



Good Practice in Admissions

SPA Guidance for further education colleges offering higher education

Revised December 2013

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1. Introduction

This guidance note is intended for all those concerned with admissions to higher education courses and programmes in a College, from senior management to 'front-line' admissions staff, and is intended to act as an initial source of guidance for colleges considering how to deal with admissions to higher education. It has been developed in cooperation with associations of Colleges round the UK, particularly the Association of Colleges (AoC) in England and forms the 'Admissions' chapter of AoC's online 'HE in FE Guide'¹. SPA is continuing to develop guidance on HE in FE admissions and would be delighted to hear from colleagues with questions and examples of good practice.

Colleges already follow very high standards in their admissions processes. Their close relationship with students and applicants means that their practice in many areas is highly innovative and supportive, for example in the inclusive and advisory role of interviews. However, both senior and admissions staff may find the following principles of value in demonstrating a college's high standards and in giving a structure against which good practice can be measured.

This note will be mainly concerned with admissions to full-time undergraduate courses across the UK, although many of the points made also apply to the admission of part-time and postgraduate students, and to international as well as UK/EU students.

2. Why is HE admissions important?

Access to higher education and the fairness of the admissions process are topics of interest to applicants, their families and advisers, to the public at large, to politicians and to the media. The wider admissions process, which extends from the pre-application stage up to and including enrolment², is also critical in establishing a good relationship between applicants and HE providers, and can assist HE providers in ensuring that they reach their target and retain their students.

Higher Education (HE) in Further Education (FE) or College HE as it is increasingly referred to, is an important and growing area of higher education. In England many FE colleges are receiving numbers direct from HEFCE for the first time and have the challenge of undertaking their own admissions, in Scotland colleges are considering collaboration and mergers while the HE and admissions landscape is also changing in Wales and Northern Ireland.

Once FE colleges have decided to offer higher education provision they are likely to find that they encounter a large number of obligations. A recent example of this is the requirement to complete the [Key Information Set \(KIS\)](#) which has many obligations and requirements for data which colleges are unlikely to have encountered previously. All KIS information is published on the [Unistats web-site](#). The same applies to admissions to higher education; once the decision to offer higher education is taken, the need for an admissions IT systems and to set appropriate academic requirements follow. Colleges are also keen to meet the requirements of the QAA and will wish to pay close attention to the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education Part B, Chapter B2, Admissions](#).

Admissions is also an area where all HE providers may encounter criticism and challenge - including, possibly, legal challenge. Colleges are justifiably proud of the close personal relationships they have with their applicants and students but there is now an expectation that

¹ For AoC members www.aoc.co.uk/en/policy-and-advice/higher-education/. (accessed December 2013).

² For more on this relationship see SPA's work on the [Applicant Experience](#) (accessed December 2013).

procedures, policies and obligations should be clearly set out, not only for the benefit of applicants, their families and advisers but also to protect each college.

3. Who is responsible for admissions to higher education?

Admissions are the responsibility of individual universities and colleges. Institutions are able to set their own criteria, choose their own assessment methods, and select their own students.³

4. Good Practice Principles for admissions to higher education

While admission to higher education is the responsibility of each institution, there are some principles of good practice that are generally accepted across the HE sector. These were contained in the independent 2004 report from the review group Chaired by Professor Steven Schwartz, [Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for good practice](#)⁴.

This recommends that in their admissions processes HE providers should:

1. be transparent
2. select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and their potential
3. strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid
4. seek to minimise barriers to applicants
5. be professional in every respect and be underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes

Appendix A gives these in greater detail.

5. Organisation

There is no 'one way' to organise higher education admissions in FE colleges; it will depend on the size of the college and of its intake, on relationships with partner universities and colleges, the mix between FE and HE courses and a range of other factors. However, there are some aspects of higher education admissions in FE colleges where there seems to be a measure of agreement. These include:

Senior Management commitment and involvement

It is important that senior management is committed to higher education in the college. They have a vision of the importance of higher education in the college's plans, are able to emphasise to staff that this is a crucial activity and have the authority to make decisions affecting resources and student numbers.

It is often considered useful to have a Director of Higher Education who is responsible for HE on a cross-institution basis. The Director may be associated with a particular department, or academic unit, but will still have College-wide responsibilities.

Internal Communication

Many (though not all) colleges are relatively small institutions with good informal personal relationships between colleagues. The work of admissions is complex, however, and it is important to ensure that there is good communication between all staff involved with applicants and new students.

³ This is set out for England and Wales in the [Higher Education Act 2004, Part 3, Section 32, subsection 2 \(b\)](#) and for Scotland in the [Further and Higher Education \(Scotland\) Act 2005, Section 98 Subsections 1, 2 and 12 \(b\) \(ii\)](#) (accessed December 2013)

⁴ [Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for good practice](#) 2004 (often referred to as the Schwartz Report) (accessed December 2013).

Staff and offices involved may include:

- Academic staff
- Accommodation (if offered by the college)
- Admissions
- Finance
- Information Technology and Systems
- International Office
- Marketing and Recruitment
- Partner Institutions
- Planning
- Quality Assurance
- Senior Management
- Student Services
- Widening Inclusion

For guidance on who should be involved in admissions you may find it useful to look at SPA's [Plan on Considerations for Planning and Managing Admissions](#); page 5 looks at who may be involved in admissions planning and although some categories may not be relevant to you, you may find it helpful as a start.

6. Admissions decision-making

In Colleges

In some colleges (as in some universities) decisions on applications are made by academic staff, while in others they are made by administrative staff using criteria established by academic staff. There is no 'single best way' to organise admissions and each college will decide on the solution which is best for it.

Whatever solution is decided on, both academic and administrative staff should always be involved in the setting of criteria. This should be on the basis of robust data and should take into account information on both the performance of students on courses and the position of the College and course in the market.

In partnership with HE partners

Arrangements for admissions decisions between FE colleges and HE partners can vary widely. In some cases all decisions are made by the HE partner and the role of the FE college is to receive a list of students at the beginning of the academic year; in others, all decisions are made by the FE colleges, who also input the decisions through UCAS. Others have a mixture of the two.

Admissions Administration

It is important to note that the admissions function does not include only decision-making but also a range of associated issues including:

- Guidance on Policy related to HE admissions
- Information about qualifications
- Knowledge of the course provision at the college, and at partner institutions
- Responses to consultations from governments and other organisations, that may have an effect on admissions
- Knowledge of admissions systems, procedures and timelines, including UCAS, if your college is a member

Information on developments in any of these areas must be shared by the Admissions Office in the college, or by the HE partner, with all those staff who need to know.

Documented and transparent procedures

Admissions processes and policies should be clearly laid out in agreements and plans, both within colleges and between colleges and HE partners. They must be transparent to potential applicants, applicants and their advisers. This is both helpful to the admissions operation and in accordance with the QAA's recommendations.⁵

7. Considering the application

In considering the application admissions decision-makers will take into account a range of factors including:

- Academic merit, based on qualifications
- Skills in areas such as creative subjects
- Interviews and auditions
- Requirements of professional bodies
- Progression and potential
- The requirements and procedures of partner institutions
- Equality, diversity and disability policies
- Criminal convictions

In viewing applications, individual factors (such as qualifications or school performance) should not be considered in isolation but should be viewed in relation to each other, as part of a whole (sometimes referred to as 'holistic' consideration). Information on such 'contextual data' can be found on the [contextual data pages](#) on the SPA website.⁶

If applicants are unsuccessful colleges should offer [feedback](#) if requested, and there should be an established [complaints and appeals procedure](#). Policies on these (and other issues) should be transparent and easily found (as noted in section 6, above).

8. Admissions Policies

All institutions should have admissions policies dealing with what they are looking for and how admissions will be conducted. In some FE colleges, one policy will cover both FE and HE admissions while in others there will be separate policies for the two groups (and possibly others, such as part-time students). There is currently no 'best model' for how policies should be divided in this way and SPA will continue to work on this issue.

In some institutions there will be one large policy with sections covering many different topics while in others there will be a number of separate policies. A couple of sentences or paragraphs on many of these topics may suffice, while others may need to be longer, possibly even being separate policies in their own right.

Full information, including links to some examples, is given on the SPA website in **Appendix D**, and in the [SPA Good Practice Statement on Admissions Policies](#).

⁵ [QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Part B, Chapter B2, Admissions, Indicator 5](#) (accessed December 2013).

⁶ [SPA website contextual data](#) pages (accessed December 2013).

9. Data and its use

It is important that the performance of students on course is monitored against entry requirements. This will enable colleges to understand if requirements are correct or if any changes are required in the subjects asked for or the level of performance required.

Marketing data is also important and at course and college level, robust data ensures that staff are able to understand the changing demand for different subjects.

Good data is also a key part of public information, including the [Key Information Set \(KIS\)](#) and it is important that all parts of the college - including admissions and planning - work together to ensure that data is of good quality and available at the right time.

10. Information for applicants

Colleges have long experience of providing information for prospective students, both for progression within the college itself and for recruitment from a wider area.

While there are new (and sometimes challenging) requirements for public information - for example, for the Key Information Set - colleges will already be aware of and understand the need for information, and will have their own systems and procedures for its collection.

11. Partners - and links

There may be links with partner universities, through either a validation or a franchising arrangement. It is appreciated that these links can be highly complex, and can vary according to the number of HE partners, the modes of study and specific courses. Links may also be at many levels and between many offices, including admissions, marketing and recruitment, quality assurance, senior management and any special offices dealing with partnership arrangements. It is important that lines of communication between all parts of the two institutions are very clear.

12. Staff resources

Staff dealing with HE admissions may encounter a range of different challenges. They may:

- Need to learn about different IT systems
- Require training on UCAS systems, procedures and timelines (if these are used)
- Encounter a different range of qualifications from those previously dealt with
- Need to attend update events on issues significant to HE admissions (e.g. Student Number Controls)
- Find that the key times and deadlines for HE admission may not be the same as those for FE admissions (for example, in mid-late August, a crucial time for HE admissions, when only guidance staff were previously involved.)

Senior staff in the college must be aware of these issues, the demands on staff time and the resources which may be required (e.g. to attend events and training).

13. SPA – who we are and what we can offer

SPA is the UK's independent and objective voice on admissions to higher education. We offer an impartial, independent, fully-funded central shared service, offering expertise and advice on policy and procedures in admissions, widening inclusion and student recruitment.

We are not auditors or regulators, but offer support to institutions to enable them to enhance and develop their HE admissions policy and procedures.

What can SPA offer HE providers?

- Expertise on admissions to HE
- A wide range of examples of good practice and a free resource for institutions who wish to enhance excellence in admissions, recruitment and widening inclusion
- The provision of advice to and answering queries from admissions practitioners and managers, HE stakeholders, national policy makers and others on specific questions, current issues and on policy developments in HE admissions.
- Broker between policy and practice: Drawing on our experience working in institutions and our established sector networks, SPA regularly provides a practitioner voice on policy issues and *vice versa*.

We make regular visits to HE providers, put information on our website www.spa.ac.uk, issue regular e-bulletins and publications, make presentations, conduct workshops and attend events.

For further information please visit our website at www.spa.ac.uk, contact the SPA team at enquiries@spa.ac.uk or call 01242 544891.

14. UCAS

Those colleges recruiting large numbers of full-time undergraduate students from outside their own colleges and immediate geographical area may wish to join UCAS. Many colleges find it of value in view of UCAS's clear procedures and established systems, the exposure to their courses given to prospective students and by practical benefits such as access to the Awarding Body Linkage (ABL) system (which transmits the results of many examinations through UCAS to their HE members). Part-time students are not admitted through UCAS, although UCAS may be considering systems for publicising part-time study options.

Of course, UCAS membership is not obligatory and Colleges may prefer to continue to undertake admissions by direct application. Colleges will wish to make a detailed study of these issues, including the costs involved, and decide on the best solution for them.

Even those HE providers not members of UCAS may still find that the UCAS website has information of use and interest to them, for example in the sections for [HE staff](#) (although some of these may require passwords) or the [Statistics Information](#). UCAS also offer a comprehensive staff training programme which colleges may find of interest.

15. Developing admissions for higher education

Many colleges will have well-developed systems for admitting higher education students, either with a partner institution or independently.

If college is new to undertaking HE admissions independently (without the involvement of a partner institution) it is important to consider the resources required (including time) to develop policies and procedures on every topic and build these into a plan. For example, you may decide that it is essential to give priority to official requirements, or you could decide that the areas that would give greatest information to and transparency for applicants are most important. Identify any remaining topics not yet covered, establish a timeline for reviewing them and include them in your policies and procedures over subsequent years.

Appendix A

Admissions to Higher Education - Good Practice Principles

These principles to all types of applicants (full and part time; undergraduate and postgraduate; home, EU and international; young and mature etc) and to all parts of the UK.

Principle 1: Be transparent

Universities and colleges should provide, consistently and efficiently the information applicants need to make an informed choice. This should include the institution's admissions policy and detailed criteria for admission to courses, along with an explanation of admissions processes. It should include a general indication of the weight given to prior academic achievement and potential demonstrated by other means.

Principle 2: Enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and potential.

In assessing applicants' merit and potential, institutions may legitimately consider other factors in addition to examination results, including: the educational context of an applicant's formal achievement; other indicators of potential and capability (such as the results of additional testing or assessment, including interviews, or non-academic experiences and relevant skills); and how an individual applicant's experiences, skills and perspectives could contribute to the learning environment

Principle 3: Strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid

Assessment can legitimately include a broad range of factors. Some of these factors are amenable to 'hard' quantifiable measures, while others rely on qualitative judgements. Admissions policies and procedures should be informed and guided by current research and good practice. Where possible, universities and colleges using quantifiable measures should use tests and approaches that have already been shown to predict undergraduate success. Universities and colleges should monitor and evaluate the link between their admissions policies and undergraduate performance and retention, and review their policies to address any issues identified.

Principle 4: Seek to minimise barriers to applicants

Admissions processes should seek to minimise any barriers that are irrelevant to satisfying admissions requirements. This could include barriers arising from the means of assessment; the varying resources and support available to applicants; disability; and the type of an applicant's qualifications (e.g. vocational or academic).

Principle 5: Be professional in every respect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes.

An institution's structures and processes should be designed to facilitate a high quality, efficient admissions system and a professional service to applicants. Structures and processes should feature: clear lines of responsibility across the institution to ensure consistency; allocation of resources appropriate to the task; and clear guidelines for the appointment, training and induction of all staff involved in admissions. The suggestion was made that institutions would find it simpler and cheaper to implement these guidelines if at least part of the admissions process were conducted by centrally located staff.

[Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice](#) - Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group, September 2004

SPA briefing: [Fair Admissions - what are the current issues? - July 2012](#)

Appendix B

Resources

Colleges are not alone in facing a range of challenges. Some sources of advice and guidance are as follows:

- Associations of Colleges. Seek advice from your Association of Colleges or Mission Group. Many colleges are currently considering how to develop their higher education provision and your Association may offer guidance, or be holding conferences, on this issue.
- Other colleges. Use the opportunity of conferences and other events to talk to colleagues from other colleges - particularly those who are not in competition with you - to understand their questions and the answers which they have developed to some of the issues.
- Speak to partner universities. If you are continuing to work closely with partner universities for some of your courses, while admitting directly to others, it may be helpful to see if you can use some of the same systems and procedures they do. Ask if you can have copies of their Admissions Guides to develop for your own use.
- [UCAS](#). If you are considering admitting through UCAS, speak to them to obtain details of costs and other requirements. Even if you do not intend to join, have a look at their website to see if there is useful information or if they have events for colleges and/or admissions staff that you may be able to attend.
- Marketing. Your college marketing staff may be involved in the [College Marketing Network](#) (CMN). Also speak to recruitment staff at your partner university who may be involved in the [Higher Education Liaison Officers' Association \(HELOA\)](#).
- Seek advice from [Supporting Professionalism in Admissions \(SPA\)](#). SPA is a national, independent source of advice, guidance and good practice on admissions issues. We are always happy to answer queries and offer advice and guidance; contact us at enquiries@spa.ac.uk, Telephone 01242 544891 or [consult our website](#).

Appendix C

Admissions to Higher Education - Useful Links

General

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has published useful guidance on [Supporting higher education in further education colleges \(2009/05\)](#); Chapter 5, in particular, deals with Marketing, Recruitment and Admissions. Although intended for English FE Colleges, it has general guidance that will be of interest to colleges across the UK.

College Groups and Associations

England: [Association of Colleges \(AoC\)](#)

[Mixed Economy Group](#)

[157 Group](#)

[The Gazelle Colleges Group](#)

Northern Ireland: [Colleges Northern Ireland](#)

Scotland: [Scotland's Colleges](#)

Wales: [Colleges Wales/Colegau Cymru](#)

Funding for Institutions

Funding Councils often give very important guidance on student number issues. Indeed recent direction on student number controls means that it is vital to follow their guidance closely. It is worth signing up for their bulletins and newsletters to keep abreast of developments.

England: [Higher Education Funding Council for England \(HEFCE\)](#)

Northern Ireland: [Department for Employment and Learning \(DELNI\)](#)

Scotland: [Scottish Funding Council \(SFC\)](#)

Wales: [Higher Education Funding Council for Wales \(HEFCW\)](#)

Funding for Students

[Student Loan Company \(SLC\)](#), in particular the sections on [Services for HE Partners](#).

[Student Finance England](#)

[Student Awards Agency for Scotland \(SAAS\)](#)

[Student Finance NI](#)

[Student Finance Wales/Cyllid Myfyrwyr Cymru](#)

Statistics

[Higher Education Statistics Agency](#).

Marketing

[College Marketing Network](#). Marketing staff in FE colleges.

[Higher Education Liaison Officers' Association \(HELOA\)](#) Currently for higher education institutions, but the representative from your partner HEI may be able to assist.

Professional Requirements

Professional bodies linked to particular courses may have a role in setting and monitoring entry requirements. Academic members of staff in departments will be able to give guidance on these.

Quality Assurance

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)

A key and authoritative resource and source of guidance for higher education is the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#). For admissions, the sections of particular interest are:

[Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality Chapter B2: Admissions](#), and

[Part C: Information about higher education provision](#)

UCAS

If your institution is a member of UCAS the named contact, the 'UCAS Correspondent', in the college will receive regular briefings and notes from UCAS on a wide variety of issues. It is important that the UCAS Correspondent shares information with everyone in the institution who needs to know it.

The [UCAS Professional Development Team](#) offers a range of specialist training for HE admissions staff while the [UCAS website](#) has a great deal of useful information in many sections, even for those colleges which are not members.

Appendix D

HE in Colleges Admissions Policies - good practice examples

These are examples of admissions policies currently used by FE colleges, which may be of interest to FE Colleges and to HE institutions with FE partners. This list is not exhaustive but colleges may find it of help in writing or reviewing their own policies. SPA would be delighted to receive further examples of good practice; please contact enquiries@spa.ac.uk, 01242 544891.

Borders College

Student Admission and Interview Policy and Procedures

http://www.borderscollege.ac.uk/downloads/admissions_and_interview_policy_and_procedureSept13.pdf

City of Westminster College

Higher Education Admissions Policy

[www.cwc.ac.uk/aboutus/CollegeInformation/Documents/HE Admissions Policy and Code of Practice Approved.pdf](http://www.cwc.ac.uk/aboutus/CollegeInformation/Documents/HE_Admissions_Policy_and_Code_of_Practice_Approved.pdf)

Newcastle College

Higher Education Admissions Policy

www.ncl-coll.ac.uk/media/downloads/166.pdf

Staffordshire University

Comprehensive Quality Assurance Policy on working with partner institutions

www.staffs.ac.uk/support_depts/quality/uk_non-surf_ga_handbook/

University Centre Grimsby

Higher Education Admissions procedures

www.grimsby.ac.uk/highereducation/documents/quality/CoP_Admissions.pdf

Wakefield College

Student Administration and Support, Section 4, Student Admission and Enrolment

www.wakefield.ac.uk/foia/docs_StudentAdmin.asp

Partners

Colleges might also consider using the Admissions Policies of their partner universities, suitably modified for their own use.

Appendix E

SPA Good Practice Statements and Guidance

Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme (SPA)

The SPA Programme was set up in 2006, and is now the UK's leading independent and objective voice on fair admissions to higher education. SPA is a free central shared source of expertise and advice for the sector on strategy, policy and practice on a wide range of admissions issues. SPA develops and leads on the development of fair admissions, providing an evidence base and recommendations for good practice and in helping universities and colleges maintain and enhance excellence and professionalism in admissions, student recruitment and widening participation/access. SPA works closely with institutions offering HE and other stakeholders to provide outputs as a resource for institutions which wish to develop and update their admissions practice and policy to enhance quality, transparency, reputation and fairness. Full information on SPA and its work can be found at www.spa.ac.uk.

SPA Guidance and Good Practice Statement

This guidance has been prepared by SPA in response to requests from institutions offering HE courses. Our objective is to provide good practice which has been derived from the analysis of evidence collected by SPA from discussions with staff on visits to institutions, at conferences, meetings, evidence from institutions policy and practice, and from desk-based research. There are a number of SPA good practice statements which aim to provide a wide range of staff in universities and colleges with principles and examples to consider to enable them to review and update their own policies and practices. Heads and deputy heads of institutions, senior managers, admissions and registry staff, student services staff, equality and diversity practitioners and student officers and representatives may find the statement of value and assistance.

In the UK admissions standards, requirements, procedures, policies and decisions are the responsibility of each individual HE institution. This principle was affirmed in the Schwartz Report on Fair Admissions (2004)⁷ and is set out in law.

Disclaimer

This good practice statement is for general guidance only, and should not be taken as a list of obligations or a legal document. SPA emphasises that it does not offer legal advice and cannot take any responsibility for actions taken based on this information. Institutions must always take their own legal advice as they see appropriate.

SPA good practice statements are kept under review and updated as appropriate. Your comments or updates are invited and appreciated, please contact enquiries@spa.ac.uk

⁷ *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice – The Schwartz Report, September 2004* (accessed December 2013)