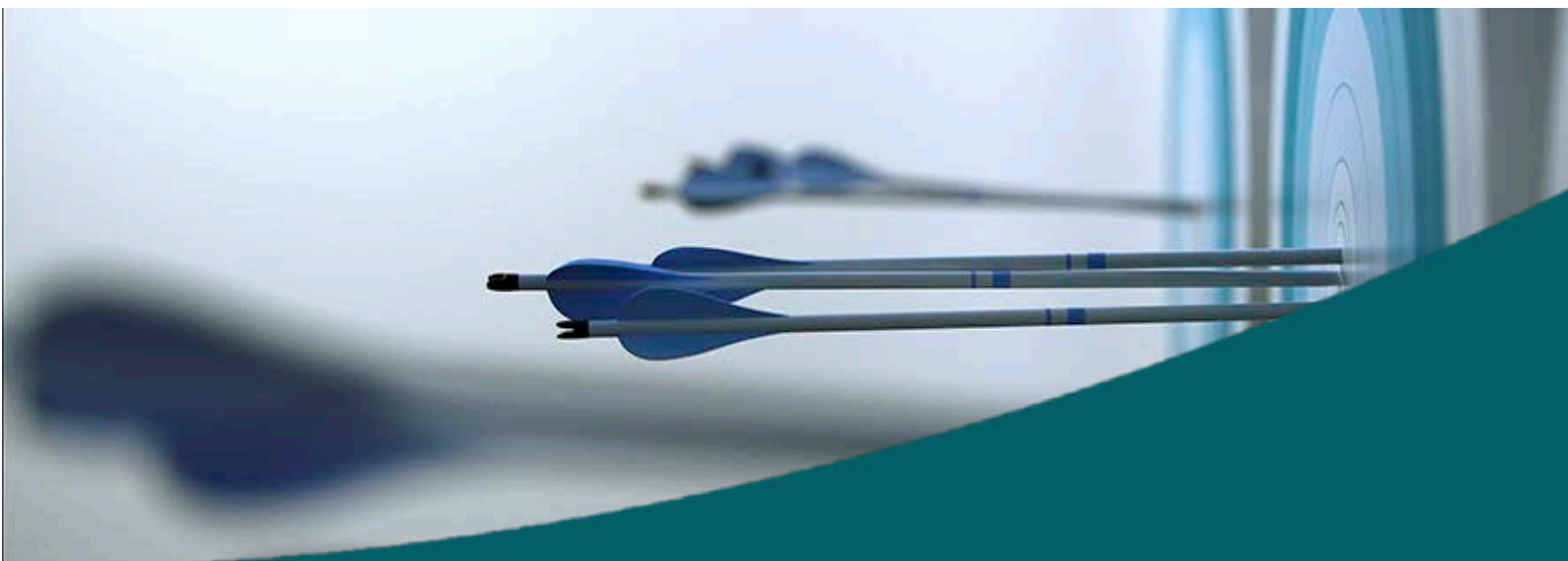




Supporting Professionalism  
in Admissions

# SPA good practice

## Planning and managing admissions processes



## Contents

Introduction.....	3
Overview.....	4
Review.....	4
Predict.....	5
Enact.....	6
Collaborate.....	7
Keep up-to-date.....	8
Be ready.....	9
Annex A – stakeholder engagement matrix.....	10

## 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

If you wish to discuss these good practice considerations 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](mailto:enquiries@spa.ac.uk) or 01242 544891.

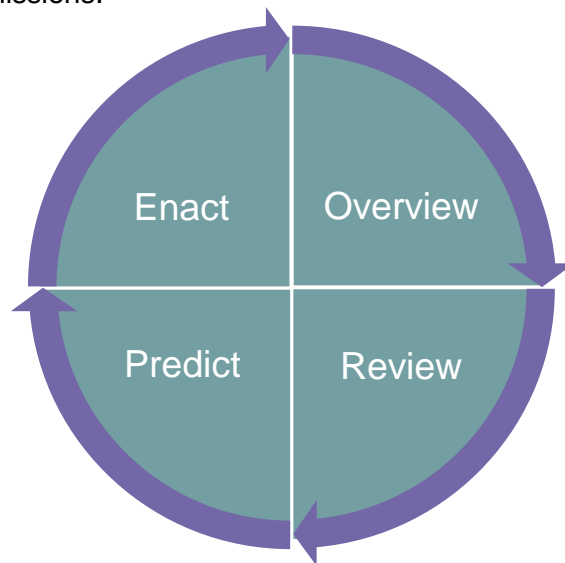
## Introduction

Effective planning is crucial, and your capacity to plan ahead, predict activity and have contingencies in place is the best way of ensuring you have control over your admissions processes. Planning should start well before a new admissions cycle commences to give appropriate lead-in time before potential applicants consider new entry information, and before the HE provider begins to consider any applications.

This document provides a brief checklist of issues to consider in planning and managing admissions processes. It should be read in conjunction with the following three related documents:

- [SPA's considerations for Confirmation and Clearing](#) – which provides more in-depth good practice considerations for the Confirmation and Clearing period.
- [SPA's good practice statement on admissions policies](#) – which provides detailed considerations for the production, implementation, monitoring and review of admissions policies and related documents.
- [Admissions Review Plan](#) – for HE providers seeking to review their practice to inform more effective planning and managing of admissions.

The below diagram illustrates the four key stages in planning admissions that form a 'virtuous circle', each providing information to support the next: gaining an **overview** of your admissions; to establish a baseline for **review** of previous entry years; which provides evidence to help you **predict** the new entry year; allowing you to **enact** plans from an informed position; which in turn will update your overview of admissions.



Three further elements underpin effective planning:

- **collaborate** with relevant colleagues
- **keep up-to-date** with the current picture
- **be ready** to respond to changes

## Overview

- ❑ Plan the process as a whole to ensure context and impact on other areas are considered.
  - ❑ Plans must support the institutional mission and strategic aims.
  - ❑ Ensure compliance with the admissions policy and external regulatory requirements.
  - ❑ Seek input from [colleagues and stakeholders](#) who are involved across the entirety of the applicant and student experience.
- ❑ Identify and ensure agreement on core admissions values that will be protected and maintained regardless of any unexpected events. This will make appropriate reaction to events quicker and reduce unnecessary debate or dispute over practice.

## Review

- ❑ Review admissions data from previous cycles, considering:
  - ❑ Application numbers, offer numbers and conversion rates for at least the immediately preceding cycle, including:
    - How progression and retention data relates to application data, including contextual data and qualifications on entry.
    - Application / conversion data for applicants with different characteristics (e.g. protected characteristics, socio-economic group, care leavers, other WP categories) to identify trends.
    - You may find our [tracking and monitoring](#) resource helpful.
  - ❑ National trends in applications and demographic data (information can be found on the UCAS website, as well as in government and HE funders' data sources).
  - ❑ Competitor data, including competitor analysis reports (bearing in mind the need to comply with [competition law](#)).
  - ❑ Local/catchment data, including intelligence from school and college visits.
  - ❑ Subject-specific data, including trends in uptake of and performance in relevant pre-entry subject areas.
- ❑ Review market intelligence on applicant behaviour.
  - ❑ Some information may be anecdotal, so care should be taken not to upscale (e.g. do not apply intelligence related to one specific subject area to all courses; do not assume a local pattern will be repeated nationally).
- ❑ Review new national-level research and/or good practice recommendations.
  - ❑ Where new research or good practice guidance has been published, review findings/recommendations and consider the implications for your admissions policies and process.
- ❑ Review existing policies and procedures.
  - ❑ Re-examine policies, procedures and their rationales in detail, ensuring they are fit-for purpose, rather than simply updating names and dates.
  - ❑ Specific care should be taken to ensure policies and procedures are compliant with existing (including recently introduced) legislation, in particular consumer protection legislation.
  - ❑ Ensure policies and procedures meet the Expectations of the [QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#), specifically Chapter B2 on recruitment, selection and admission.
- ❑ Review staff perceptions (positive and negative) of the previous cycle's admissions process to inform any new approach.

- This should include administrative and academic admissions staff, course/department management staff and staff involved in the teaching and support of first year students.
- Understand variation in admissions needs across different courses.
  - For example: how selective each course is; any additional professional requirements; different assessment methods (e.g. [admissions tests](#), [portfolio assessment](#), [interview](#), contextual information and/or data); differing needs of key demographic groups (e.g. if a course attracts high numbers of mature entrants).
  - Agree how any necessary variation should be incorporated fairly within the standard policy and practice.

## Predict

- Identify and assess the potential impact on your admissions process of any changes to:
  - Programme offerings (e.g. new courses, courses advertised but not yet validated/accredited, discontinued/suspended courses, alterations to existing course content), ensuring compliance with [consumer protection legislation](#).
  - [Entry requirements](#) (e.g. changes to standard/typical/minimum offer, or offer range, new subject-specific requirements, introduction of specific grades in specific subjects, new Level 2 prerequisites, qualifications to be taken in a specific year, admissions tests, presentation/portfolio, competence standards, additional non-academic requirements). This is particularly important, given widespread qualification reform in the UK, the increased flexibility in the pre-HE curriculum, and consumer protection legislation. [SPA's resources from the NETT on qualification reform](#) may be of use.
  - [Contextualised admissions](#) – any new or changed data or information used when deciding who to invite to interview, in assessing applications and offer-making, final decision-making at Confirmation or Clearing or in assessing applicant/student support needs.
  - Policy, process and workload (e.g. turnaround times, gathered field, widening participation commitments, application assessment methods, CRM activity, IT system changes, updating offer libraries), bearing in mind that changes to one stage of the admissions process may have implications for other parts of the process.
  - Staff changes, deadlines/timing within the admissions cycle and performance indicators.
- Evaluate any impact on the transparency and accessibility of information for applicants resulting from new or changed admissions criteria, decision-making or policy.
  - Analyse external pressures on the new cycle to predict possible risks, and build contingencies into the plan for likely risks.
- Regularly report on developments throughout the cycle to check actual situation remains in line with predicted trends and to spot deviation early.
- Consider possible impact on the planning, timing, staffing and operation of open and visit days, interviews and CRM communications.
- Plan for [Confirmation and Clearing](#) from the start of the admissions cycle, which may helpfully include a review of the recent Confirmation and Clearing activity while memories of it are still fresh. Any major changes to your Confirmation or Clearing processes, especially those with resource implications, may need to be planned for well in advance, e.g. ensuring compliance with consumer protection legislation.

## Enact

- ❑ Finalise [entry requirements](#) and publish them in good time for applicants to make informed choices.
  - ❑ Published entry requirements should be clear, transparent and easily accessible, using plain language wherever possible, and ensuring compliance with consumer protection legislation.
  - ❑ Where changes to entry requirements are necessary, these should be published promptly, and applied consistently.
  - ❑ In order to support schools and colleges, consider publishing an [institutional statement](#) on how you will approach qualification reform.
- ❑ Set provisional targets, levels and thresholds for numbers of offers to make.
  - ❑ Determine timings for when offers will be made during any period of equal consideration and monitor against agreed thresholds.
  - ❑ Consider where gathered field approaches may be needed for courses with great uncertainty in predicted application or conversion numbers (particularly if external information that may affect final targets is unknown at start of cycle).
  - ❑ Factor progression agreements, compacts, articulation, deferrals and other entry routes into provisional targets and ensure staff are aware of how such groups are represented in any figures.
  - ❑ Decide what safety factors will be calculated into provisional targets and planned offer numbers (e.g. whether to plan for 100% during equal consideration and close entry after that point, or whether to plan with some numbers in reserve to recruit later in the cycle, during Adjustment and/or Clearing).
  - ❑ Consider potential impact on low participation groups and ensure there is no conflict with the institution widening participation and equality strategies.
- ❑ Ensure senior management buy-in.
  - ❑ If significant changes are required, a senior management ‘champion’ may help steer them through effectively – this person can promote the need amongst other senior managers, help secure any necessary resources and add the authority to implement changes across other departments and areas.
- ❑ Develop a communication plan in line with admissions planning aims.
  - ❑ Consider internal communications:
    - Plans for internal communication of any changes that may happen mid-cycle, especially those caused by external factors.
    - Carry out regular and detailed communication with colleagues across the institution involved in recruitment, outreach and international activity, to ensure messages to applicants and potential applicants are always joined-up, throughout all stages of the [applicant experience](#).
    - Ensure all relevant colleagues know and understand the key dates, activities and policies involved in the admissions cycle. You may wish to consider a briefing event for admissions tutors and other relevant staff at the start of the cycle, especially where there are any significant changes this year.
  - ❑ External publications and sources of information (e.g. admissions website; prospectus; UCAS; KIS). Ensure compliance with consumer protection legislation.
  - ❑ CRM systems and social networking engagement to support continued transparency and to manage expectations as cycle progresses.

- ❑ Ensure appropriate training is scheduled and attended by all involved in admissions activity – including staff whose roles sit outside of admissions itself.
  - ❑ Ensure all staff and representatives understand consumer protection requirements, including, for example, how the offer forms part of a contract and that pre-contract material information should be provided in a durable medium.
  - ❑ Consider a range of equality training, including on [unconscious bias](#), utilising expertise from other parts of the institution where appropriate.
  - ❑ Define the discretionary scope available to admissions staff in making decisions on suitable applications and constructing the terms of an offer.
  - ❑ Where necessary, clarify what actions are not permissible. For example, ensure relevant staff, inside and outside of admissions, understand the importance of the results embargo and their responsibility to uphold it.
- ❑ Ensure resources (physical, human, financial, IT, time) needed to enact the plan are available, guaranteed for when needed, or in reserve to meet planned contingencies.

## Collaborate

Effective planning and managing requires input from the right people. The following lists outline many of the possible stakeholders that admissions colleagues may wish to collaborate with on key aspects of planning and managing admissions.

### Internal stakeholders

- Academics
- Accommodation services
- Admissions teams and committees
- Compliance staff
- Equality and Diversity staff
- External relations and Media staff
- International office/ overseas agents
- IT staff and providers
- Marketing and recruitment staff
- Planning office
- Schools & college liaison staff
- Senior management teams
- Staff development/ CPD providers
- Student ambassadors
- Student experience committee/staff
- Student finance staff
- Student representatives
- Timetabling staff
- Widening access/participation staff

### Partners and other external stakeholders

- Feeder schools/colleges
- Partner institutions
- Awarding bodies
- Funding providers e.g. funding councils, NHS
- SPA
- UCAS
- Professional Statutory Regulatory Bodies
- Representative groups e.g. UUK, Guild HE
- UK Visas and Immigration

In [annex A](#) we have provided a template stakeholder engagement matrix. Factor in your own unique organisational structures and partnerships when completing it.

## Keep up-to-date

- ❑ Regular monitoring.
  - ❑ Include 'milestones' within the cycle to compare predicted with actual situation.
  - ❑ Arrange admissions meetings around milestone dates in cycle.
  - ❑ Put admissions (and consumer protection compliance) as a fixed agenda item on senior management meetings.
- ❑ Risk assessment, with recommendations for risk response.
  - ❑ Calculate financial implications of any risk.
  - ❑ Include possible external risks, including changes to government policy.
- ❑ Communications strategy
  - ❑ Internal: to keep all staff concerned aware of change and to help them plan.
  - ❑ External: to ensure transparency, manage expectations and influence applicant behaviour.
  - ❑ Remember to inform and update any external hosts of your course information (e.g. UCAS, particularly in relation to changes with any impact on applicants, such as discontinuation/suspension of entry to courses, and new course approvals). This is particularly important in light of consumer protection requirements.
  - ❑ Keep all stakeholders informed, including partner institutions, agents and external interviewers.
  - ❑ Be sensitive to the importance of the reputation of the institution.
- ❑ Managing numbers strategy.
  - ❑ Interpret trends within applications to inform conversion rates (e.g. competitor analysis, likelihood of insurance conversion).
  - ❑ Consider conversion rates of particular applicant groups (e.g. deferrals from previous year).
  - ❑ Strategy/contingency plan for late applications, Extra, Confirmation, Adjustment and Clearing.
  - ❑ Plan for careful control over offer-making in subject areas of high uncertainty (e.g. if final allocation from a funding provider cannot be reasonably predicted, consider holding/limiting offers until allocation is agreed).
  - ❑ Be specific in the wording of any offers where courses need additional control measures to allow finer discretion at Confirmation (e.g. specific grade requirements, rather than overall UCAS Tariff points) and ensure conditions are clearly represented to applicants.
  - ❑ Check the number of unconditional offers made to inform the degree of flexibility available at Confirmation. This applies to both accepted deferrals from the previous cycle plus any further unconditional offers made in the current cycle.
  - ❑ Agree where there is flexibility to move target numbers between courses and ensure close coordination of offers where target numbers are shared across a group of courses.
  - ❑ If a course has no potential to have additional target numbers allocated to it, consider tactics for oversubscription (e.g. promoting alternatives applicants may legitimately be interested in).
  - ❑ Redirect marketing and recruitment efforts during the cycle, particularly if planned promotional activities are no longer required and could lead to over-subscription.
- ❑ Training to ensure staff are aware of risks, including the consequences of bad practice.
- ❑ Incorporate numbers from progression, articulation and other entry routes into core planning and agree dates for consideration.



- ❑ If closing dates for such groups are changed, ensure they are informed as early as possible.
- ❑ Consider alternatives for any applicants unable to be considered within new timelines or requirements (e.g. deferral; part-time; franchise).
- ❑ Consider numbers applying to different points of entry (e.g. Year 6 students in Scotland applying for Year 2 entry).
- ❑ If there are alternative start dates (e.g. January; April), recalculate target numbers after each enrolment session.

## Be ready

- ❑ Quick response.
  - ❑ Assemble a core group (including senior management representation) able to interpret information and assess likely impact on admissions.
  - ❑ Empowerment (group or individual) to instigate action as soon as it is needed.
  - ❑ Set 'trigger points' that require immediate response if hit (e.g. if applications exceed an expected threshold by a set date; if requests for accommodation exceed capacity).
  - ❑ Understand which aspects of policy and practice can be reviewed mid-cycle and which ones are immutable.
  - ❑ Have resources in place or in reserve that can be drawn upon to meet any agreed action.
- ❑ Clear management.
  - ❑ Staff need to be aware of who has authority to take action.
  - ❑ Staff need to be aware of, and agree with, their responsibilities.
- ❑ Have a robust admissions policy and ensure practice adheres to it, to protect the institution if there is complaint or litigation. SPA's good practice on [admissions policies](#) and [complaints and appeals](#) may be of use.

## Annex A – stakeholder engagement matrix

Collaboration on	target setting	entry requirements	publications and publicity	communicating changes and managing expectations	training/ updating staff	reviewing plan against actual numbers during cycle
<b>Collaboration with</b>						
<i>Example</i>	✓	✓			✓	
Academics						
Accommodation services						
Admissions teams and committees						
Compliance staff						
Equality and diversity staff						
External relations and Media staff						
International office/ overseas agents						
IT staff and providers						
Marketing and recruitment staff						
Planning office						
Schools & college liaison staff						
Senior management teams						
Staff development/ CPD providers						
Student ambassadors and representatives						
Student experience committee/staff						
Student finance staff						
Timetabling staff						
Widening access/participation staff						
Feeder schools/colleges						
Partner institutions						
Awarding bodies						
Funding providers e.g. funding councils, NHS						
SPA						
UCAS						
Professional Statutory Regulatory Bodies						
Representative groups e.g. UUK, Guild HE						
UK Visas and Immigration						