SPA good practice

Feedback to unsuccessful applicants

www.spa.ac.uk

information *n* advice, intelligence, knowledge, notice; advertisement, advice, enlightenment, instruction, word, warning;

December 2016

Contents

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. Your comments are invited and appreciated, please contact enquiries@spa.ac.uk.

Introduction

The provision of feedback to unsuccessful applicants is widespread among the HE sector. Good quality and constructive feedback to unsuccessful applicants allows them to be better prepared for future applications and interviews, provides closure, and allows them to move forward constructively. It enhances the higher education (HE) providers' reputation, improves the applicant experience and reduces complaints and queries from disappointed applicants. Collecting data on feedback and common reasons for rejection can also feed valuable insights back into the admissions process. It is for these reasons that SPA strongly encourages HE providers to provide feedback wherever possible.

Feedback is easier to provide if entry criteria and details of the processes for considering applicants and reaching admissions decisions are transparent, clear and easy to understand.

This good practice document outlines:
- why HE providers should give feedback to unsuccessful applicants
- what feedback should consist of
- good practice on feedback policies
- procedures for when and how to give feedback

We define feedback as the communication from an HE provider to an applicant who has been unsuccessful in gaining an offer, which provides information about the reasons why they have been unsuccessful. Feedback may also include suggestions as to how the applicant may improve their application.

Feedback may either be on request from the applicant or given automatically to all unsuccessful applicants. Feedback may be offered, and requested, at any point in the cycle.

It is good practice to offer feedback to all applicants, including those for part-time and for postgraduate courses.

Why give feedback?

As well as the reasons cited above, the provision of feedback has been endorsed by a number of HE sector organisations, including:
- The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA): UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Part B, Chapter B2 - Admissions, Indicator 9.
- The Board of Universities UK (UUK), the GuildHE Council and the UCAS Board.
- Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice (The Schwartz Report), September 2004, Paragraph D8, page 35.

It is the responsibility of each individual HE provider to decide whether and how it will offer feedback. In some very rare cases HE providers may decide not to give feedback (for example due to a concern that this will give an undue advantage for future applications in very over-subscribed courses such as medicine). However, if you decide not to provide feedback it is important to be transparent; give the reason why it will not be provided and suggest what other action a disappointed applicant might take to review and improve their application.

What should feedback consist of?

HE providers will need to decide on the nature and extent of any feedback they make available to unsuccessful applicants (and in some cases their advisers).

Good feedback should:
- Give a clear reason why the applicant was unsuccessful.
- Be in clear and concise language that can be understood immediately.
- Be personal. It is not appropriate for feedback to consist of a brief reason for rejection in the third person (for example, as appears on an admissions or student records system).

If the reason for rejection is that the applicant has not met the entry requirements, it is not acceptable to refer to requirements in the feedback which were not part of the published entry requirements or admissions criteria. This should be considered unfair to the applicant, and indicate bad practice on the part of the HE provider

Applicants and their advisers often, understandably, seek a very high degree of detailed personal feedback to assist them with future applications. HE providers may feel that they cannot always meet the expectations due to the pressure of resources and staff time, but any attempt to offer comprehensive feedback is welcomed by the pre-HE sector.

It may be helpful to have a central point of contact for feedback requests (usually the admissions office) and a centrally agreed bank of feedback reasons that can be personlised. This means that:

- Routine enquiries can be answered easily and speedily.
- Inappropriate enquiries can be filtered out at an early stage.
- The time of expert staff will only be taken up by non-standard enquiries.
- The opportunity can be taken to carefully consider standard answers, to ensure that they have the effect intended and that they contain no comments which might invite further debate or which would expose the HE provider to challenge.

Annex C has some examples of good (and bad) practice.

The QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Part B, Chapter B2 (Admissions) Indicator 9 suggests HE providers may also wish to consider to what extent staff in the institution are able to offer advice to unsuccessful applicants about alternatives and future options for study.

Staff may be able to give advice on how an application to their course could be improved in any future resubmission, may suggest an alternative course for which the applicant would be better suited, or give information about alternative entry routes, for example through a college with which it has progression agreements or widening participation links. Staff may also wish to discuss the possibility of offering a place on a different course. Note that if the offer is being made through UCAS, a 'changed course offer' cannot be made if a rejection has already been sent.

Feedback policies

The HE providers' policy on the provision of feedback can be contained within its admissions policy or as a policy in its own right.

- ☐ It is important that the policy is visible to both staff and to applicants. For further guidance in this area please see our Good Practice Statement on Admissions Policies.
- ☐ All staff involved in any aspect of admissions, recruitment and widening participation should be aware of the feedback policy and be able to explain it to applicants, their families and advisers.
- ☐ Feedback practices may vary depending on the course. If this is the case, the details of the different feedback policies and procedures should be set out clearly.
- ☐ Feedback policies should give details of response times to a request for feedback.
- ☐ The way in which an institution deals with any further correspondence from an applicant following the provision of feedback needs to be considered in any policy. This would include whether the HE provider would be prepared to review an admissions decision following a further request by an unsuccessful applicant and, if so, under what circumstances.
    - ☐ If an admissions decision is to be reviewed, the procedure for how this is undertaken, what is taken into consideration in the review, by whom it is reviewed and the timescale involved would need to decided and made available to applicants.
- ☐ Applicants should be made aware that if they do request feedback, or indeed make a complaint or appeal, they will not be discriminated against in any further applications.

Feedback procedures

- ☐ Decision-making procedures should include an internal audit trail with accurate records documenting admissions decisions, together with the supporting evidence and reasons for the outcome. These records enable the provision of feedback and the ability to justify decisions (including if any are subject to legal challenge).
- ☐ HE providers will need to decide how long data on unsuccessful applicants should be kept before being archived and/or deleted from systems. This may require advice from the institution's data protection officer.
    - ☐ It is helpful to remember that under data protection legislation an applicant always has the right to request personal information recorded about them during the admissions process, whether or not an HE provider decides to offer feedback. For more information discuss the issue with your institution's data protection officer or consult the website of the Information Commissioner.
- ☐ Under data protection regulations a request for feedback should come from the applicant or from someone to whom the applicant gives express and voluntary consent, in writing, to act on their behalf, such as a school advisor or parent.
- ☐ HE providers will need to consider the quality assurance mechanisms they have in place to monitor and evaluate the operation of their feedback policies and procedures, and report on them internally.
- ☐ An annual review should highlight to senior and other staff any changes that need to be implemented in future. For example, the information provided on courses and entry requirements (e.g. a high proportion of rejections because applicants have grade C in GCSE Maths rather than the required B could indicate a need to clarify published entry criteria).

☐ Feedback may be given by various units and individuals within the institution. These may include:

- an academic selector
- the academic unit concerned (e.g. course team, department, faculty)
- the central admissions office

☐ HE providers should consider:
- If the decision has been taken by an academic selector, applicants often prefer to be in contact with him or her as they feel that they are then receiving feedback direct from the key decision-maker (and may, perhaps, be able to influence their decision). This can, however, take valuable academic time and result in a drawn-out dialogue.
- If the decision is taken by administrative staff in the admissions office, disappointed applicants may feel that they are not speaking to the 'real' decision-makers and are unable to have the detailed discussion of academic issues which they seek.
- If feedback is offered by many different offices throughout the institution, there is a risk of inconsistency and the possibility that inappropriate comments or reasons are given. Clear guidance is needed to avoid this.

☐ Irrespective of who in the HE provider is responsible for providing feedback, it is very important that applicants should be clear as to whom they should approach to request it.

When and how to give feedback

Feedback can be offered at different times, and this is a matter for individual HE providers to decide. There are two broad approaches to providing feedback: automatic and on request.

Automatic feedback

Feedback may be given automatically, to all unsuccessful applicants at the time of transmission of the decision. Providing feedback in this way can cut down the number of enquiries, reduces the HE providers' overall workload, and enhances the satisfaction of applicants and their advisors.

Feedback on request

Some HE providers prefer to offer feedback on request only. If HE providers decide to offer feedback only in response to requests, they should give guidance on how requests should be made. It may be by telephone or, more commonly by email, letter or web form.

Some HE providers choose to give applicants a time limit in which to request feedback while others suggest that applicants wait until they have received all of their decisions before requesting feedback.

In determining their procedures HE providers may also decide to acknowledge a request for feedback from an unsuccessful applicant on its receipt and include a date by which a response will be made. This could vary depending on the point at which the request is made within the application cycle.

Feedback can be given in a variety of ways, including:

- In person (for example, in the case of creative subjects where there has been an audition or viewing of a portfolio).
- By telephone (ensuring a record is kept on file) and being sure that the person the member of staff is speaking to is authorised to receive this information.
- By letter, email or web based response.
- Via UCAS.

Providing feedback via UCAS

Many HE providers use UCAS to provide feedback. It is worth noting the following:

- You can give a reason for rejection when you send the initial decision, or later, as long as the applicant hasn't replied to any offers.
- There is a limit on the number of characters the feedback can contain.
- The applicant sees the reasons given through Track (see **annex A**) via an AS4 letter, so ensure it is written in a clear and helpful style, and in the second person. An example template of the **AS4 letter is at annex B.**
- Regularly check your feedback decision library. Some providers use a very large number of decisions, many of which are virtually identical to each other. A shorter list of key reasons will be easier to use, maintain and give a consistent approach.

Complaints and appeals

It is not uncommon for some requests for feedback to include a disagreement about the decision-making process or the criteria that were used, or to bring further information to the attention of the HE provider.

These are likely to fall under the headings of 'complaints' or 'appeals' and should be distinguished from 'feedback'. HE providers are advised to consult SPA's good practice on complaints and appeals for advice on all issues affecting complaints and appeals, and also to refer to the QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Part B, Chapter B2 (Admissions), Indicators 10 and 11.

Annex A – An applicant's view in Track of an unsuccessful application

Start from
Year One

Start date
September 2017

Are you planning to live at home while studying?
Yes

Need to check course details or contact information?
View full details about this course on the UCAS search tool ↗

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Last updated 5 Dec 2016

Your application for this choice has been unsuccessful.
View letters

Annex B – Example of AS4 letter showing a feedback decision

PO BOX 28	**CUSTOMER CONTACT CENTRE**	www.ucas.com
CHELTENHAM	0371 468 0 468 (UK)	
GL52 3LZ	+44 330 3330 230 (International)	
	08:30 – 18:00 (UK time) MON -FRI	

Unsuccessful
AS4

[title] [initial] [surname]	Date:	[produced]
[addr 1]	Personal ID:	[pid]
[addr 2]	Scheme code:	[asc]
[addr 3]		
[addr 4]		
[postcode]		
[country *(if no postcode)*]		

Please read ALL of this information

Dear [?title] [?surname]

Unfortunately, your application is no longer being considered by [?institutionname] for [?coursetitle], [?coursecode].

[?institutionname] may have decided not to offer you a place, or your application may have been withdrawn. Here are the details we have been given:

[?conditions]

Decisions about individual applicants are made by individual universities and colleges. UCAS does not hold any further information about why you have been unsuccessful in this application.

If you would like feedback about this decision, you should contact [?institutionname] directly. Please note that in order to comply with data protection legislation, they may not be able to discuss this with anyone else other than you.

If you've now had responses from everywhere you applied to, and haven't received any offers, please read the following information to find out more about your options:

- adding more choices
- Extra
- Clearing

If you are waiting for decisions from other universities and colleges we will be in contact with you again soon.

We wish you every success with your application.

Yours sincerely

UCAS

If you have any questions, please contact us via Twitter @ucas_online or through our Facebook page www.facebook.com/ucasonline.

Annex C – Examples of good and poor reasons for rejection

The following examples are based on reasons for rejection given through UCAS, used by HE providers in the 2010-11 application year.

What is the basis for rejection?	Poor example of reason for rejection	Why is it poor?	Good examples of reason for rejection	Why is it good?
Audition performance / Portfolio Review	Unsuccessful portfolio review. Portfolio not suitable	Impersonal, and no constructive action suggested. Solely emphasises the negative.	We appreciate the overall quality of your portfolio but feel that your drawing is not yet of an adequate standard for this level of study. We suggest further study and preparation, for example through a foundation course. While your technical skills are of a high standard, in your interview you did not show a wider understanding of the place and history of the subject in society or an ability to discuss this wider context.	Mentions strengths, as well as weaknesses, in performance or portfolio. Stresses the particular areas the institution is looking for, which should also be set out on the web and in the prospectus. In addition to the above, suggests areas for improvement e.g. more fine drawing required.
Competition for places	Better applicants have applied	This is not personalised to the applicant. It is very curt and gives no constructive action for the applicant.	Unfortunately you were in competition with applicants who were stronger academically. The proportion of applicants already holding, or predicted to obtain, grades higher than our requirements is particularly high this year. As a result this means some highly qualified candidates have not been offered admission to the University, as we simply do not have enough places.	Polite and personalised. While it does not suggest what action might be taken, it does clearly let the unsuccessful applicant understand that they were less successful in a strong field.

What is the basis for rejection?	Poor example of reason for rejection	Why is it poor?	Good examples of reason for rejection	Why is it good?
Competition for places	Not offered a place.	It is already clear to the applicant that they have been unsuccessful, what is needed is an explanation of why and, ideally, what they can do about it.	Though you made a good application overall the University is unfortunately, unable to offer you a place. Those who were invited for interview presented a stronger application in at least one of the following areas: academic profile, understanding of teaching and learning, school experience and the ability to reflect on this. In making this decision we are aware that many good candidates will be disappointed. Unfortunately you were in competition with stronger academic applicants.	Whilst less personal, this gives the same message in a succinct fashion – which can be useful if you are bound by the number of characters you can use.
Deferred Places			Thank you for applying for a deferred place. Unfortunately we do not have any deferred places available for [year]. However, we would be happy to review your application if you reapply from September [year] for the year [xxxx].	This is polite, clear, and provides guidance as to what action can be taken.
	You have not undertaken essential subjects required for entry.	This gives no idea as to what the essential subjects are.	You do not have GCSE Maths at grades A*-B (or equivalent Key Skills level 3 qualification) and are not taking a minimum of 3 A-levels and therefore do not meet the entry	This makes clear reference to the entry requirements and the fact the applicant has failed to meet them. It is also

What is the basis for rejection?	Poor example of reason for rejection	Why is it poor?	Good examples of reason for rejection	Why is it good?
			requirements for Psychology.	personalised to the applicant.
Entry Requirements	Your qualifications are not equivalent for entry to our degree programmes.	Applicants may not understand what equivalency is in this context.	As discussed, the admissions tutor has fully assessed your application and subsequent information but cannot offer you a place until you have studied and achieved the A level in xxx.	This is personalised and makes clear reference to the process undertaken, and where the applicant does not meet the requirements.

Of course the 'as discussed' refers to a previous informal discussion and is only necessary in this context. |
| | Applicant cannot meet minimum entry requirements. | Very impersonal. This statement gives no idea what the requirements were and how the applicant does not meet them. | Regrettably, your qualifications do not meet the subject requirements for the programme of study for which you have applied.

Biology is required at Higher Level in the IB. | This is precise and personalised and gives clear guidance as to the entry requirements. |
| **Further Information** | Information incomplete. | It is important to ensure the applicant is aware of the responsibility they have to provide information. | You did not respond to our requests for further information. | Tells the applicant what was wrong and suggests action to be taken in future applications. |
| **Grammatical and spelling errors within a reason for rejection** | Your application details are…. more **suitbale** for … **photogrpahy**

Your application details are. not **fpcused** on the course

Your **qualifcations** not suitable for this course

thsi is not a combined course | Avoid errors – it gives a bad impression of your institution and can be confusing to applicants. | | |

What is the basis for rejection?	Poor example of reason for rejection	Why is it poor?	Good examples of reason for rejection	Why is it good?
Interview	Unsuccessful at interview.	This gives no useful information that can suggest why the applicant was unsuccessful and what they can do about it.	You were unsuccessful due to an unsuccessful interview. You need to give more clarity and depth in answers, and you should carry out further research into both the programme and the XXXX profession.	Although negative to start with (double use of unsuccessful in the first sentence) the advice given is succinct and helpful to the applicant.
Personal statement	Personal statement unsuitable.	Reason does not state why it is unsuitable and no actions for applicant to take forward.	We were concerned by your personal statement, which contained numerous grammatical errors and spelling mistakes.	Clearly identifies the problem and implicitly suggests corrective action for applicant to take in future applications.
	Lack of evidence in personal statement and brief reference.	Reason does not state why this had an impact on the application decision.	Your personal statement lacked evidence to support your application and the reference was too brief to add further information for us to consider.	Clearly identifies the problem and implicitly suggests corrective action for applicant to take in future applications.
Reference	Reference did not meet requirements.	This is impersonal and gives no idea what the requirements were, and how the reference did not meet them.	While your reference was supportive of your personal character, we require a reference which comments on your academic knowledge, your skills, and your suitability for study at the University.	This focuses and comments on the reference which was provided, and gives clear guidance on the type of reference actually required.
Restricted Courses	You do not meet bursary eligibility criteria.	While this gives some information, it would be better if the reasons why the applicant was not eligible for a bursary (in this case an NHS Bursary) had been explained.	Following receipt of your completed fee questionnaire, it is clear to us that you do not meet the requirements to be classified as 'Home' for fees purposes. Consequently you will not be	This provides clear information about the process of consideration for the applicant.

It also explains the background to eligibility for |

What is the basis for rejection?	Poor example of reason for rejection	Why is it poor?	Good examples of reason for rejection	Why is it good?
			eligible to apply for an NHS bursary, which is a requirement of the course, and we cannot make you an offer of admission.	the course, in this case an NHS Bursary (criteria for different fee statuses will have been given in materials accompanying the fee status questionnaire).
Rejection with the possibility of alternative courses In some cases HE providers may suggest a linked preparatory course or make a course offer for an alternative course (e.g. through a UCAS changed course offer).	When an alternative course is to be offered it is always preferable, if possible, to hold an informal conversation with the unsuccessful applicant explaining the options before the decision is sent. If an offer is being made through UCAS, such a process would enable a 'changed course offer' to be made. This will generally be more convenient than sending a rejection (even with a reasons being given) which would then require the applicant to apply through Extra or Clearing. It is important not leave the applicant with the impression they are unsuited for further study. Take care not to imply there is a guarantee of a place on another course if conditions apply			
			As discussed, at this time we are unable to offer you the degree as your UCAS tariff is below our standard entry criteria but we have offered you an unconditional place on the Foundation Degree in XXX	The statement is helpful and positive. Gives specific reasons why an applicant has been unsuccessful and offers an alternative.
			XXXX would like to offer a place on the Foundation Diploma in Art and Design as we do not think you are ready for an HE course yet. Please see the letter from XXXXX University which you will receive shortly, with details of this course offer.	These statements are helpful and positive. They give specific reasons why an applicant has been unsuccessful and suggests alternatives.

What is the basis for rejection?	Poor example of reason for rejection	Why is it poor?	Good examples of reason for rejection	Why is it good?
Rejection with the offer of feedback	If you would like to receive feedback as to why your application was unsuccessful, please contact us.	No method for applicant to contact the institution, or contact name.	Feedback is available on request. Please call the XXX Admissions Team on XXXX XXX XXXX.	Gives specific contact details.
Timing			Applications received after the 15th October deadline are considered late applications. We have more than sufficient applications received before the 15 October to fill our places. Therefore we will not consider your application.	This is clear and concise, providing a good description why the application is not being considered.
Understanding of the course or profession	Does not understand profession.	Impersonal and no constructive comment for the applicant to move forward.	While you are well-qualified and committed, you were unsuccessful due to performance at interview. You need to demonstrate a further understanding of the role of the Children's nurse and articulate exactly why this career is right for you.	This clearly states the reason for rejection and what the applicant needs to do to move forward.
Other 'general' reasons for rejection	Lack of understanding of award benefits. Rejected from similar course. Doesn't fit student profile.	These statements are unlikely to mean anything to applicants. They may also leave the applicant the impression they are completely unsuited to further study.		