each and every applicant and by ensuring that those taking decisions are familiar with the widening participation agenda.

Staff interviewed commented that they take a very holistic approach to the admissions decision-making process, and that widening participation is very much embedded within this. A member of academic staff involved in decision-making confirmed that 'this balancing of contextual factors goes right to the heart of the Schwartz principles' and enabled them to make decisions by looking at the 'whole picture'. Admissions decision-making staff at all levels disseminate widening participation issues across the institution and question departments when necessary for clarification about their practices. Admissions decision-makers work closely with the widening participation team; the two teams have joint roles on some recruitment and outreach activities (e.g. summer schools and events involving Year 10 and Year 11 students at the time they are making decisions about HE). This coherent and collaborative approach has increased since the role of the Director of Student Admissions and Recruitment was created.

## ***Glossary of terms used in this report***

**Centralised/ decentralised** - admissions decision-making within institutions can be either centralised, with most if not all admissions decision-making located in a central department of the institution, or decentralised, with most if not all admissions decision-making located within departments, schools or faculties.

**Delivery Partnership for Improving the HE Application Process** - the Delivery Partnership is a UK-wide, higher education sector-led, partnership of different education stakeholders. It was established in autumn 2006 to implement reforms to the higher education applications process following the Government's response to the DfES-led Consultation on *Improving the Higher Education Applications Process* in May 2006.

**EMA** – Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is a weekly payment from the Government for young people who want to study in full-time further education.

**Entry Profiles** – are written by HEIs and are located on the UCAS Course Search website. They give prospective applicants to HE more information about the courses they want to study by providing details about entry qualifications, entry criteria and desirable personal characteristics etc. which may include the relative importance of the criteria plus the process detailing how admissions decisions are made, all on one website.

**Fair Admissions** - a) the name and subject of what is known as the **Schwartz Report**.  
b) General use in the report: Fairness does not necessarily mean the same treatment of all applicants, but all applicants should have the same equality of opportunity. The Schwartz Steering Group stated in the Report its '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...admissions should not be biased in favour of applicants from certain backgrounds or schools'. [Section C2, Schwartz Report 2004]

**GuildHE** - GuildHE is the new name for SCOP (the Standing Conference of Principals), which was originally established in 1978 as the representative organisation for the colleges of higher education. GuildHE (launched in 2006) now speaks for HE colleges, specialist institutions and some universities. It has 22 member institutions and six associate members.

**IAG** - Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) is a term used to describe careers and higher education advice provided by teachers and tutors in schools and colleges, Connexions careers staff and others such as staff from HEIs.

**Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs)** – Higher education Funding Council funded national, area and regional collaborations involving institutions in a defined area which aim to create new opportunities for vocational learners.

**Mission Groups** - are used in this report to differentiate between HEI types; they are associations of HEIs sharing particular missions which can be expressed through factors including: the relationship between research and teaching; the profile of applicants and acceptances in the student body; the balance between selecting and recruiting courses offered. Mission Groups referred to in this report are: 1994 Group; Million+; Russell Group; University Alliance (see below). GuildHE, a representative group that speaks for HE colleges, specialist institutions and some universities, is also referred to in this report though it is not a group which is defined by a shared mission among its members.

#### **1994 Group**

Established in 1994, this Group brings together 19 research-intensive universities. The Group provides a central vehicle to help members promote their common interests in higher education, respond efficiently to key policy issues, and share best methods and practice.

#### **Million+**

Established in 2007, formerly the Coalition of Modern Universities and later CMU: 'campaigning for mainstream universities'. Million+ describes itself as a university think-tank and has 28 member institutions which teach around half of the UK's higher education students each year.

#### **Russell Group**

Established in 1994, the Russell Group is an association of 20 research-intensive universities of the United Kingdom. In 2006/07, Russell Group Universities accounted for 66% (over £2.2 billion) of UK Universities' research grant and contract income, 68% of total Research Council income, 56% of all doctorates awarded in the United Kingdom, and over 30% of all students studying in the United Kingdom from outside the EU.

### **University Alliance**

Established in 2006, the University Alliance, previously convened informally as the Alliance of Non-Aligned Universities, comprises a mixture of pre- and post-1992 universities. The 23 member institutions have a balanced portfolio of research, teaching, enterprise and innovation integral to their missions.

**OFFA** - Office for Fair Access (OFFA) is an independent, non departmental public body which aims to promote and safeguard fair access to higher education for under-represented groups in light of the introduction of variable tuition fees in 2006-07. OFFA requires all publicly funded providers of higher education in England which decide to charge tuition fees above the standard level to submit an access agreement.

**QAA** - The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was established in 1997 to provide an integrated quality assurance service for UK higher education. It is an independent body funded by subscriptions from universities and colleges of higher education, and through contracts with the main higher education funding bodies. The QAA's Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education includes admissions to HE. It was first issued in 2001 and updated in September 2006 in the light of the Schwartz Report, as Section 10: Admissions to higher education.

**Performance Indicators** – are a range of statistical indicators intended to offer an objective measure of how a higher education institution (HEI) is performing.

**Recruiting courses/ institutions** - recruiting courses are those where there is no oversupply of applicants; in effect all applicants who meet the entry criteria are made an offer. Recruiting institutions are those that have a majority of courses which do not have an oversupply of applicants.

**Rudolf Steiner Schools** - Independent schools that offer an alternative type of education based on a flexible pedagogy designed to provide a creative learning environment that satisfies the physical, emotional, intellectual, cultural and spiritual needs of the child.

**Selecting courses/ institutions** - selecting courses are those where there is an oversupply of applicants who meet the entry criteria; admissions decision-makers have to select from among

qualified applicants. Selecting institutions are those which have a majority of courses that have an oversupply of applicants.

**SPA** - The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme was established in May 2006 as an independent UK wide programme to support institutions offering higher education programmes, to lead on the continued development of fair admissions, enhance professionalism, share good practice developed from evidence gained on visits to universities and colleges, and to provide advice to senior managers and admissions decision-makers and other stakeholders.

**UCAS** – Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. The central organisation which processes applications for most full-time undergraduate courses at UK universities and colleges.

**UCAS Course Search** – the UCAS website which provides details for applicants and advisers of the 50,000 courses in the UCAS scheme, including Entry Profiles.

**UCAS Wider Picture** – the UCAS consultancy and staff development programme, focussing on the specification of HE entry requirements, the UCAS Tariff and principles of good offer making, the 14-19 curriculum, fair admissions, widening participation and the electronic transformation of UCAS services.

**Widening Participation** – assisting more people from under-represented groups, particularly low socio-economic groups, to participate successfully in higher education.



## Appendix 1 – Sampling framework

The case studies were selected in conjunction with SPA from survey respondent volunteers from England, a total of 51 institutions. The sampling criteria were: region; size (measured by FTE acceptances, see Table 1 below), mission group, type (HEI, FEC of which two were selected) and one single-subject area institution was included. Fieldwork was carried out during May 2008.

**Table 1 Case study sampling frame**

Institution	Type	Size code	Region	Mission Group
Durham University	HEI	2	North East	1994
Newman University College	HEI	3	West Midlands	GuildHE*
Plymouth College of Art and Design	FEC	4	South West	Universities Alliance
Royal Holloway, University of London	HEI	2	London	1994
South East Essex College	FEC	3	South East	None
University of Hull	HEI	1	Yorkshire and Humberside	None
University of East London	HEI	1	London	Million+
The University of Nottingham	HEI	1	East Midlands	Russell Group
University of Bolton	HEI	3	North West	Million+
University of Warwick	HEI	2	West Midlands	Russell Group & 1994

\*GuildHE is not a mission group but a representative group speaking for HE colleges, specialist institutions and some universities which do not necessarily share a mission.

**Table 2 Size ranges and derivation**

Range of FTE acceptances	Type	Code range	No. in Category	% of all 322	Size code
0-1	Non HEI	288-322	34	10	6
1-99	Non HEI	206-287	81	25	5
100-299	HEI/ non HEI	150-205	55	17	4
300-2,000	HEI/ non HEI	95-149	54	17	3
2,001-3,999	HEI	37-94	57	17	2
4,000-8,500+	HEI	1-36	36	11	1

Source: Applications (choices) and accepted applicants to each UCAS member university and college 2007, UCAS.

[http://www.ucas.ac.uk/about\\_us/stat\\_services/stats\\_online/data\\_tables/abushei/abushei2007/](http://www.ucas.ac.uk/about_us/stat_services/stats_online/data_tables/abushei/abushei2007/) Accessed 25/02/08

**Table 3 Breakdown of interviewees by level of responsibility**

	<b>Strategic</b>	<b>Operational</b>	<b>Academic</b>
Durham University	2	2	1
Newman University College	4	1	1
Plymouth College of Art and Design	3	1	0
Royal Holloway, University of London	2	3	1
South East Essex College	2	2	1
University of Hull	2	2	1
University of East London	2	1	0
The University of Nottingham	4	3	2
University of Bolton	1	2	1
University of Warwick	2	2	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>9</b>

The information collected during the interviews was analysed by creating a matrix containing the main themes identified to enable patterns and variations to emerge across the ten cases. The resulting report has two functions: it summarises the main themes and how these are demonstrated in each of the institutions; and it presents a series of 'good practice' guides analysing in more detail a specific institutional aspect of the fair admissions agenda.

## Appendix 2 - Job roles of interviewees

### ***HEI job roles***

Head of Admissions, Deputy Registrar  
Marketing Liaison Manager  
Head of Recruitment and Admissions  
Team Leader, Admissions  
Senior Assistant Registrar, Director of Undergraduate Admissions Office  
Head of Admissions Office  
Undergraduate Admissions Manager, centralised system  
Assistant Head of Student Admissions  
Admissions Officer (decentralised subject area)  
Admissions Officer  
Admissions Tutor, (decentralised subject area)  
Director of Student Recruitment and Admissions (also with Widening Participation responsibility)  
Head of Widening Participation  
Pro-Vice Chancellor Teaching and Learning  
Deputy Vice-Chancellor  
Tutor for Academic Transitions  
Programme Leader (Combined Honours)  
Schools and Partnership Manager (Widening Participation role)  
Programme Leader, Extended Degrees (subject area)  
Head of Admissions  
Head of Registry

### ***Non-HEI job roles***

Principal  
Vice-Principal  
Head of School (subject area)  
Lecturer (subject area)  
Head of Student Support Services  
Information, Advice and Guidance Manager  
Learner Support Manager  
Programme Manager  
Director, Student Services and Marketing  
Academic Director of HE  
Head of Admissions  
Deputy Registrar- HE  
Head of HE  
Director of Higher Education and Operations  
Assistant Head of Admissions

## Appendix 3 - Interview question schedules

### **Question schedules for semi-structured case study interviews**

Questions were asked of Head of Admissions with admissions responsibility at the policy/operational level and also (with slightly different questions) of Senior Managers with admissions responsibility (i.e. Pro-Vice Chancellor, Vice-Principal, Registrar) at strategic /institutional level.

#### **1. Your institution and Schwartz**

1. Did your institution respond to the consultation on fair admissions in 2004? (*probe: what was the nature of the contribution*)
2. How did your institution respond to the five principles and the recommendations made by the Schwartz Report? (*high level committee meetings; ad-hoc discussion of findings; internal review of practices, restructuring of admissions (e.g. decentralised to centralised or vice versa, etc.)*)
3. Have you adapted or developed any new policies as a result of the Schwartz Report? (need details and copies of policies if possible)
4. Which elements of the Report's recommendations have not yet been adopted by your institution, and why?
5. How relevant do you think were the recommendations to your institution?
6. In what ways does the QAA Code of Practice on admissions impact on your admissions policies? (*does it have more/ less impact than (a) Schwartz Report and (b) SPA in determining policy changes?*)
7. Can you describe the process by which admissions policy is monitored and, if necessary, updated? How frequently is it reviewed?
8. Has there been any institutional change/awareness in the role/importance of admissions and fairness in admissions since the Schwartz Report? If changes have been made, how have they been implemented? (*what were the internal mechanisms by which change was adopted? How is admissions policy developed within your institution?*)
9. What are the barriers, if any, to implementing the recommendations? (*internal; external*)

#### **2. Staffing and staff development**

1. Are the admissions staff (academic and administrative) fully aware of the recommendations of the Schwartz Report (*what elements of Schwartz are seen as most important by staff*)  
*Five Principles:*
  - Be transparent, and provide consistent and efficient information

- Select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and potential
  - Use assessment methods that are reliable and valid
  - Minimise barriers to applicants
  - Be professional in every respect and underpinned by institutional structures and processes
2. Has your institution provided any staff development on these or other issues relating to fair admissions for academic admissions tutors, for administrative and support staff, for others? (*nature and form of activities, who delivers the training, internal, external*)
  3. Do you use interviews as part of the admissions decision-making process? Are your interview procedures and policy clear to applicants? What is the added value of an interview as part of decision-making? Have you considered using common interviews for certain subjects with other institutions?
  4. Are those interviewing applicants for places given interview training? *Training not just in interview techniques but also equality, diversity and fairness issues. Is the training provided by internal staff, if yes by whom? For Medicine, Nursing, Education etc. do you use external professionals as part of the interview team? If so are they trained in the HEI's interview procedures?*
  5. Do you use the UCAS Continuing Professional Development programme? *If so how? If not why not? If not do you use any external training organisations/consultants?*
  6. Do you feel you have sufficient resources to deal with new policies and changes in admissions whilst maintaining the principles recommended by Schwartz?

### **3. Wider curriculum changes**

Since 2004 there have been various curriculum changes that may have impacted on your institution's admissions practices - can you tell us about the impact of (for example):

- the DCSF HE Engagement project on 14-19 curriculum changes in England
- changes in other parts of the UK e.g. Advanced Highers (Scotland), the Welsh Baccalaureate
- other new qualifications and initiatives?
- have more applicants with vocational and other (non A level) level 3 qualifications been admitted to your HEI over the last three years? If not why not?
- what are your views on the impact of these changes for admissions?

How are admissions staff kept up to date with developments in these areas?

### **4. Publicity and transparency**

1. How is the admissions policy publicised? (e.g. externally: *on website - easily found from home page? linked from course pages; in prospectus; in general information sent to all applicants*, internally: *to all staff involved in admissions, training provided?*)

2. How easy do you think it is for applicants of all types/ backgrounds to access all the information they might need regarding entry requirements and application procedures at this institution? *If not easy why not easy? If it is easy what evidence do you have to support this?*
3. In the DfES Consultation on *Improving the HE Application Process* the responses from HEIs and other stakeholders gave 99% support for UCAS to continue their work to
4. encourage the provision of clear, comparable entry requirement information, with a view to moving towards 100% provision of information for students wishing to enter HE in 2009. This level of support has been backed up by the Delivery Partnership and its Entry Profile Working Group which is working with UCAS to progress up to date and transparent Entry Profiles.

Do you have up to date Entry Profiles for all your HE courses? How useful do you think Entry Profiles are to applicants?

5. How useful are Entry Profiles for enabling applicants to make an informed decision about which course to apply to?
6. Do you include details of the admissions decision-making process within your Entry Profiles? (e.g. use of interview, admissions tests, etc.)
7. Can you explain how or if you monitor the satisfaction of applicants with the admissions service?
8. How would you rate the transparency of the admissions processes at your institution (please can you explain)?
9. How do you handle feedback to unsuccessful applicants? *How are you updating this in the light of the Delivery Partnership/SPA statement of good practice and its request for updating of policies by December 2008? Will you make use of the electronic coding/ free text for feedback on reasons for rejection (in UCAS ODBC or XML -Link manual for 2009)?*
10. How do you manage equality and diversity issues in admissions, applicants with disabilities, looked after children etc...*Who has responsibility for this? Is the policy published on your website?*
11. What are your policies and procedures on considering applicants who have criminal convictions, both for those courses which require Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks and for general admission? *(how is this publicised?)*
12. Do you have an admissions complaints and or appeals/review policy?

## **5. Assessing contextual factors**

1. Can you explain how/if personal contextual factors are considered in decision-making? (e.g. *school performance data, widening participation background, disability/ illness information, care leaver etc*).

2. Do you attach weighting - explain how this is decided and to which types of courses.
3. Do you use admissions tests; if so what part do they play in decision-making? (i.e. how important in relation to other factors; variation by subject area, how much weight is given to tests compared with other factors (e.g. application form, qualifications, interview etc?) Are details of tests on your website?
4. How does your institution decide whether to use an admissions test or not, what is the process / committees etc that consider this (*SPA's statement on what comprises a 'good' admissions test is that a test should:*
  - Have rigorous validation and reliability testing;
  - Be supported by statistical and research evidence;
  - Ensure the minimum of bias in the test questions so the test is valid for applicants from all backgrounds in a UK context;
  - Be readily available and accessible to applicants who have declared and provided evidence of disability or a special requirement in a timely way;
  - Provide exemplar materials and tests with answers;
  - Be fairly and professionally administered, and
  - Be able to demonstrate it is fit for purpose and add value as part of holistic decision-making).
5. How do you assess motivation and potential in applicants for a course?

## **6. *Linkages between admissions and institutional mission***

1. How important is fair admissions within the institution's mission and strategy? If it is important where/ in which documentation is this stated? *How important is fair admissions in relation to the other institution objectives, scale 1-10? Who within the institution has overall responsibility for admissions decision-making policy?*
2. How closely related is a good 'applicant experience' (pre-application, application, after offer made and transition) to the successful transition and progress at your institution (i.e. retention) (*do compacts have a role here?*) How are you monitoring and evaluating the link between your admissions policies and procedures, supporting transition and your undergraduates' performance and retention rates?
3. How closely do the recruitment and admissions staff and process work with widening participation staff and activity? (*internal communications of institutions' policy very important, involvement in widening participation activities and projects, local schools and colleges*)
4. Are you involved with your regional Lifelong Learning Network links? (*involved in a progression agreement/ impact of link on applications*)
5. Are data and statistics, from UCAS or elsewhere, used to inform the admissions process (*and if so how and at what stages? If not why not?*)

## **7. Good practice issues**

1. What specific examples of good practice for fair admissions, recruitment or widening participation at your institution can you bring to our attention and explain why they are important?
2. Are there any other examples of good practice in student recruitment, widening access or participation, admissions and related areas at your institution the research team should be aware of? (*get copies of information about these*)
3. Is there anything that your admissions procedures or policy contain that is particularly beneficial to prospective applicants?
4. Are there any particular fairness issues you feel SPA should be acting on as part of its remit?



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Department for Innovation Universities and Skills, [www.dius.gov.uk](http://www.dius.gov.uk)

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