



Supporting Professionalism  
in Admissions

# SPA National Expert Think Tank

Fair admissions in a  
competitive environment

Partnerships and fair admissions

June 2016

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## SPA National Expert Think Tanks

National Expert Think Tanks (NETTs) are expert groups convened by SPA to inform and influence topical national debates on fairness and good practice in higher education (HE) admissions. In 2015-16, the NETT considered how fair admissions can be maintained and enhanced in the current HE landscape, how fair admissions is understood across the sector in the UK, and what it means to individual HE providers. The aim of the NETT was to support HE providers in addressing these issues in the more competitive and resource-stretched higher education landscape.

### Partnerships and fair admissions – who are the partners?

The focus of this strand of the NETT was how to embody the principles of fair admissions within partnerships for the delivery of higher education. The NETT focused on partnerships within the UK, but excluded articulation arrangements. Defining partnerships has been one of the issues that needed clarification, both for institutions and applicants, as a number of terms are used.

For instance BIS defines the 160 universities and colleges in the UK that can award a wide variety of degrees and have degree-awarding powers recognised by the UK authorities as '**recognised bodies**'. Over 700 colleges and other institutions that don't have degree-awarding powers but provide complete courses leading to recognised UK degrees are known as '**listed bodies**'. Courses at these providers are validated by institutions which have degree-awarding powers. See [www.gov.uk/recognised-uk-degrees](http://www.gov.uk/recognised-uk-degrees) for more details. In England the Higher Education and Research white paper published in May 2016 outlines that new Office for Students (OfS) is under a duty to establish and maintain a register of all English higher education providers, under this new system all higher education providers will be classed as either **Registered** (basic status), **Approved**, or **Approved (fee cap)**.

The Quality Assurance Agency's UK Quality Code for Higher Education [Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others](#) (the Code) requires:

“All degree-awarding bodies take ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, irrespective of where these are delivered or who provides them. Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively”

And that:

“Degree-awarding bodies clarify which organisation is responsible for registering a student to modules or programmes delivered with others, and ensure that admissions are consistent with their own admissions policies” (Indicator 11).

The degree awarding organisation is normally the validator with '**validation**' defined by the QAA as a process by which a degree-awarding body judges a module or programme developed and delivered by another organisation and approves it as being of an appropriate standard and quality to contribute, or lead, to one of its awards. Students normally have a direct contractual relationship with the delivery organisation.

The QAA also defines a '**delivery organisation**' as an organisation that delivers learning opportunities on behalf of a degree-awarding body. This may be a higher education provider without degree awarding powers, a degree-awarding body other than that granting the award (for example, in the context of some federal structures), an employer or another organisation approved by the degree-awarding body. '**Franchising**' is defined as a process by which a degree-awarding body agrees to authorise a delivery organisation to deliver (and sometimes assess) part or all of one (or more) of its own approved programmes. Often, the degree-awarding body retains direct responsibility for the programme content, the teaching and assessment strategy, the assessment regime and the quality assurance. Students normally have a direct contractual relationship with the degree-awarding body.

In this document the NETT refers to both of these types of partners as the **teaching institution** and to the degree-awarding body as the **awarding institution**.

Where institutions establish new partnerships or review existing arrangements, it is important that all parties are clear on the type of partnership they are entering into. They should also consider the principles of fair admissions, how responsibilities are allocated for each aspect of the admissions process, and how quality of admissions practice will be assured and enhanced. The partnership will need to ensure that the arrangements made provide seamless structures and processes for applicants, regardless of which partner administers, manages or offers different aspects. There are many successful models for the fair admission of students to higher education which are delivered through partnerships between awarding institutions and teaching institutions. Some of the issues which may be relevant for partners to consider when discussing how they make arrangements for fair admissions of applicants are set out below.

### **Types of admissions arrangements between partners**

Partnership arrangements are many and varied, leading to similarly diverse ways in which admissions is handled by the partners. The admissions arrangements could be anywhere on a sliding scale: the relative positions do not necessarily relate to the overall partnership arrangement and indeed may have been agreed after other arrangements have been established. It's important that both partners are clear who has responsibility for the

elements of admissions policy and practice and that this is transparent to applicants, particularly in relation to admissions queries and complaints.

Sliding scale



Degree awarding institution handles all admissions

Mix of admissions responsibility

Teaching institution handles all admissions

#### Degree awarding institution

- includes the admission of students to partners under its own admissions policy
- makes admissions decisions and offers, liaises with applicants and UCAS
- handles applicant records and data integrity/security
- approves all entry requirements, suitability of qualifications, Accreditation of Prior Learning
- manages course information via UCAS and own website

#### Degree awarding institution

- clearly identifies which aspects of its own admissions policy apply to its partners, but has some aspects devolved to each teaching institution (e.g. complaints)
- provides staff development and opportunities for sharing of good practice with staff at partner institution
- moderates applications/ admissions process after each enrolment
- may handle Accreditation of Prior Learning applications

#### Teaching institution

- has well-developed policies on all key admissions areas
- makes admissions decisions and offers, liaises with applicants/UCAS, record maintenance/ data integrity, making decisions on applicants with: criminal convictions, disabilities, non-standard applications, ensuring adherence to relevant quality assurance frameworks
- provides supportive role in developing and enhancing good practice with validating institution
- provides advice and guidance on qualifications
- has capacity and expertise in managing partnerships

#### Teaching institution

- handles all standard applications which meet agreed entry criteria, liaises with all applicants and UCAS, handles applicant record maintenance/ data integrity/security
- refers non-standard admissions, queries on entry qualifications, English language, suitability of applicants, Accreditation of Prior Learning to validating institution for approval.
- handles all recruitment activity under defined agreement and guidelines

## Checklist

The aim of this checklist is to provide partners with issues and points for consideration on admissions and related areas, which should be agreed and made transparent to both staff in the HE providers and to prospective students and applicants. Although comprehensive, it is not likely to be exhaustive, so if you are aware of other issues that can be added to support good practice and fair admissions, please let SPA know so that this document can be updated.

### Knowledge and understanding of admissions regulatory/ compliance requirements

- Partners need to consider the following to embed fair admissions into their practice. (N.B. this list does **not** cover all areas or regulatory or legal compliance):
  1. [QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) – including:
    - a. Chapter B2: Recruitment, selection and admission to higher education
    - b. Chapter B6: Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning
    - c. Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others
  2. Equality and Diversity – Equality Act 2010 see Equality Challenge Unit ([ECU](#)) webpages, [ECU/SPA Equitable Admissions](#) for underrepresented groups.
  3. Widening Participation/Access – check where Access Agreement/ Outcome Agreement/Fee plan responsibility lies, where applicable.
  4. Data – data protection will be an issue for all partners, but be clear where responsibility lies for data sharing and data security.
  5. Consumer protection and consumer rights – will be an issue for all partners but responsibility is ultimately likely to lie with the degree-awarding institution, being transparent between partners, with applicants, and on who will do what is crucial.
  6. Your memorandum of understanding, agreement or contract that the partners have agreed to, with regard to who is responsible for what in admissions and student recruitment.
  7. Additional information on regulatory requirements for colleges is available on the [SPA checklist of policy, reporting and regulatory requirements](#) for College HE.
- Have any knowledge gaps relating to regulatory/ compliance requirements in the full [admissions policy](#) been identified by either party? If yes, are there resources (staff expertise, funding, training etc.) which can be shared by partners to rectify this?

### Resources for Admissions

- Do admissions colleagues have sufficient resources (staffing and financial) and understanding of their own and their partners' key admissions processes to deliver the admissions process? (E.g. UCAS procedures; qualification assessment; communications; IT; legal compliance.) If no, are there resources (procedures, practices, training etc.) which can be shared by partners to rectify this?
- Do those responsible for admissions in partners have sufficient capacity to process all applications and enquires? E.g. relevant skills and training; meeting any agreed turnaround times; working with one **or more** partners.
- If admissions is delivered within the teaching institution, are suitably-trained staff available throughout the year to manage workloads?

- If admissions is delivered within the degree-awarding institution, are partners' courses given equal priority and have staff been allocated with application volumes and potentially different peak periods in mind?

If the answer is no to any of these points on resources, are there resources that can be shared? What short to medium-term support can be provided and by whom?

## Admissions Policy

Partners' admissions policies should cover everything an HE provider does with regard to the admission of students, from initial enquiries through the formal application process to enrolment and beyond. SPA has [admissions policy good practice guidance and a check list](#). All partners should also refer to the Quality Code.

- Have the partners developed and agreed on the **overall admissions policy** that applies to their applicants (this could be either a common admissions policy for each partner *or* institution specific *or* a variation – see sliding scale diagram above)? For example:
  - Would applicants use the same complaints and appeals procedure in both partners?
  - If the teaching institution has its own procedure how would it be reviewed and who would it be approved by?
  - How would these procedures be made clear and transparent to applicants?
- For each part of the admissions policy and process:
  - Who is responsible for approving the policy and processes; for keeping them up to date; agreeing updates; and publishing them?
  - Who implements the various elements of the policy and procedures? Who ensures everyone adheres to the policy and procedures?
  - Are these responsibilities and roles clear to both staff and applicants?
  - Are these responsibilities and roles clear between partners?
- List elements of policy to be checked as needed in your institution – for example:
  - Are terms and conditions (for both partners if relevant) provided to applicants at the same time their offer is sent, in line with Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) consumer protection guidance?
  - Is there a clear and well-defined equality and diversity policy that is considerate of all protected characteristics, socio-economic status and other groups? Does it include specific consideration for fairly considering the needs of applicants with disabilities and for enabling reasonable adjustments?
  - Is there a clear and well defined policy and process for assessing applicants' fee status?
  - Is there a clear and well-defined process for dealing with admissions complaints and appeals?
  - Is there a clear and well-defined policy and process for applicants with criminal convictions?
- Although the degree awarding institution has final responsibility for advanced entry and Recognition/Accreditation of Prior Learning, have the partners developed and agreed a clear and well-defined policy and process for advanced entry or Recognition/Accreditation of Prior Learning?

- Who implements the policy and procedures and ensures Recognition/Accreditation of Prior Learning is carried out following the policy and procedure?
- Who makes the final decision on advanced entry?
- Is it clear to staff and applicants?
  
- Annual admissions numbers/ targets by institution/ course programme
- When do numbers / targets get set each year? Are they agreed for the year or are there agreed points in the cycle where these may be reviewed, changed and clearly communicated to staff in both partner providers? e.g. in UCAS Extra or Clearing.
- Do both partners know and agree minimum and/or maximum target numbers for specific programmes?
- Is it clear to staff at the partner institutions what their role is?
- Who is responsible for monitoring and tracking admissions data against targets?
- Who decides when a course is full, or when a course does not have enough acceptances to run? What procedures are in place to support applicants affected if a course will not run?

### **Entry requirements and admissions decision-making criteria**

- Have the partners agreed a process for setting and implementing entry requirements, including non-academic requirements?
- Who has responsibility for approving entry requirements?
- Do the partners have a shared and agreed understanding of international qualifications equivalence and English Language requirements? Where requirements for English Language are the same, are pre-sessional and in-sessional support facilities the same in both partners?
- Are there resources and examples of good practice which can be shared between institutions?
- Who has responsibility for setting the minimum standards for Confirmation and Clearing entry requirements?
- Is it clear to staff at the partner institutions what their role is? Do staff between partners understand one another's roles?
  
- Have the partners agreed processes and practices for making admissions decisions?
- Who sets and agrees the criteria for making decisions on applicants, and who implements them?
- Are additional admissions assessments (e.g. interview, test, audition, portfolio) used to make decisions? If yes who has responsibility for setting and reviewing assessments methods, how is the process made transparent to applicants, how do partners assess their effectiveness/ added value?
- Who has responsibility for approving applications with qualifications and/or experience outside the standard criteria?
- Who ensures these policies and procedures are implemented and training provided to admissions staff?
- Is it clear to staff at the partner institutions what their role is?

## Information provision

This good practice area covers not only the need to make sure that partners provide applicants and each other with relevant information in a timely manner, but also should aid both partners in thinking about how best to comply with consumer protection and other legislation.

- How do you assure applicants understand which partner is responsible for the various policies and practices relevant to them before they apply, when they are an applicant and student? For example:
  - Who is awarding the degree or qualification they will be studying?
  - Which HE provider is delivering the course and where will the applicant be studying as a student?
  - Who is responsible for organising open days and applicant visit days?
  - Where is the information on course content and modules to be studied?
  - Are tuition fees and any additional costs for the teaching institution clear and well publicised?
  - Is any additional support available – e.g. bursaries, sponsorship?
  - Is it clear to staff in all partner institutions what their role is?
- How is this information communicated to potential students both before and during the application process?
  - Who is responsible for maintaining clear and accurate information in both print and online media?
  - Who has final approval of published information?
  - Is it clear to staff at the partner institutions what their role is?

## Data and systems

- Has the partnership developed and agreed a process and policy on sharing and transferring applicant data?
  - Have the partner institutions got the IT resources to handle admissions and share data confidentially? Is the software for handling admissions compatible between partners (e.g. to handle data sharing; student record transfers; or admissions statistics)?
  - Who is responsible for managing the sharing of data at each institution?
  - What are the safeguards in place or required to ensure data security at the partner institutions?
  - Are staff in the partners aware and trained to implement and operate systems and security?

## Coordination

- Do admissions colleagues at each partner institution have a key named colleague they can contact for assistance?
  - Do colleagues at each institution meet regularly to catch up and discuss admissions processes?
- How are admissions processes and policies regularly reviewed by the partnership to ensure that they are fit for purpose?

- What should the review cover?
- How often should these meetings take place? Annually, or more frequently?
- If changes are made to policy and procedures, how are they communicated, how are staff to implement the changes briefed/ trained, and how is this monitored?
- Are there any other areas where further development or good practice can be shared to enhance the management of fair admissions within the partnership?

## Case studies

### Case Study: UCFB - Maintaining clear and open channels of communication between the partner admissions departments

UCFB is the teaching institution working in partnership with two different awarding institutions to deliver both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the Sport and Leisure industries. Applications to undergraduate UCFB programmes are made through the corresponding awarding bodies' UCAS account, either Bucks New University (B94) or The University of Northampton (N38).

An important role of the UCFB Admissions department is to ensure and maintain consistent and fair admissions for all UCFB applicants. This is achieved in part through clear and open communication channels between admissions colleagues at each institution. Both Bucks New University and the University of Northampton have provided dedicated colleagues to work on UCFB admissions who provide clear and open communication channels between UCFB and the awarding body.

Admissions colleagues are in contact with each other daily, coordinating on specific decisions, referrals and non-standard applications, and consulting each other regularly on the best-practice for handing application to UCFB. Where any disparity exists between each institutions' requirements (e.g. offer conditions for international qualifications), UCFB are able to discuss the issue with each awarding body to establish the best compromise which meets the requirements of each institution

In addition to daily communications, UCFB admissions staff meet regularly with partnership colleagues at their awarding institutions to discuss strategic or general issues and broader, sector-wide issues such as consumer protection compliance. Meetings are held at key points in the UCAS admissions cycle such as post-15 January, pre-Clearing and the start of the academic year. Admissions also forms a part of meetings between department directors at each institution to ensure that admissions is an important consideration in strategic level decisions between the institutions. These meetings do not follow a formal, set timetable but are arranged as required within the admissions cycle. Normally there are three meetings per year taking place between departments.

Through ensuring clear and open communication channels between colleagues at every level of the admissions process, UCFB and their awarding institutions are able to maintain a consistent and professional service to applicants whilst considering and meeting the needs of key stakeholders at each institution.

#### **Effectiveness of partnership communications**

As the teaching institution, UCFB needs to be able to communicate and share information with both awarding institutions who, by the nature of the completely separate relationship, do not communicate with each other. UCFB acts as the 'go-between' partner for the staff and admissions policies and processes at each institution to ensure correct implementation of the policy and practice agreed with each awarding institution.

As both Bucks New University and the University of Northampton have provided clear channels of communication and named colleagues, UCFB are able to communicate quickly

and clearly between each of their awarding institutions and act quickly where issues are time sensitive.

- The University of Northampton have two dedicated admissions colleagues and a partnerships email address for enquiries and communications to take place between departments.
- Bucks New University similarly have two dedicated members of the team available with a dedicated admissions email address for enquiries.

Regular face-to-face meetings with the awarding institutions has encouraged a positive and open relationship with each institution and ensures that broader, more strategic issues are not lost in day to day admissions processing.

Holding meetings ahead of key points in the UCAS calendar (such as Clearing and decision deadlines) ensures that UCFB and their awarding institutions are able to plan ahead and anticipate any issues before they arrive.

### **Evidence to measure impact and lessons learned**

Maintaining clear and open communication channels between admissions at the teaching and awarding institutions has ensured that admissions are managed fairly, efficiently and professionally in collaboration with our partners. Through regular meetings, UCFB are able to discuss policy and good practice with colleagues at each institution and ensure that applications to UCFB are handled fairly and efficiently regardless of the awarding institution the applicant has applied to.

Holding meetings at the start of each academic year has proven particularly useful, giving both institutions the opportunity to raise and amend any issues prior to applications for the following year being assessed, particularly when reviewing entry requirements.

There are occasions in which the preference or policies of the awarding institution are different from those of UCFB and it is on these occasions where meetings and regular contact have been useful, the opportunity for these issues to be raised and discussed face-to-face means that a satisfactory resolution or understanding of the situation can often be achieved quickly between relevant colleagues at each institution.

The sharing of data and resources has been particularly crucial for each institution, UCFB make colleagues available to each institution for chasing up application issues (e.g. incomplete applications at risk of being rejected by default by UCAS or following up applicants who decline by default) and each institution makes application data and UCAS Weblink accounts available to UCFB for monitoring and tracking applications.

UCFB are currently developing in-house admissions resources including a dedicated Admissions Policy document, this is being developed using not only the SPA good practice guide for admissions policy but also the corresponding policy documents for each awarding institution to create a policy which is in line with the requirements of each institution and the principles of fair admissions.

Graeme Slater, Admissions Manager, UCFB

## **Case study: University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) - Sharing good practice on admissions processes and updates with our UK collaborative partners**

A common Admissions Policy is issued to all UK Collaborative Partners and the University provides support in the implementation of the policy. An induction process is undertaken for new partners to the network, which includes engagement and training from the University's Admissions professionals. As part of our collaborative network, the University champions the opportunity to exchange knowledge and good practice amongst the partnership network and between partners and the University. One established mechanism for this is the bi-annual Partnership Forum meeting with regular admissions updates on the agenda, for information and discussion and sharing of good practice.

In addition the admissions team provides briefing and training updates relating to changes in the external environment as applicable to partners staff, which include sessions delivered by the University admissions team and those provided by other organisations, such as UCAS. A recent example being the UCAS Tariff Changes and Qualifications Reform session delivered by UCAS on 2 March 2016, to which all UK Collaborative partners were invited and materials from the session were disseminated across the network. A session on Qualifications Reform (BTEC) was also held in March, delivered by David MacKay, Head of Stakeholder Engagement (HE) at Pearson's.

Following the issue of Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) guidance to HE on consumer protection a series of additional activities were provided by the University with support from legal professionals to raise awareness of the complexities of Consumer Protection Legislation (CPL) and compliance. This included workshop sessions, a substantive item on the Partnership Forum led by an external legal expert, Q&A's produced, and the provision of the University's processes and documentation as examples, to a range of key personnel within the Partner Organisations (e.g. Principals and Vice Principals; Directors of HE and marketing contacts).

### **What was your rationale for undertaking this development?**

The ethos and the principles of the UCLan Partnership Network are to work in a collaborative way to involve partners and to ensure that they are informed and up to date and that we are able to share good practice, both within the network and between the University and our Collaborative Providers. As part of this we would naturally update our partners on changes to the external environment and felt that the issuing of additional activities with Partners on the CMA Guidance was paramount to raising awareness of the complexities of Consumer Protection legislation within the network.

As the Awarding Body we believe that compliance with Consumer Protection Law is important not only in protecting students but also in maintaining student confidence and the reputation of the HE Sector and in supporting competition. Consumer Protection Law is therefore an important aspect of an HE Providers relationship with students, together with the existence of a supportive learning and pastoral environment within an academic community.

### **How effective has the activity/intervention been? What evidence have you gathered to measure impact?**

Partners feedback that they value the informative and supportive environment offered by the UCLan Partnership and the success of the Partnership Forum as a vehicle for providing updates and sharing good practice has been recognised by previous QAA reports. The most recent Higher Education Review, undertaken in March 2015, identified Good Practice in 'The effective role of the University in supporting its partners (Expectation B10)'.

We have received positive feedback from UCAS on the support we have provided to our Partners in relation to the CMA consumer protection guidance and partner Principals have acknowledged the benefit of the University sessions on CMA. The CMA session with Partnership marketing staff received high satisfaction scores in our evaluation report.

### **Lessons learned?**

With respect to Consumer Protection Laws, with multiple partners operating across both franchised and validated models with varying contractual responsibilities it can be difficult to ensure total compliance. Guidance is provided, processes can be implemented and monitoring is undertaken, but this does not always ensure full compliance.

Implementing both the UCAS processes and CMA consumer protection guidance can be confusing for potential students particularly with respect to accepting offers with UCAS followed by the 14 day 'cooling-off' period. This is particularly challenging during Clearing.

The complexities/restrictions on UCAS Collect and Course Search with respect to promoting multi-site provision (the limited areas which are able to be tailored to each site of delivery which falls under one overall course title) and complying with CMA guidelines have caused some difficulties, but we are working with our admissions team and UCAS support to improve this area.

Lynne Livesey, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Executive Team, University of Central Lancashire.