



Supporting Professionalism
in Admissions

SPA good practice

Entry requirements



May 2017

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Disclaimer

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

Feedback

SPA good practice statements are kept under review and updated as appropriate. If you wish to discuss this good practice in greater detail, or provide any feedback on this document, we would be happy to talk to you. Please get in touch via enquiries@spa.ac.uk or 01242 544891.

Introduction

It is in everyone's interests that applicants know whether or not they are suitable for consideration for a particular higher education course. Clear, accurate and readily accessible information on entry requirements benefits applicants in making informed choices, providing a realistic expectation of the conditions they would need to meet should they receive an offer. This matching also aids higher education (HE) providers in both their recruitment activity and conversion strategies.

The Quality Assurance Agency's [UK Quality Code for HE, Chapter B2](#) on recruitment, selection and admission specifically highlights the need for transparent entry requirements, in particular Indicator 7 which states, "Selection processes for entry into higher education are underpinned by transparent entry requirements, both academic and non-academic, and present no unnecessary barriers to prospective students". This is reflected in the [Competition and Market Authority \(CMA\) advice to HE providers](#) on consumer protection law which notes that course-related material information made available to applicants must include published "entry requirements/criteria (both academic and non-academic), and an indication of the standard/typical offer level criteria". SPA has summarised the [implications for entry requirements](#) of the CMA advice for HE providers.

This good practice on entry requirements includes the distinction between entry requirements, typical/standard offers and actual offers made, and considerations for reviewing and communicating entry requirements. This is an update to our good practice originally published in 2014, incorporating recommendations from our [National Expert Think Tank \(NETT\) on curriculum and qualification reforms](#) and our [good practice on admissions policies](#).

Entry requirements should not be reviewed in isolation, but in terms of their relationship to offers and offer-making strategy. SPA continues to work with HE providers and UCAS to help ensure that high standards of transparency and consistency are maintained in entry requirements and offer-making and to encourage good practice.

Definitions

Whilst the distinction between entry requirements, typical/standard offers and actual offers may be clear to those working in HE admissions, it may not be clear to applicants and those providing information, advice and guidance on applying to HE. Clarifying the meaning and usage of each will help to ensure transparency and support informed choices. The following definitions may prove useful, although individual HE providers will need to include institution-specific information:

Entry requirements/criteria

Entry requirements, or entry criteria, represent the normal requirements an applicant is expected to achieve in order to be considered for a place on the course.

The full entry requirements are likely to be far broader than what may appear in an offer, including for example prior attainment or additional assessment such as interviews. Course entry information should be clear about the full range of academic and non-academic requirements that must be met and/or expected to be met in order to be considered. These requirements will not necessarily constitute the exact grades or UCAS Tariff points that will be requested in an offer made but will reflect the prerequisites for making an offer.

Approaches to entry requirements vary between HE providers. The below approaches are intended to provide learners with an indication of the achievement they need to aim for in order to be eligible for consideration:

- Publish entry requirements indicating the absolute minimum required for consideration, based on the lowest matriculation requirements identified in the course validation (for example, five GCSEs including English and Mathematics plus two A levels).
- Set higher requirements based on agreed selective levels (for example, ten GCSEs at grade A including English, Mathematics and a foreign language, plus three A levels at grades ABB).
- Publish the absolute maximum required as a guarantee to applicants that no offer will exceed it.
- Publish differential entry requirements (for example, AAA - ABB at A level) for applicants who fulfil certain criteria, such as for [contextualised admissions](#). In order for applicants to make an informed judgement, this approach should clarify which level of entry requirements applicants would be eligible for, and any circumstances in which this may vary. Any published entry requirements range that does not allow applicants to identify where their circumstances fit in that range would not be considered fair.

It must be accepted that market forces, applicant demand for places and restrictions on the supply of places will have an effect after the publication of entry requirements, so although applicants who meet the requirements should be equally eligible for consideration, they may be in competition with one another for a limited number of offers.

Typical/standard offers

Typical offers, or standard offers, refer to the offers a course expects to normally make for applicants meeting the entry requirements. They are commonly published within the entry requirements themselves, but are subject to change closer to the start of the admissions cycle.

Typical offers are usually based on historical data including actual offers made in previous cycles, and moderated against predictors of future demand. However, typical offers are indicative only and do not represent a guarantee that all offers will be at that level. HE providers have the right to vary the offers made to individual applicants for a range of reasons such as: consideration of contextual factors or other indicators of potential; specific compact or progression agreements; and restrictions for late or Clearing applications. It would be helpful to applicants for HE providers to clarify any grounds for varying offers or to publish their intention to adhere to the typical offers published at the start of the admissions cycle. HE providers should not alter their published typical offers during any period of guaranteed equal consideration.

Offers made

Actual offers made should relate to both the published entry requirements and typical offers and should not include any extra requirements. Adding new requirements, such as subject-specific qualifications or work experience, is unfair and imposes barriers to entry.

As noted within typical offers, it may be appropriate for HE providers to vary the offers made within

published requirements but this should be in line with clear disclaimers published alongside typical offer information.

A number of HE providers make unconditional offers to applicants who have not yet satisfied published entry requirements and still have examinations to complete. SPA would encourage HE providers who are considering this practice to read [our statement](#) and our [National Expert Think Tank considerations on unconditional offer-making](#).

All terms and conditions for entry should be made absolutely clear to the applicant before they accept any offer. HE providers should carefully consider how both academic and non-academic requirements are conveyed to applicants to ensure that they are fully aware of what is expected of them. Information on non-academic requirements must be passed to the applicant in a reliable and clear way, either through the offer itself or through accompanying information.

Considerations for reviewing and communicating entry requirements

Reviewing entry requirements

HE providers should review their entry requirements well in advance of the admissions cycle. Entry requirements should not be reviewed in isolation, but in terms of their relationship to offers and offer-making strategy. Entry requirements should be reviewed in relation to the whole cycle, with additional consideration given to Confirmation, Adjustment and Clearing activities and any changes should be mirrored consistently across the cycle.

HE providers should have a justifiable basis for their entry requirements, minimise barriers to participation and select applicants with the skills and knowledge to enable them to successfully complete the course.

- Ensure all staff involved in considering and reviewing entry requirements have an informed understanding of the structure and methods of learning and assessment of qualifications.
- Consider whether entry requirements tally with what applicants are actually presenting.
- Review qualification profiles of both successful and unsuccessful applicants on an annual basis to identify any changes in the qualification profiles of the cohort.
- Review entry requirements considering any curriculum or qualification reform. This may involve significant awareness raising with colleagues who are not accustomed to dealing with applications/qualifications frequently, but are involved in the setting of entry requirements. HE providers should ensure that they are reviewing reformed qualification specifications and information, so that they are aware of the impact of any changes and are considering the suitability of qualifications in an up-to-date context. This will allow providers to set entry criteria that is relevant for the most current version of all qualifications. In order to support applicants and their advisers, HE providers may wish to publish a [qualification reform statement](#).
- Endeavour to ensure equivalency across different qualifications. This is particularly important if you are not using the UCAS Tariff as a measure of 'equivalence'.
- Use consistent subject-specific requirements and consider how you can express a subject-specific requirement across qualifications. Try to avoid combinations of grades and UCAS Tariff points within an entry requirement as this can be confusing.

- Use reliable and consistent methods of assessing applicants, recognising the full range of provision and learning styles offered and the different ways in which outcomes may be represented.
- Mitigate the risk of [unconscious bias](#) by ensuring entry requirements are evidence-based rather than informed by assumptions or perceptions about the suitability of particular qualifications.
- Monitor progression of students to help to ensure that standards upon entry continue to support requirements for study. This will also facilitate any in-session support or alternative course delivery requirements.
- Ensure that contractual obligations with UCAS, professional bodies or other external organisations, and any contractual agreements with applicants, are adhered to, mindful of consumer protection law. HE providers will want to satisfy themselves that nothing included or omitted from published entry requirements leaves them open to arbitrary dispute.

HE providers should review whether their entry requirements are clear enough for learners to make informed progression planning and have reasonable confidence in their eligibility.

- Focus groups of school students and teachers and advisers could test and sense-check entry requirements, identifying elements that aren't easy to understand.
- Recruitment staff and school/college liaison officers, feeder schools and partner colleges, participants in widening participation programmes and events, and staff who are parents or school governors may also provide useful feedback on the clarity of entry requirements.

It is not good practice to make changes to entry requirements after they have been published. However, exceptional changes may be needed in response to external policy developments (for example, from governments, funding councils, or other professional, statutory and regulatory bodies). In such instances, HE providers should carefully consider all other options before committing to mid-cycle changes. Where changes are deemed necessary:

- HE providers should widely publicise both the change and the reason it was necessary and ensure any online information is updated promptly.
- Indicate in printed materials that applicants should refer to the relevant page(s) of the admissions website for definitive, up-to-date information on entry requirements.
- Provide clear internal and external communications to help alleviate any issues that may arise, including those which may occur later in the cycle (for example, at Confirmation).
- HE providers should keep in mind that any changes to entry requirements are also likely to require changes to offer libraries or standard offer text.

Publishing and communicating entry requirements

Transparent, clear and accessible information on entry requirements will allow applicants and their advisers to make the most informed and suitable match in their choices.

Applicants should have access to accurate and up-to-date information on entry requirements prior to beginning the application process. Prospectuses are often produced 18 or more months before applicants are likely to be admitted, and many HE providers will update information on their own website and in other sources (for example, UCAS course information) at around the same time.

However, HE providers should remember that potential students will make decisions on subject choices for pre-HE qualifications considerably in advance of the year in which they apply to HE. Published entry requirements and information and guidance from HE providers on the required and desirable subjects for each course has an important role to play in informing this process and may help to dispel myths. Teachers and advisers may also consult entry requirements several years in advance to inform their school or college curriculum planning.

Information on entry requirements should be easily navigable, allowing prospective applicants to readily find the requirements most relevant to them.

- It should be clear which admissions cycle(s) entry requirements apply to. There may be instances where HE providers will need to publish entry requirements more than several years in advance (for example, in response to qualification reform).
- HE providers may wish to have a separate webpage for Clearing to avoid confusion for those beginning to research main-scheme applications.
- It should be clear where entry requirements differ for different modes of study (for example, for part-time).
- Prospectus and web design teams should be consulted on how the presentation of this information could make it easier for applicants to navigate the options.
- HE providers should also consider about how entry requirements will display in UCAS Search.
- Recommendations on referencing entry requirements within admissions policies can be found in [section 4.4.2 of SPA's good practice on admissions policies](#).

Applicants present with a diverse range of qualifications as well as with mixes of different qualification types. Entry requirements should be clear for **all** applicants.

- HE providers should ensure their entry requirements are expressed in terms of a number of frequently encountered qualifications, with clear signposting to further information on equivalency over a broader range of qualifications.
- Published information should clearly set out the policy on combinations of qualification types (for example, A level/BTEC combinations).
- Entry requirements should acknowledge relevant legacy, current and future qualifications. (Post-qualified applicants and mature learners may present with different qualifications to school- and college-leavers.)

Language and terminology for entry requirements should be precise and specific. HE providers should describe exactly what is required and beware of generic terms for qualifications.

- Clearly state the exact qualification, level and subject (and awarding organisation, if relevant).
- Be mindful of qualifications with the same name but different characteristics (for example, differences between countries, or the range of BTEC qualifications.) It should be easy for applicants to understand what the requirements are in terms of their own qualifications.
- Entry requirements expressed simply in terms of the most commonly encountered qualification (for example, 'BBB at A level or equivalent') may be confusing for applicants and advisers who may not be well equipped to understand what is considered 'equivalent'.

- Terms such as 'desirable' or 'preferred' should be accompanied by help-text on the website or in the prospectus.
- References to alternative offers should be accompanied by concrete examples (for example, 'AAA at A level, or AAB plus an A in the Extended Project Qualification').
- Any exclusions or qualifications which do not meet the entry requirements should be clearly stated.
- If you are using the UCAS Tariff for any purpose, clearly articulate how and when you use it and ensure messages on your website and in publications are consistent.

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May 2017