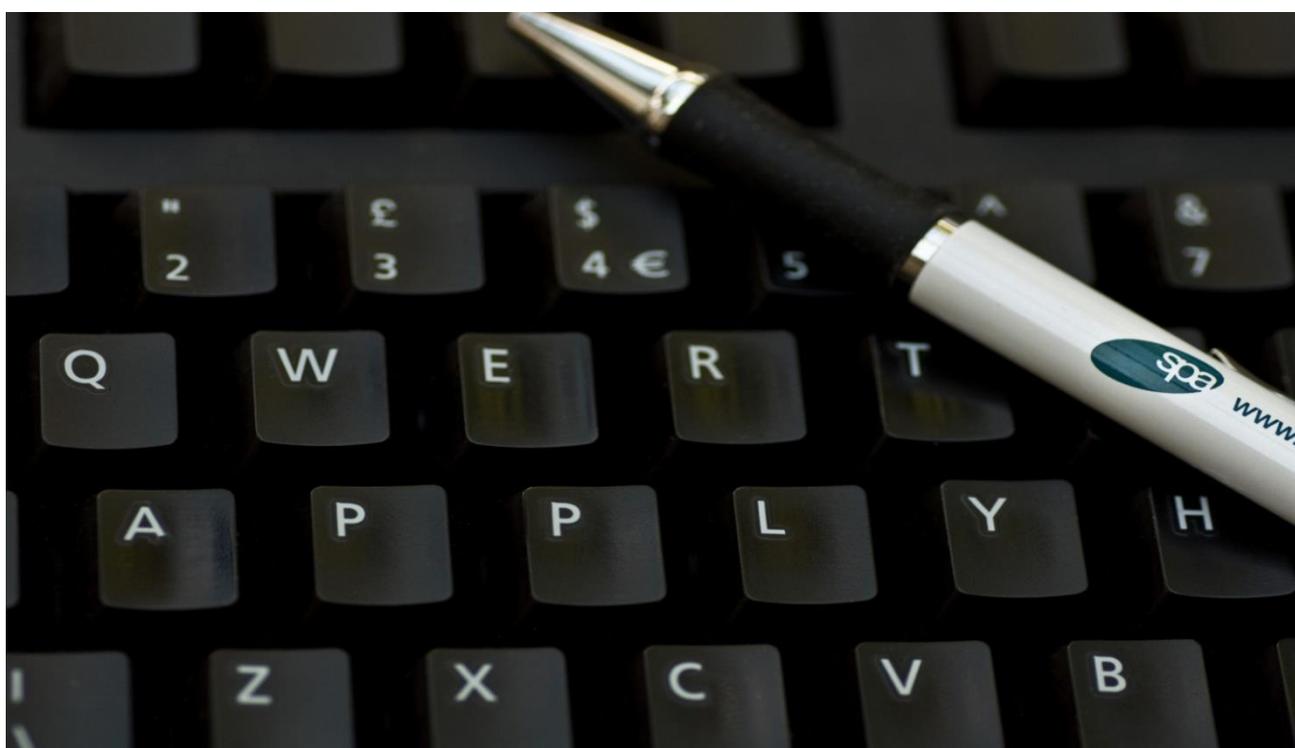




SPA Good Practice Statement

Admissions Policies



April 2014

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SPA would like to thank those institutions who contributed to the redevelopment of this good practice statement.

This document replaces the SPA Good Practice Statement issued in 2009 and updated in 2012.

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

Executive Summary

The production and dissemination of clear, comprehensive and well implemented admissions policy and procedures is absolutely fundamental to fair admissions to higher education for UK HE providers. More specifically, it is key to meeting the QAA's expectation that admissions processes are professionally run and transparent.

This statement outlines good practice in the production, implementation, monitoring and review of admissions policies and related documents, and particularly recommends that:

- HE providers have a single, institution-wide 'core admissions policy' that clearly states their commitment to fair access and admissions, the principles that guide recruitment, selection and admissions, and the qualities desired in applicants.
- This core policy should be publicly available and comprehensible to applicants, their advisors and the general public, and widely disseminated amongst the provider's staff.
- More detailed procedural information may be included within the admissions policy or outlined in staff-oriented handbooks, but in all cases necessary information about the application and decision-making process should be provided in a clear format to applicants and their advisors.
- Admissions policy and detailed procedures should be in place for all programmes, modes and levels of study, with stakeholders readily able to identify the relevant policy in each case.
- Robust mechanisms for internal dissemination of admissions policy and procedure, for identifying and meeting staff training needs, and for monitoring the admissions process should be in place to ensure that policy and procedure are implemented and reflected in practice.
- Providers should regularly review admissions policy, procedure and information for applicants to ensure that all documentation is up-to-date, consistent and aligned with the provider's strategic priorities.
- Where responsibility for admissions is fully or partially devolved, policy, procedure and practice should be reviewed both at the devolved level – to ensure continued alignment with the provider's overarching admissions policy – and at the institutional level – to support harmonisation of diverging practices across the institution.
- Providers should ensure that all aspects of recruitment, selection and admissions are encompassed within the institution's policies and procedures and that applicants and their advisors have information about everything they might need to know to make informed choices and appropriate applications.
- Providers should take care to identify and outline the needs of any subset of their applicant cohort for whom specific policies, procedures or support/information are required.
- SPA has also produced a good practice checklist to assist HE providers in developing and reviewing their admission policies, available at www.spa.ac.uk/resources/admissions-policies

1. Introduction

1.1. SPA good practice statements

SPA (the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme) provides an independent and objective voice on UK HE admissions, with a particular focus on supporting fair admissions policy and practice. SPA works closely with HE providers and other stakeholders to develop an evidence base and recommended good practice to help universities and colleges to maintain and enhance excellence and professionalism in admissions, student recruitment and widening participation/access. Full information on SPA and its work can be found at www.spa.ac.uk.

This good practice statement – as with SPA’s other good practice guidance – is intended to assist a range of staff within HE providers with instilling and developing good practice in admissions, with a particular emphasis on developing fair and professional admissions policy and procedures. SPA’s good practice statements are developed through evaluation of existing practice within the HE sector, supplemented by desk-based research, discussions with staff at a range of institutions and intelligence gathered from conferences and meetings.

This statement may be used as a point of reference when reviewing and updating admissions policies and related documents (such as procedural handbooks, internal good practice statements and advice for applicants on the application process). SPA recommends that it is read alongside the QAA’s UK Quality Code for Higher Education, [Chapter B2: Recruitment, selection and admission to higher education](#) (hereafter *QAA Quality Code*). HE providers may find it useful to perform a gap analysis to compare their own practice with that outlined here and suggested by the *QAA Quality Code*’s Indicators, to identify and address any areas where improvements might be made. To aid providers in this process, SPA has produced an admissions policy checklist and a B2 gap analysis template, available at www.spa.ac.uk/resources/admissions-policies

This good practice statement 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; HE providers should always take their own legal advice as they see appropriate.

SPA good practice statements are kept under review and updated as appropriate – this document replaces a previous statement released in 2009 and updated in 2012.

1.2. The fair admissions background and responsibility for admissions

Admissions to higher education – particularly with regard to undergraduate degrees – has received a consistently high level of political and media interest for many years, and particularly since the publication of the ‘Schwartz report’, *Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice*, in September 2004 and the resultant establishment of both the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme (SPA).

The Schwartz report outlined **five principles** of a fair admissions system – transparency, merit-based selection, reliable and valid assessment methods, minimal barriers for applicants, and professional structures and processes.¹ These principles have since been reviewed and reaffirmed in 2008 and 2012, with the national Fair Admissions Task and Finish Group in 2012, chaired by Professor Mary Stuart, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lincoln, concluding:

¹ More information about the Schwartz Report and its principles can be found at www.spa.ac.uk/resources/what-fair-admissions

Fair admissions has always been important for applicants and institutions but in a time of such change in all the HE systems in the UK the principles of fair admissions and continuous improvement in admissions practice are even more important.²

October 2013 saw the publication of Chapter B2 of the QAA Quality Code – the first major revision since 2006 – focusing on *Recruitment, selection and admission to higher education*. The new Expectation has brought fair admissions right to the forefront of the QAA’s agenda with regard to admissions:

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about recruitment, selection and admission to higher education, which higher education providers are required to meet.

Recruitment, selection and admissions policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. They are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes. They support higher education providers in the selection of students who are able to complete their programme. (B2, p. 7)

The Chapter cites the Schwartz report and SPA’s guidance extensively, and notes the particular importance of the principle of transparency, concluding that ‘Adherence to the principle of transparency ensures that all those engaged in recruitment, selection and admission are able to act with integrity and professionalism in all circumstances’ (B2, p. 4).

As well as advocating adherence to the principles of fair admissions, the Schwartz report affirms the autonomy of individual HE providers in determining their own admissions standards, requirements, procedures, policies and decisions. This is also stated in legislation, including the Higher Education Act 2004 (Part 3, s. 32(2)(b)) and the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 (s. 9(12)(b)(ii)). This principle was recently reaffirmed for English HE providers in OFFA’s 2014–15 guidance on Access Agreements, which states ‘The freedom to control your own admission processes is an important part of academic autonomy. The law puts admissions criteria outside our remit and it is right that it should do so.’³

HE providers should also be aware that the admissions process establishes a contract between the provider and the applicant, with attendant provisions and terms defined and limited by contract legislation. It should be reiterated that SPA does not offer legal advice and HE providers should always take their own legal advice where appropriate or necessary.

This guidance has been designed to assist HE providers in further developing their good practice and professionalism when developing or reviewing their admissions policy and procedures. Acknowledging the paramount importance of transparency, this guidance aims to encourage the publication and dissemination of a transparent and fair admissions policy.

Although the focus of this document is often on undergraduate admissions, the principles and guidance outlined here apply equally to postgraduate admissions and admission to professional courses, and to both full-time and part-time provision.

² www.spa.ac.uk/resources/fair-admissions-task-and-finish-group (acc. 26/3/14). ³ OFFA, [How to produce an access agreement for 2014–15](#), §122; (acc. 17/3/14).

2. Admissions policies and procedures

2.1. What is the admissions policy for?

An HE provider's admissions policy or policies⁴ should cover everything that provider does with regard to admission of students, from initial enquiries through the formal application process to enrolment and beyond. This includes all elements of the applicant experience⁵ and is likely to encompass student recruitment, outreach and widening access work, setting offer levels, making admissions decisions, managing relationships with partners, with agents and with UCAS, equality and diversity issues and transition support, as well as having links to the student experience and retention and success rates.

In the interests of transparency, HE providers should provide good quality, detailed information on all aspects of their admissions policies and procedures, highlighting how these contribute to the provider's mission and strategic plans. This is made explicit in the *QAA Quality Code*:

Policies and procedures for recruitment, selection and admission are clear and explicit. They articulate the values underpinning the provider's processes and clarify where authority and responsibility for each stage lies. ...

Higher education providers ensure that those involved with recruitment, selection and admission are familiar with policies and procedures and can access them easily. This may include staff involved in recruitment, selection and admission activity, prospective students, and their advisers. (B2, pp. 7–8)

In addition to meeting this particular requirement of the *QAA Quality Code*, the admissions policy gives providers an opportunity to declare and demonstrate their compliance with all of Chapter B2 of the *QAA Quality Code*, and their commitment to the [principles of fair admissions](#). Providers may also use the admissions policy to formally recognise the importance to them of recruitment, widening access and admissions, and to demonstrate their commitment to and support of these activities.

The policy can also serve to demonstrate the provider's compliance with and commitment to its various legal and statutory obligations. This may be as simple as a sentence or short paragraph declaring the policy's compliance with relevant legislation. Alternatively – as deemed appropriate – more detail may be provided about compliance with particular pieces of legislation (e.g. the Equality Act 2010 might be cited with regard to equality and diversity monitoring).

HE providers should have clear and regularly updated admissions policies in place for all programmes of study offered, whether undergraduate or postgraduate, full-time or part-time, delivered on site, via distance learning or through a partner institution. Consideration should be given to whether a single admissions policy will suit for all purposes or different policies will be needed for different areas.

Where the latter approach is taken, care should be taken to ensure as much consistency as possible between the policies. Any divergence between them must be justified as necessary, and SPA recommends senior-level review of both quality and equality considerations, to ensure that the differences in policy and procedure are warranted and based in evidence. This is especially important where approaches may seem contradictory.

⁴ Throughout this document, we will refer to a single admissions policy. However, some institutions may have several policies covering different modes or levels of study.

⁵ See SPA's guidance on the applicant experience at www.spa.ac.uk/resources/applicant-experience

2.2. Who is the admissions policy for?

An admissions policy is not simply a matter for an admissions office (wherever it may be situated), but rather a document that should be widely disseminated throughout an institution, informing all aspects of an institution's relationship with enquirers, prospective applicants and applicants.

All staff within an HE provider who have a role to play in recruitment, selection and admission should be familiar with the admissions policy and related procedures and should be fully briefed in the requirements of their role – this may include staff in marketing, student recruitment, widening access/participation, planning and student services, among others, as well as academics within departments or schools.

Admissions policies and procedures will also be of interest and use to applicants and their advisors, as specified in the *QAA Quality Code*:

Higher education providers' policies and procedures for applying to higher education are clear and accessible. The policies and procedures assist prospective students in completing and submitting their application in full by the given deadline, to the satisfaction of the provider. (B2, p. 14)

The 2013 redrafting of the *QAA Quality Code* brought the issue of transparency to the forefront, declaring it to be 'of paramount importance to the recruitment, selection and admission context', and HE providers must give serious thought to how clear and accessible their admissions policy is to external audiences.

2.2.1 Accessibility of the policy

The admissions policy should be written with applicants, their advisors and the general public in mind. It is important that it is readily understood by this general audience, and that the language used is clear and appropriate to the level of a prospective applicant (e.g. information about undergraduate programmes should be comprehensible to 15/16-year-olds). Jargon, acronyms or technical language should be kept to a minimum or explained where necessary, perhaps even by means of a brief glossary.

It should be relatively simple for applicants and other external audiences to find the admissions policy on their first visit to a provider's website. SPA recommends providing access to the policy through all of the following routes:

- links from the admissions home page and any particularly relevant pages (e.g. 'How to apply'), with reference to the link made in appropriate publications, such as the prospectus. Where policy relates to a specific area (e.g. the terms and conditions of offers) it should be linked to from any pages relating to that area.
- following an intuitive route with a low number of clicks from individual programme entries, UCAS Entry Profiles, related institutional policies etc.
- searching for 'admissions policy' or similar phrases both through institution websites' own search functions and via external search engines. These should return the main institutional policy as the first hit, rather than departmental policies or policies on particular areas (e.g. complaints procedures). Providers should ensure that old versions of admissions policies are removed and archived, and do not appear in a general search on the provider's website.
- any A-Z listing for the institution website

Admissions policies and related documents should also be available on request in different accessible formats.

Providers may also wish to include an admissions policy statement in their printed prospectus, though whether this consists of the full document or simply a summary of the key principles will

likely depend on the space available. In any case, it would be appropriate to provide information within the prospectus about where to find the provider’s admissions policy.

SPA recognises that HE providers may refer to this policy under different titles, reflecting the wider coverage of the documentation or particular internal governance arrangements. As noted above, external audiences searching for an ‘admissions policy’ should be able to discover the relevant documents, and appropriate arrangements – e.g. the use of keywords – should be made to facilitate this process.

HE in FE/ partnerships Where an HE provider is operating under the admissions policy of their partner institution(s) for some or all of their HE provision, they should give careful consideration to how this information is indicated to the applicant. SPA recommends that providers link to the policy and other documents where they are hosted on the partner institution’s website.

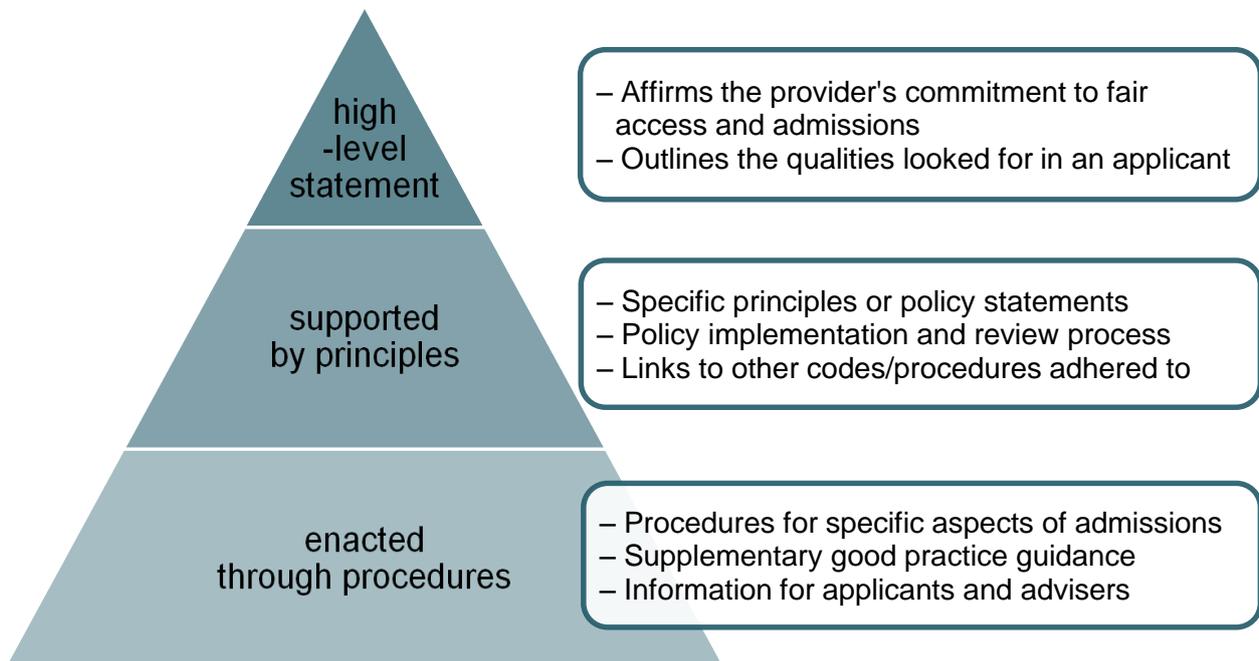
If providers wish to host a local copy of their partner’s admissions policy, or include summaries of admissions policy or procedure in their information for prospective applicants, they should ensure robust procedure and communication channels are in place to keep this information up-to-date.

It is of great importance that applicants and their advisors, as well as staff with a role in recruitment, selection and admissions, can quickly and easily discover the correct admissions policy for each programme.

2.3. Policies, procedures and other documentation

As well as being accessible to applicants and their advisors, admissions policy and procedure should allow internal stakeholders – primarily staff with some role to play in admissions, recruitment and/or selection processes – to ensure that their practice is professional and consistent with institutional policy.

Admissions policy and procedures can be thought of in terms of a hierarchy, moving from an overarching high-level statement to increasingly detailed, and often more procedural, information about areas of the admissions process:



The first two tiers of this hierarchy form the core of the admissions policy. HE providers should publish a single admissions policy document (or, if appropriate, multiple policies to cover different levels and modes of study) that at least covers all of the material included in these two tiers. This admissions policy will apply to all of the institution's admissions activities.

Where responsibility for admissions is fully or partially devolved, there may be subordinate admissions policies for some departments/programmes, or variation in the particulars of admissions procedure, but these should be aligned with, rather than conflicting with, the provider's main admissions policy.

This core admissions policy should be made available to applicants and their advisors as well as being widely distributed internally to all relevant staff (see §3.2 below). It should therefore be written in comprehensible language, with jargon and technical terminology kept to a minimum or glossed, easy to access and clearly identifiable.

HE providers may have different approaches to how procedural details and good practice are communicated to staff and to applicants and their advisors. Some providers choose to include this level of detail within the main policy document, while others may see merit in separating accessible information for external audiences from detailed procedural guidance for staff.

The three boxes below briefly outline three approaches to admissions policy and procedure documentation, but these are intended to provoke thought rather than to outline strict alternatives, and a combination of these approaches may be appropriate for many HE providers. Ultimately, providers should determine for themselves which method is best suited to their institution, based on a number of factors including degree of devolved responsibility for admissions, internal governance and committee structures, and how separated different areas of admissions are (e.g. undergraduate and postgraduate).

All-in-one policy and procedure document

Here the admissions policy document serves as a single general source of information for internal and external audiences, containing both the core admissions policy and details of recruitment, selection and admissions procedures. This may be achieved in one lengthy document, through linking to subordinate policy/procedure documents (e.g. separate documents for interview policy/procedure, complaints and appeals policy/procedure, disability policy/procedure etc.), or a combination of the two approaches.

This approach ensures a high level of transparency, with applicants and their advisors having direct access to the same procedural guidance as staff members. It can also be clearer for staff by providing a single source of information on both policy and procedure. However, thought should be given to how much variance in procedure there is between departments and programmes – in a devolved environment, this all-in-one approach may become unwieldy.

Core admissions policy and staff handbooks

The admissions policy document is limited to the core admissions policy (the first two tiers of the hierarchy, described in further detail in §4.2), and intended for both internal and external audiences. In addition, detailed 'staff handbooks' outline exactly how each stage of recruitment, selection and admissions procedure should be carried out, identifying who is responsible for key actions/decisions, any deadlines or time-related key performance indicators, etc. These are designed primarily for staff within the institution, rather than to be read by applicants and their advisors.

There may be a single, comprehensive handbook for all staff with a role to play in admissions, or a range of handbooks for different parts of the admissions process – interviewing, decision-making, complaints and appeals, etc. – different roles, or different departments/programmes (particularly in a devolved admissions environment).

The content of internal handbooks should be reviewed and assessed regularly to ensure they remain compliant with the core policy and do not inadvertently or unnecessarily contain information best shared in the public domain. Providers should consider the administrative burden of keeping multiple documents consistent and up-to-date when deciding how many handbooks would be appropriate.

Applicants will not be directed to these handbooks in the first instance, but to appropriate sections of the admissions website, which would outline the admissions process in a sufficient level of detail for their purposes. Care should be taken to ensure that applicants and their advisors are still given access to all the information they require and that this information is consistent with and correctly outlines internal procedure.

Supplementing staff handbooks with agreed institutional good practice

This approach builds on the staff handbook approach by harmonising the provider's divergent policies and procedures around specified indicators of good practice. It may be particularly well suited to devolved or partially devolved admissions environments or other instances where admissions policy or procedure necessarily varies between programmes.

Separate handbooks are used to outline the different procedures for each department or programme, and these must, of course, all be in alignment with the provider's core admissions policy. In addition to these handbooks, the provider produces and circulates statements of agreed good practice in a particular area of recruitment, selection or admissions. These do not prevent variation in procedure between departments, but rather lay out a standard set of expectations that all departmental procedures should meet.

For example, there may be significant difference in the specifics of interview procedure between departments, but certain common features – using two interviewers, providing applicants with a detailed schedule ahead of their visit, requirement for interviewer training – could be agreed as good practice on an institution-wide basis.

These good practice statements help departments to ensure conformity with the provider's policy when reviewing procedures, allow individual staff members to ensure their actions are consistent with best practice, and facilitate institution-wide review of policy and practice. Providers may also wish to place them in the public domain, to give applicants and advisors a better sense of what they can reasonably expect.

In all cases, HE providers should be supplying applicants and their advisors with information, advice and guidance that is specifically geared towards them and that outlines in appropriate detail the admissions process and any related procedures (e.g. what happens when an applicant declares a disability). This should make clear both the applicant's obligations and what they can expect from the HE provider, at every stage from initial enquiry to enrolment.

In determining which matters are only of interest for internal procedural purposes and which should be included in information, advice and guidance (IAG) for applicants and advisors, providers should give careful consideration to what information will support prospective applicants in making choices and in submitting appropriate applications. SPA advises that providers consult Chapter B2 of the *QAA Quality Code*, and particularly the guidance under Indicator 6, which outlines what information should be made available to prospective students (pp. 14–15).

3. Implementing and reviewing admissions policy

As noted in the previous section, the admissions policy is not simply a matter for admissions staff, but rather it should inform and direct all forms of engagement with enquirers, applicants and their advisors, from first enquiry through to enrolment and beyond. In addition to disseminating the policy throughout the institution, providers should take steps to monitor the implementation of the policy and conduct regular evaluations of both admissions process and policy.

3.1. Responsibility for the admissions policy

Committee structures and approval routes will naturally vary among HE providers, and it is for institutions to determine which body (e.g. an admissions committee) or individual (e.g. a Pro-Vice-Chancellor or Vice-Principal) should have overall responsibility for the provider's admissions policy. The admissions policy itself should provide some level of detail about which body or individual has sign-off on the policy, the date of its last review, and to whom any enquiries about the policy should be addressed.

It may be useful to outline the remit and responsibilities of the relevant committee/individual within the admissions policy, or to link to this information elsewhere (e.g. within the governance section of the website). It is anticipated that these responsibilities will include:

- oversight of the admissions process across the institution to ensure that it is in line with the provider's policy and guidelines
- ensuring that assessment methods and the decision-making process comply with the provider's policy
- ensuring that the policy is disseminated throughout the institution and that admissions staff are trained and adequately supported to do their job
- ensuring that there are job descriptions or clear role profiles for admissions tutors, centrally based admissions decision-makers and all others involved in the decision-making process
- regular review of the admissions policy, resulting in recommendations as appropriate to the relevant committee or body within the institution

Where an admissions committee has responsibility for some or all of these areas, SPA recommends a broad membership, encompassing, for example (and depending on the provider's administrative structure), senior management, academic admissions tutors, the head of admissions, the head of widening participation/access, the head of recruitment/ marketing, and student representation. In a devolved admissions environment, both central and decentralised admissions staff should be represented. Provision should be made to ensure the views of any partner institutions expected to adhere to the admissions policy are represented, especially as their offerings, facilities, applicant demographics and needs may vary considerably.

HE in FE/ partnerships

Providers operating under the admissions policy of a partner institution may find that they have little-to-no involvement in the review or development of the policy. This places admissions staff one step removed from policy-makers and can slow the dissemination of any changes or updates to policy. It may also reduce buy-in and accountability for policy amongst staff in the unrepresented provider, to the detriment of both HE providers and their applicants.

It may be beneficial for one or more staff members from an HE in FE provider (or Transnational Education provider etc.) to have a stake in the policy monitoring and review processes at their partner institution. If this is not possible, steps should be taken to ensure strong channels of communication between the two institutions so

that any changes in policy are quickly and efficiently transmitted to all affected staff.

HE in FE providers with several HE partners should take particular care if administering admissions processes under those partners' different policies, particularly if there are conflicts between policies. Any concerns over inconsistent treatment of applicants should be reviewed and discussed with partners. Even in cases where some or all applications are handled by the partner institution, the college will still likely handle areas such as enquiries, open days and admissions information on its website, and will want to be sure ensure fair treatment of all applicants.

All providers involved in a partnership arrangement are advised to review the requirements of Chapter B10 of the QAA *Quality Code*, [Managing higher education provision with others](#), when developing their policy, and particularly Indicator 14 (see below, §4.2.7).

3.2. Disseminating and implementing admissions policy

Policies are only ever as good as their implementation. Institutions may have excellent policies but if they are not implemented and adhered to this will be evident and processes will not comply with institutional strategies and aims. This is now encoded in the QAA *Quality Code*:

The provider ensures that those carrying responsibility for recruitment, selection and admission have up to date knowledge, are appropriately trained and are sufficiently experienced to carry out their respective roles.

Higher education providers are vigilant to ensure that all those authorised to make decisions on behalf of the provider about whether or not a place should be offered to an applicant are fully briefed, and competent to do so. (B2, p. 9)

Providers are advised to read this section of the QAA *Quality Code* in full (Indicator 2), and to consider the extent to which they meet its requirements.

While nominal oversight of the implementation of a provider's admissions policy is likely to rest with the same body or individual that has sign-off on the policy itself, in practical terms responsibility for ensuring that policies and procedures are understood and followed is likely to fall upon a large number of individuals across an institution, including heads of admissions (whether centrally or within schools and departments in devolved systems), academic admissions tutors, centralised decision-makers, and staff responsible for student recruitment and outreach.

To support correct implementation of admissions policies, providers should ensure that all staff have:

- full awareness and – crucially – understanding of the admissions policy and related procedures
- received the necessary training to carry out their role with regard to recruitment, selection and admissions
- knowledge of where to find further information if required and timely access to support throughout the year for any queries on interpreting policy

3.2.1 Disseminating the admissions policy and any changes

Providers should put in place processes for efficient and thorough dissemination of the admissions policy both internally and to any partner organisations (e.g. FE in HE providers or external education agents) to facilitate understanding of and engagement with the policy.

An annual 'admissions briefing' preceding or at the start of each admissions cycle can provide an opportunity to introduce admissions policy and procedures to new members of staff and to highlight any changes for existing staff. In a devolved environment, this method might be used to brief key representatives from each department, who would then have responsibility for further disseminating and ensuring policy is understood and implemented within their own teams. If certain aspects of the policy are only relevant for parts of the admissions cycle (e.g. interviews, qualification verification, Clearing), then it may be appropriate to offer follow-up briefings at the appropriate point in the year.

Providers wishing to review the success of their current dissemination/briefing strategies might consider performing a congruence survey to identify gaps between what staff members at all levels across the institution **need to know** about admissions policy and procedure and what they **actually know**. An example of such a survey being performed in a specific area (understanding of the Student Number Controls in an English HE provider) can be found on the [SPA website](#).

HE providers must also ensure that information provided to applicants and their advisors through the admissions website remains aligned with institutional admissions policy and procedural guidance given to staff members. Robust systems should be put in place to ensure that any change to policy/procedure triggers a timely review of published information and that any conflicts are corrected.

3.2.2 Staff training

Providers will normally have reliable procedures in place to identify and address the training needs of their staff members as part of their overarching policies on continuing professional development (CPD) and staff evaluation/appraisal processes.

However, it may be worth considering whether additional mechanisms for providing training may be appropriate. For example, all academic staff wishing to interview applicants might be required to participate in an interviewing workshop and affirm their familiarity with interview procedures and good practice. Such training activities may be required on a one-off basis or at regular intervals as long as an admissions role is maintained.

In particular, the *QAA Quality Code* specifically requires the decision-makers 'are equipped to counteract the potential for bias that can arise from educational and cultural differences and are able to recognise the potential of applicants seeking to enter higher education via a variety of different routes' (B2, p. 9). HE providers may wish to give particular thought to whether staff with decision-making responsibilities require equality and diversity training or briefing in a range of potential entry routes. HE providers will often have their own Diversity or Equality Offices to assist with this, but the Equality Challenge Unit ([ECU](#)) will also be able to offer advice and help.

3.3. Monitoring and reviewing admissions policy and practice

HE providers should have in place arrangements for regularly monitoring and reporting on the admissions process, at least once a year. This may include collecting and analysing reports from schools or departments, where admissions responsibilities are devolved; analysis of data and statistics on applications, offers and acceptances, where available, to ensure fair and consistent application of policy across the institution; and reflection on how internal and external developments have impacted upon the admissions process.

It is the provider's responsibility to investigate any issues that arise from this evaluation and to make necessary changes, particularly where practice is found to diverge from agreed policy/procedure or where correct following of policy and procedure appears to be leading to unfair or unprofessional practice. The first of these issues will likely be addressed by reconsidering and

improving processes for staff training and dissemination of the admissions policy and procedures. The latter should feed into periodic review of the admissions policy and procedures themselves.

The admissions policy and related procedures should ideally be reviewed once a year, and any changes applied on an admissions-cycle basis – that is, the policy applied to the first applicant in any one admissions cycle should hold true until the last application in that cycle is processed, with any changes or developments applied consistently to all applications in the subsequent admissions cycle. Where an annual review is not feasible, care should be taken to monitor key developments (e.g. revision of Chapter B2 of the *QAA Quality Code*, effective September 2014) that may necessitate a review of the admissions policy.

Providers may wish to encourage staff to provide feedback and reflections on the admission process throughout the admissions cycle, gathering intelligence as issues arise and reducing the risk of points being forgotten or misremembered over time. This could be on an ad hoc basis or focused around particular key points in the admissions calendar, and would feed into considerations by the body responsible for reviewing the policy.

Given the desirability for regular review of a provider's admissions policy, care should be taken to ensure that the policy is easy to work with, carries appropriate amounts of detail, and that processes for review and revision are not unduly complex. If the most minor change requires approval at the most senior levels of an institution, policies will be difficult to revise and may quickly become out of date.

Consequently, providers should consider whether authority over some level of detail may be sensibly devolved, while full committee review is reserved for more substantive changes. For example, details of which A level subjects are required, or more or less useful for entry to a particular programme might be agreed between the head of the admissions office and an academic admissions tutor, while the standard A level grades required for the course may still be a matter for consideration by the entire committee.

When reviewing admissions policy and procedures, providers may wish to give particular consideration to:

- any external developments impacting on admissions– for example, changes to legislation or the *QAA Quality Code*, qualification reforms
- any internal developments affecting the provider's structure or strategic objectives, as well as any changes to its provision
- any changes to partner institutions that may affect compact agreements, articulation or HE in FE provision
- any substantive concerns arising from internal monitoring of the admissions process
- informal feedback from academic and administrative staff involved in the admissions process
- the reasons for, and outcomes of, any admissions-related appeals or complaints

It should be clear within the policy who was responsible for reviewing and approving the policy, when the last review was undertaken, and when the next review is expected.

Providers should ensure that changes to admissions policies are communicated to all staff involved in recruitment, selection and admissions, with a clear indication of when changes come into effect and who to contact with any queries. In addition, the knock-on effect of changes to policy on other published information, such as information on the admissions website, should be considered and the relevant bodies or individuals alerted to the changes.

3.4. Harmonising policies and procedures

Where responsibility for admissions or elements of the admissions process are partially or wholly devolved, HE providers may find the process of monitoring and reviewing admissions policy and practice rather more complicated. The institution-wide admissions policy should still be reviewed centrally (and ideally annually), and it would be good practice to ensure that the body responsible for this review includes members representing all aspects of admission, including centralised and devolved functions.

Providers in both devolved and centralised admissions environments may also wish to consider whether the method outlined here might be usefully applied to harmonising policies for different modes or levels of study, or for ensuring that admissions policy resonates with the provider's policies on planning, transition, student experience etc.

Procedures and specific details of implementation of that policy may well differ between departments⁶ or programmes. Many providers will find that some procedures vary between departments – e.g. use of admissions tests – while other policies/procedures – e.g. provision of support for care leavers – are applied consistently across the institution.

In each case, there should be a framework in place for monitoring the implementation of the policy/procedure and regularly reviewing and updating it. Institution-wide procedures should be monitored and reviewed at the institutional level, often as part of the implementation/review process for the main policy. For devolved areas of policy/procedure, it should be clear who has responsibility for the monitoring/review process, where final sign-off lies, and how any changes are fed back into the review of the main admissions policy.

In addition to monitoring and reviewing each devolved procedure *in situ*, HE providers should consider regularly reviewing the full range of devolved procedures across the institution. This review process could serve several functions:

- identify and draw attention to examples of good practice that might be beneficially spread and shared throughout the institution. These could feed into departmental reviews of policy and procedure or be used to compile institution-level good practice statements like those outlined in §2.3.
- help bring a wider evidence base and peer review into evaluation of departmental practice, to improve efficiency, identify redundant procedures and suggest new approaches
- assess the degree of divergence in policy or procedure between different departments and the rationale for such divergence
- identify any instances of convergent practice, where two or more departments are following separate but effectively identical policies/procedures

This review process would provide an opportunity to harmonise admissions practice across the institution, identifying where variation is adding value and based on genuine difference in requirements. Here the provider could affirm the value of divergent procedure in that area, and work to ensure that the different procedures are all in alignment with institutional admissions policy. One approach might be to secure agreement between departments on a set of good practice indicators that should feature across the institution (as outlined in §2.3).

Where differences in procedure between departments are relatively trivial or arbitrary, however, providers should consider whether those departments could work together to agree a single, shared procedure. This would not be intended to take admissions responsibility away from the

⁶ Or faculties, schools, colleges etc. – the principles outlined here apply at all levels of devolution as well as to policies covering admissions to different modes or levels of study or to harmonising admissions policy with other institutional level policies.

individual departments (and could, for example, include an annual opt-out option), but to reduce administrative overheads and minimise barriers for applicants trying to understand the admissions process.

Such shared procedures would not have to be shared across all departments, but providers may identify groups of departments who could usefully work together to coordinate their policy and procedure. This may be easier where such groupings naturally align with administrative structures (e.g. coordinating practice across all departments within a faculty), but need not be restricted to such instances. Where different procedures are required for each course, so be it, but where five variations on procedure might serve the whole institution, this has obvious benefits for the transparency of the admissions process.

The purpose of this review should not be to push a centralisation agenda. There can be very good reasons for divergent admissions practices within an institution and SPA recognises the value and validity of devolved admissions systems.⁷ Rather, the intended outcome would be a harmonised approach to devolved admissions with different procedures adding value, operating in alignment with institutional admission policy, and recognisably a part of the whole.

4. What should the admissions policy cover?

This section provides guidance on the processes and issues that should be defined or addressed by admissions policy and procedural documents. SPA recommends that HE providers have written policy and procedure covering all these areas, as well as ensuring that applicants have access to appropriate levels of information and guidance on each point.

However, this is not intended to be a comprehensive list – each provider should give careful consideration to their processes and practices, and decide what else they may need to include. Wherever a particular process or practice is carried out within recruitment, selection or admissions, it would be good practice to have a documented policy and procedure.

HE providers may find this section of the good practice statement of particular use when developing or reviewing admissions policy and procedures, and SPA recommends that it is read in combination with the *QAA Quality Code*. To assist providers in assessing their current admissions policies and procedures, SPA also provides an [admissions policy checklist](#) and a [gap analysis tool](#) for Chapter B2 of the *QAA Quality Code*.

4.1. Identifying and structuring the document

An HE provider's admissions policy should be immediately identifiable as such – readers may have come to the document via a search engine, or been passed a printed copy, and so the document will need to stand on its own. The title page or introductory paragraphs should:

- name the HE provider and identify the document as admissions policy
- outline the scope of the policy – undergraduate and/or postgraduate, full-time and/or part-time, internally and/or externally delivered etc. (providers with multiple policies may wish to provide links to their other policies)
- specify when the policy was approved, and/or the admissions cycle to which it applies
- identify any partner institutions to which the admissions policy also applies

SPA recommends that HE providers structure their admissions policy and procedural documents clearly, with headings and subheadings that make it easy for readers unfamiliar with the document

⁷ For more information about centralised and devolved admissions, see www.spa.ac.uk/resources/admissions-operations

to locate the information they require. For longer documents (more than a few pages), a table of contents may be appropriate.

Where some matters of policy or procedure are handled separately (e.g. in a 'staff handbook'), providers should consider linking to this additional information from within the admissions policy document. See §2.3, above, for further consideration of what level of procedural detail to include within the admissions policy document.

4.2. Core elements of the admissions policy

SPA anticipates that the primary admissions policy (or policies, if these differ between levels and modes of study) for each HE provider will contain all of the below elements, regardless of the approach taken with regard to details of procedure.

4.2.1 High-level statement

SPA recommends beginning the admissions policy with a high-level statement that underlies and informs all of the provider's activities with regard to widening participation/access, recruitment, selection and admissions. This should be a general expression of the provider's commitment to the fair admission of students and should indicate the qualities, skills and knowledge the provider looks for when assessing applicants.

The statement may be drawn from the provider's charter or other founding document, and will reflect its mission statement, strategic plan and other strategic-level documents. It should include the provider's commitment to fair access for all applicants.

4.2.2 Principles

In addition to the high-level statement, which is likely to be only one or two sentences, HE providers should include further principles that underpin their admissions policy and practice. These should include general statements declaring:

- the provider's commitment to applicants and the applicant process, to transparency and consistency, and to providing a good applicant experience
- a commitment to equal consideration of all applicants applying by the relevant deadline (as detailed in UCAS/CUKAS guidance for undergraduate full-time programmes, or the provider's own established deadline for part-time, postgraduate etc.)
- support and commitment at a senior level for recruitment, admissions and widening participation/access, placing these at the core of the provider's activities
- the qualifications, knowledge, competencies, qualities and skills that applicants should have (with reference to where more detailed information on entry requirements may be found)
- how the provider assesses merit and potential – e.g. qualification results, admission tests, interviews, contextual data, references (some indication of the relative weighting of different factors may be helpful here)
- the process for considering and assessing applications, including how decisions are made and where responsibility for decision-making lies (centralised or devolved, decisions made by academics or administrators etc.), how policies and procedures operate at the level of the admissions decision-makers, and likely timescales under which an applicant may, for example, be required to undertake additional assessment (e.g. interviews, admissions tests), or receive a decision
- the provider's commitment to handling complaints, appeals and reviews of admission decisions appropriately, professionally and within a given framework
- a commitment to ensuring coherent practice and implementation of policy across the institution

HE providers may also wish to include or link to policies related to student retention and success and the delivery of a high-quality, attractive student experience.

4.2.3 Compliance with codes and regulations

HE providers should affirm their compliance with legal and statutory obligations – this may be as simple as a brief sentence or paragraph asserting compliance with all relevant legislation, or may be discussed in more detail, as deemed appropriate by the provider.

Providers may wish to make particular mention of equal opportunities legislation, noting (for example):

- a commitment to equal opportunities in admissions
- staff are aware of equal opportunities policy and alert to the risk of unconscious bias
- recruitment patterns are monitored to check for indirect discrimination

Providers may also wish to declare explicitly their commitment to the Data Protection Act 1998, and state:

- why data is collected and how it will be used (i.e. for admissions and student records)
- that information may have to be released to police, the Home Office, local authorities, DWP etc. as appropriate and to prevent or detect fraud
- how to make a Subject Access Request, including contact details
- a commitment to UCAS's data protection agreement (where appropriate)

Institutions may also wish to declare their compliance with or consultation of other external guidance or regulations, including (as appropriate):

- QAA's UK Quality Code for Higher Education
- UCAS's guidance and manuals for institutions
- the requirements of relevant accrediting professional bodies
- SPA's good practice guidance
- the Schwartz report's principles of fair admissions

4.2.4 Related policies and procedures, and regulations

In addition to the admissions policy itself, HE providers will have a range of other policies and procedures that impinge upon the applicant experience and may provide guidance on actions to be taken by the applicant, school or college, or the institution's own staff.

These may include, for example, policies on students with disabilities, on accreditation of prior learning, equality and diversity policy, accommodation policies. Providing links to these from within the admissions policy itself, or from the webpage on which the policy is hosted, may be beneficial.

Where certain matters of admissions policy or procedure are not detailed in the documents, it would be appropriate to link to them or provide clear information about where further information can be found. For example, in most cases it will be impractical to provide full information about entry requirements within the admissions policy, though a general statement about entry requirements may still be useful. In such cases, the policy should indicate where a greater level of detail can be found (usually in course listings on the admissions website and in the prospectus).

As a general rule of thumb, an applicant with access to the admissions policy should be able to find information on all of the points listed here, either within the policy itself or through following a path clearly indicated by the policy document.

4.2.5 Responsibility for admissions and review of the policy

The admissions policy should clearly indicate who has approval for the policy and when it was last reviewed. It should affirm the provider's commitment to periodic review of the policy (ideally at once a year) and indicate the intended date for the next review. Providers may wish to include contact details for any enquiries about the policy or related procedures.

The policy should outline or link to related information on:

- the remit and responsibilities of the committee or individual responsible for oversight of the admissions process
- how policy will be implemented and how practices will be monitored to ensure they follow the policy and procedures
- a commitment to identifying and addressing the training needs of admissions staff

Where responsibilities for some areas of recruitment, selection or admissions are devolved, providers may wish to clarify which bodies or individuals have responsibility for:

- setting entry requirements
- making decisions on applications
- ensuring cross-institutional consistency
- specific functions (e.g. fee status assessment, running DBS checks)

Where all admissions functions are centralised, providers may wish simply to note this in the main policy document.

Further guidance on developing, implementing and reviewing policy can be found in Section 3 of this document.

4.2.6 Progression/articulation agreements

HE providers that are committed to providing progression opportunities or articulation with advanced standing from particular approved programmes or institutions should have specific documentation detailing each arrangement. The provider's admissions policy should outline the basic principles that will be followed in establishing progression or articulation agreements, and link to further information on the process and on the agreements that are in place. Principles may include commitments to:

- maintaining good channels of communication with partners and ensuring they have up-to-date information about admissions policy and about relevant programmes of study
- supporting partners in providing good quality and current information, advice and guidance to prospective applicants wishing to progress/articulate
- monitoring arrangements to ensure that they are operating successfully and fairly, and remain in line with the provider's admissions policy
- (for articulation agreements) monitoring and assessing the programme studied at the partner institution and its suitability for supporting entrance with advanced standing

The admissions policy may also specify which individuals or bodies have responsibility for scrutiny of progression and articulation agreements, and provide details of who to contact with any related enquiries.

Further information and support with regard to progression agreements is available through the [SPA website](#).

4.2.7 Collaborative partnerships with other HE providers

Where an HE provider has a collaborative partnership arrangement with one or more other HE providers (either within the UK, the EU or internationally), the associated agreement should detail

the admissions processes for included programmes. These should be consistent with the provider's admissions policy and regularly monitored and reviewed. Providers may wish to briefly affirm this commitment in the main admissions policy document and provide a link to further information.

SPA recommends that providers participating in collaborative partnerships review Chapter B10 of the QAA *Quality Code*, [Managing higher education provision with others](#), when developing their policy, and particularly Indicator 14:

Degree-awarding bodies clarify which organisation is responsible for admitting and registering a student to modules or programmes delivered with others, and ensure that admissions are consistent with their own admissions policies. (B10, p. 32)

The QAA *Quality Code* stipulates that the HE provider responsible for awarding a degree retains responsibility for approving admissions criteria, and must stipulate where responsibility lies both for decision-making and for management of the admissions process. Arrangements must be fit for purpose, consistent with the provider's overarching admissions policy and recorded in the formal written arrangements.

4.2.8 Use of intermediaries/external agents

Where HE providers have contracts with external agents to provide some functions relating to recruitment, selection and admissions (e.g. an advice and application service for prospective international applicants), there should be clear outlines of the provider's expectations and any service level agreements within the contract. The admissions policy should indicate (or link to information on):

- who manages the provider's relationship with external agencies
- a commitment to (and processes for) ensuring that agency staff are appropriately trained and operate in alignment with the provider's admissions policy
- a commitment to monitoring and regular review of the arrangements

4.3. Enquiries and information, advice and guidance for applicants

4.3.1 Policy on provision of information, advice and guidance

HE providers should be committed to providing high quality, up-to-date and accurate information, advice and guidance (IAG) to applicants and their advisors, and may wish to include a brief statement to this effect within their admissions policy. A more detailed approach might note who has responsibility for producing/updating the provider's prospectus and admissions website, and outline the provider's commitment to:

- keeping IAG accurate and current
- publishing entry requirements in the prospectus and online in a manner that is clear and accessible to applicants and their advisors
- providing the prospectus and other relevant information in alternative formats (e.g. Braille, Welsh)
- maintaining the accuracy of external sources of IAG, e.g. UCAS Entry Profiles, Key Information Sets

Situations will arise where HE providers find it necessary to make changes to the content or delivery of some programmes, their entry requirements or other matters of admissions policy after the publication and distribution of printed materials, such as the prospectus. Providers may wish to reserve the right to make post-publication changes in their admissions policy, affirming that such changes will only be made where reasonable and necessary and committing to keeping online

information up-to-date. If appropriate, providers may wish to outline communication strategies for highlighting any substantive changes (e.g. email alerts for schools and colleges).

HE providers should give careful consideration to what information will be needed by or of interest to applicants and advisors, and specifically to what will help applicants to make informed choices. In particular, providers should ensure that applicants can access clear information (not necessarily within the admissions policy) on:

- the content and delivery of programmes
- the application process, how prospective applicants will be assessed, and the obligations placed on applicants
- the timescale for admissions, including any relevant deadlines for applicants and when they can expect to receive key communications (e.g. acknowledgement that an application has been received, offer of a place, transition and enrolment information etc.)
- the costs associated with study and details of any financial support or bursaries available to students (including any support specific to widening participation/access students)
- any financial support available during the admissions process, e.g. to cover the costs of travel to interview or bursaries/fee waivers for admissions tests

4.3.2 Policy on applicant (and other) enquiries

HE providers may wish to include a brief statement outlining their policy on responding to applicant and other enquiries, received by phone, email, post or other channels (e.g. social media). This may be a simple commitment to responding to all enquiries with accurate and clear information, or might include detail about likely timescales for responses and where to target enquiries on different topics (e.g. should enquiries about course content be directed to the main admissions office or to the relevant department?).

HE providers may also wish to include contact details for the main admissions office and alternative contact details for specific enquiries – for example, enquiries about support for students with disabilities might be best directed to a central disability resources office in the first instance.

4.4. Application process

Transparency in the application process lies at the heart of fair admissions, and it is vital that admissions policies and procedures are clearly defined and information about them made available to applicants and their advisors. This is particularly addressed by Indicator 6 of the *QAA Quality Code*:

Higher education providers make clear to prospective students how the recruitment, selection and admission process will be conducted and what prospective students have to do. (B2, p. 14)

SPA recommends that HE providers give careful thought to policy, procedure and applicant information surrounding the application process, and pay particular attention to the requirements of the relevant sections of the *QAA Quality Code*. The areas highlighted below should be addressed within admissions policy and procedure, but each provider must also consider any additional aspects of their application process that they may need to cover.

4.4.1 General information about the application process

The admissions policy should specify the application route for each level or mode of study covered by the policy, and note any application fees. Providers that are charging a fee for a particular application route, or requiring a deposit, should note the *QAA Quality Code*'s requirement that they

explain to applicants what is covered by the fee and the circumstances under which it might be refunded, as well as having procedures for keeping records of fees or deposits paid.

HE providers may wish to provide general statements here about how applications will be assessed or declaring their commitment to:

- providing good quality IAG on the application process and assessment methods
- assessing applications to selective courses equally and fairly as part of a gathered field
- processing applications efficiently
- maintaining clear and helpful communication with applicants throughout the application process

HE providers should have a policy in place on how they consider multiple applications from the same individual, both within and across admissions cycles, and particularly note whether parallel applications to different programmes will be considered independently. Policy on this issue may differ with levels or modes of study, or even with specific programmes, and this should be clearly indicated in the admissions policy.

4.4.2 Entry requirements

Many applicants will make decisions on subject choices for pre-HE qualifications considerably in advance of the year in which they apply to higher education programmes, and guidance from HE providers on required and desirable subjects for each programme has an important role to play in informing this process, as well as helping applicants and their advisors to decide which providers and programmes they should consider applying to.

Consequently, HE providers should publish the entry requirements for each of their programmes in a clear and accessible manner and as early as is realistically possible. Prospectuses are often produced 18 or more months before the applicants are likely to be admitted, and many providers will update information on their own website and third-party websites (e.g. UCAS Entry Profiles) at around the same time.

Undergraduate full-time applicants will normally start applying through UCAS from the beginning of September for entry the following September/October, and should have access to accurate and up-to-date information ahead of this. SPA therefore recommends that entry requirements are agreed, fixed and published on providers' websites and in UCAS Entry Profiles by no later than 31 July for entry the following year. This may also provide a useful cut-off date for determining entry requirements for postgraduate and part-time courses, though applicants will often wait until later in the year before applying.

It is understood that developments both within an institution and at a national level may require changes to these requirements over this 18-month period, but SPA considers it good practice to keep to published entry requirements wherever possible. Where changes are required, these should be clearly publicised and any online information updated promptly (see also §4.3.1). Providers may wish to indicate in their printed materials that applicants should refer to the admissions website for definitive, up-to-date information on entry requirements. They may also wish to explicitly reserve the right to alter published entry requirements and to indicate what factors may drive such changes.

Changes to entry requirements in the middle of an application cycle are contrary to the principle of equal consideration and should only be made in the most exceptional circumstances. Providers should only make such changes with the agreement of the most senior appropriate officer or committee in the institution and should publicise widely both the change and the reason it was necessary.

In most cases it will not be feasible to provide full details of entry requirements within the admissions policy, and SPA anticipates that HE providers will instead link to programme-specific requirements laid out on the admissions website and in the prospectus.

However, providers may wish to note the following (in greater or lesser detail, as appropriate) within their admissions policy:

- any institution-wide entry requirements
- whether use is made of the UCAS Tariff (where relevant)
- how international and non-standard qualifications are considered and their equivalency determined
- whether notarised transcripts are required for qualifications not certificated in English
- whether prior experiential learning is considered as an indication of ability, and if so how
- any English/Welsh language requirements and when they are waived (e.g. if the applicant has attained suitably advanced qualifications examined in the relevant language)
- any policy the provider has on resitting examinations, including whether all grades will be considered or only the resit grade
- a commitment to regular review of entry requirements to ensure parity of requirements between qualifications and consider whether additional qualifications may be included within published entry requirements.

HE providers may also wish to reserve the right to assess prior attainment within the context of academic judgement and discretion, while affirming their commitment to fair and consistent consideration of all applicants.

4.4.3 Contextualised admissions

HE providers should have a clear policy on the use of contextual data and information in admissions. An increasing number of institutions are making use of contextualised admissions processes to widen participation and maintain excellence, and there is an ever-growing evidence base to support the use of contextual data in assessing merit and potential to succeed in higher education. The [SPA website](#) provides substantial resources to support the implementation and refinement of contextualised admissions.

The *QAA Quality Code* specifically stipulates that:

Higher education providers that use contextual data and information in recruitment, selection and admission are open and transparent about what data and information are being used, for what purposes and with what intended outcomes. (B2, p. 8)

HE providers that make use of contextualised data or information should state this explicitly in their admissions policy, noting its relevance to fair and valid assessment of applicant merit and further stipulating here or elsewhere:

- what contextual data and information is considered and how it is determined (e.g. information declared by the applicant in their application, school data provided by UCAS)
- if linked data is used, where the data is sourced from and how it is linked to the application (e.g. publicly available POLAR3 data linked onto the applicant's home postcode)
- how contextual data and information contributes to assessment of the applicant, including any processes for flagging applicants falling into specific categories, adjusting applicant scores or guaranteeing an offer or interview
- whether consideration is given to declarations of 'extenuating circumstances', including how to make such a declaration, what circumstances will be considered and in what way, and whether additional information or confirmation may be requested from third parties such as

the applicant's school or referee (providers must secure permission from the applicant before consulting a third party)

Where an HE provider does not consider contextual data or information when assessing applications, they may wish to briefly state this and outline their rationale.

4.4.4 Interviews, admissions tests and portfolios

The admissions policy should make it clear whether additional assessments – in the form of interviews, internally or externally administered admissions tests, auditions, submission of portfolios etc. – form part of the application process for some or all of their programmes. Where some programmes do require such assessment, it should be clear to applicants where they should go to find the requirements for the programme they are interested (e.g. course information on the provider's website, UCAS Entry Profiles).

Providers should clearly indicate to students what additional assessments are used, what knowledge, skills or ability they are intended to assess, and how their outcomes feed into the decision-making process. Providers should pay particular note to the *QAA Quality Code's* guidance:

Where the selection of students uses information not captured on the application form, such as interviews, auditions, additional tests, or portfolios, higher education providers explain clearly to prospective students what these selection tools entail, why they are being used and the contribution they make to the selection decision, while maintaining the right to exercise academic judgement in selection. (B2, p. 16)

In addition, providers should have a procedure for periodic monitoring of all additional assessments to evaluate their continuing effectiveness and fairness as a selection tool. This monitoring should feed into the provider's overarching review of admissions policy and practice, and will help the provider maintain its commitment to the principle of valid and reliable assessment of applicants.

For programmes requiring interviews or auditions, HE providers may also wish to affirm explicitly their commitment to the following (and any other relevant) principles:

- applicants selected for interview will be given detailed information ahead of the interview (providers should also give consideration to what information, advice and guidance about interviews could be provided through their printed publications, admissions website and outreach and recruitment activities)
- staff conducting interviews are fully trained and experienced
- interviews are conducted in line with principles of equal opportunities policy, and efforts made to meet any specific requirements that applicants may have on the interview/audition day
- reasonable effort will be made for alternate arrangements where travel to the provider proves impractical

Where programmes require the submission of portfolios, written work or audition videos, HE providers should be particularly conscious of the time required by applicants to prepare this work, and particularly of the fact that applicants may be preparing multiple portfolios/written exercises/audition videos for applications to different programmes. Providers should therefore ensure that applicants and their advisors have access to detailed information on the requirements for any submission and what assessors are looking for, at the earliest practical opportunity.

In some areas, it may also be helpful for institutions to specifically identify the staff who will be assessing submitted work or conducting auditions. In such instances, however, SPA anticipates that providers will wish to affirm the objectivity of any assessment and reassure applicants that considerations will be of merit and potential rather than matters of personal taste.

Providers making use of admissions tests – whether internally or externally administered – should ensure that their use is appropriate and providing useful additional information about applicants. Particular care should be taken to ensure transparency in the use of tests, and providers should give applicants and their advisors access to detailed information about the content and assessment methods of any tests, particularly those that are internally run. Providers should consider using the term ‘test’ in the name of the assessment.

When considering their policy on use of additional assessments, HE providers may wish to make use of SPA’s good practice guidance on [interviews](#), on [admissions tests](#).

4.4.5 Programmes requiring enhanced disclosure

HE providers that offer one or more programmes for which an enhanced disclosure of criminal convictions is required should ensure that they have appropriate procedures in place for handling this process. All providers should also have a robust policy on what to do when an applicant (to any programme) indicates that they have a relevant criminal conviction (see below, §4.6.4).

Where some programmes do require enhanced disclosure from the relevant authority – the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), Disclosure Scotland or Access NI – the admissions policy should:

- clearly indicate the programmes for which disclosures are required
- outline the provider’s policy and procedure, or link to a separate policy on this matter
- note the potential consequences of a positive result in the disclosure (e.g. restrictions being placed on the student, the offer being withdrawn)

HE providers may wish to consult SPA’s [Criminal Convictions: Statement for Good Practice - Issues and Recommendations for admission to higher education courses and programmes](#) when developing or reviewing their policy on enhanced disclosures.

4.4.6 Decisions and offers

HE providers should be committed to expeditious communication of decisions to applicants and should state this within the admissions policy. Applicants should have access to clear information about how the decision-making process will run and the timescale for decisions. Some providers may wish to indicate a specific standard turnaround time or deadline for decisions.

The admissions policy should state the provider’s commitment to ensuring that offers made are clear and easy to understand, and consistent with published entry requirements. Where providers are likely to make offers that differ from any advertised ‘standard offer’ – for example, to promote widening participation or as part of a contextualised admissions process – they should indicate in the admissions policy when and why such offers might be made. It would be helpful to link to applicant information on any related matters (e.g. contextualised admissions policy).

Where providers will consider unsuccessful applicants for alternative courses – either automatically or on request – the admissions policy should outline how this process will work, and particularly any communication with, or need for input from, the applicant.

Providers should commit to providing successful applicants with clear information about the next steps after receiving an offer. It would be good practice to provide generic information in the public domain (e.g. on the admissions website), so that applicants and advisors can consider it in advance, but also to accompany any offer made with more tailored information.

Providers should consider the contractual implications of the offer-making process, and may wish to take legal advice on these issues. SPA draws the attention of providers to the recent Office of Fair Trading report on [Higher Education in England](#):

There appears to be scope for improving access to terms and conditions. One option would be for institutions to send terms and conditions (along with summaries of additional charges and financial support) to students when an offer is made. When, in what form, and the fairness of the way in which terms are communicated to students is an issue that the CMA [Competition and Markets Authority] could explore in further detail as part of a compliance review. (§4.36)

SPA is currently working with HE providers to develop good practice and other resources with regard to offer-making, and these will be available shortly through the SPA website.

4.4.7 Meeting offer conditions, Confirmation, Clearing and Adjustment

HE providers should clearly outline their policy and procedures for applicants meeting and failing to meet conditions of a conditional offer, including Confirmation, Clearing and/or Adjustment processes for full-time undergraduate applicants, and any equivalent processes used for other levels or modes of study.

For applicants meeting the terms of their conditional offer, the admissions policy should indicate the institution's commitment to maintaining a high-quality applicant experience throughout transition and enrolment. It may also be helpful to outline or link to information on the next steps in the process.

For applicants not meeting offer conditions, the policy should outline:

- the process for considering whether or not to accept these applicants, including an indication of whether any contextual factors (including extenuating circumstances or interruption to examinations) feed into their considerations
- any specific definitions of 'near miss' applicants who will be given particular consideration (for example, if applicants missing their offer by a single A level grade or a specified number of UCAS tariff points will be considered ahead of those missing their offers by greater amounts)
- whether consideration is given to making unsuccessful applicants offers on alternative courses – institutions should clearly indicate that no obligation to accept this alternative offer would be placed on the applicant
- who offer-holders should contact for further information on this process, or to apply for consideration of extenuating circumstances, and any specific helplines or online resources that are provided during the Confirmation period

Providers who participate in Clearing and/or Adjustment (for full-time undergraduate courses) should be aware that applicants and their advisors may be under a significant amount of stress and have relatively little time to research policy and procedure during the Clearing/Adjustment process. While it is still important to have clear statements on Clearing/Adjustment policy within the admissions policy, providers may wish to ensure this information is advertised prominently on the admissions website and anywhere else appropriate during the summer. This information might include:

- where places will be advertised and how up-to-date this information will be (online information should be kept as close to 'live' as possible)
- an outline of the Clearing/Adjustment application process and timescale, and (where appropriate) information on entry requirements for specific programmes
- details of any additional applicant support services made available – including telephone helplines, provision of specific online or printed information – and any events (e.g. open days, campus tours) run during this period

Where Clearing applicants and Adjustment applicants are subject to different policies or procedures, this should be clearly indicated.

4.4.8 Deferred entry

HE providers should indicate their policy with regard to considering applications for deferred entry to their programmes, and should outline or link to information on:

- whether deferred entry is considered for the provider's programmes (providers should consider giving their rationale if deferred entry is not permitted)
- any specific programmes for which deferred entry is not available and a commitment to highlighting this restriction in relevant printed and online course information
- how a request for deferred entry should be made and any relevant deadlines
- that equal consideration is given to deferred entry applications
- if deferral is limited to a single year
- that offer conditions must be met by the end of the application cycle

4.4.9 APL/APEL for entry or for advanced standing

The admissions policy should make clear the provider's stance on Accredited Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), Accredited Prior Learning (APL), Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL) or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). In particular, the policy should outline the extent to which institutions consider prior certificated or experiential learning with regard to:

- meeting the requirements for entry to a programme
- accreditation of prior learning for advanced standing on the programme

For the sake of clarity, HE providers may wish to deal with these two issues separately in their admissions policy, or linking to separate policy documents on each. It is worth noting that Chapter B2 of the *QAA Quality Code* only covers the first of these issues – accreditation for advanced standing lies within the remit of Chapter B6, and providers may wish to consult this chapter when reviewing their policy.

In either case, the policy should indicate or link to information on who will decide if knowledge and skill requirements have been met and how this will be determined. Providers may also wish to make some general statements about how their criteria might be met – for example, by having undertaken a satisfactory portion of an appropriate programme of study.

Where there is a policy for accreditation or advanced standing, providers should clarify:

- how applicants should request accreditation or advanced standing
- how the appropriate level of credit will be determined and by whom
- whether specific advanced standing entry points are available and any limitations on these
- whether applicants should apply through the standard application route

Further advice on issues surrounding prior learning may be found in SPA's good practice guidance on [vocational learning](#).

4.4.10 Document verification and fraud

HE providers should have a clear policy on the verification of original documents (both academic and personal) used in applications, and on handling of any suspected fraud, whether detected internally or externally (e.g. by UCAS's Fraud and Verification Unit). This policy should cover:

- when original documents will be reviewed, which documents will be reviewed, and by whom
- what actions will be taken if information is found to be fraudulent, inconsistent or missing

- reserving the right to pass information to interested parties (UCAS, sponsors, recruitment agencies, UKBA) where an application is deemed to be fraudulent
- the process and timescale for appealing any decision to cancel an application on the basis of fraud
- where relevant, information about UCAS's policy on fraudulent or misleading information, and UCAS's Fraud and Verification Unit

HE providers that do not intend to verify documents until the point of matriculation/enrolment should consider carefully the potential impact on applicants should they wish to withdraw an offer after the student has arrived at the institution, and may wish to take counsel on any potential legal ramifications of this process.

4.5. Feedback on applications

Although the QAA Quality Code does not require that HE providers give feedback to unsuccessful applicants, it does state the following under Indicator 8:

Higher education providers give careful consideration to how they inform prospective students that their application has been unsuccessful. Higher education providers determine the nature and extent of feedback to be made available to unsuccessful applicants, whether such feedback is available routinely or on request only and whether there are time limits to requesting feedback. (B2, p. 17)

SPA strongly urges HE providers to offer feedback wherever possible. Good-quality, constructive feedback provides closure for applicants and allows them to be better prepared for future applications or interviews, and also offers HE providers an opportunity to enhance their reputation, improve the applicant experience and potentially reduce the number of complaints or queries received from disappointed applicants.

HE providers should clearly state their policy on feedback within their admissions policy and either include or link to detailed information on the procedure and timescale for providing feedback. If feedback is only available on request, it should be clear to applicants what they need to do to request feedback and whether a third party may request it on their behalf.

Where providers are unable or choose not to give feedback on decisions (either across the institution or for certain programmes), they should be transparent about the reasons why it is not offered, and suggest what other action disappointed applicants might take to review and improve their application.

HE providers may wish to consult SPA's good practice guidance on [Feedback to Unsuccessful Applicants](#), as well as the relevant section of the *QAA Quality Code*, when developing and reviewing their appeals and complaints policy.

4.6. Specific applicant groups

HE providers should consider whether there are areas of policy or procedure that are specific to particular groups of applicants and how they make this clear within their policy documents. One approach is to have specific subsections of the admissions policy or supplemental policy documents highlighting these particular policy and procedural matters. This has a clear benefit to transparency in allowing applicants (or their advisors) to quickly identify any issues that apply to them.

Providers who choose instead to incorporate such policy statements or procedures into their main admissions policy may wish to consider how they will guide applicants to the information most relevant to them. They could, for example, provide specific guides for different groups of applicants

on their admissions website, that highlight any particular issues or processes relevant to their application and assuage any concerns they may have.

In some cases, there may be no particular policies or procedures associated with an applicant group – for example, mature applicants may be treated in exactly the same way as standard age applicants. HE providers may still wish to include a brief statement to this effect, to reassure applicants and forestall enquiries or further searches for information.

The list of applicant groups in this section should not be considered exhaustive. Each HE provider should take care to identify and outline the needs of any subset of their applicant cohort for whom specific policies, procedures or support/information are required.

In determining policy and procedure for specific groups of applicants, providers should take care to ensure their practices are not discriminatory or unfair, particularly with regard to the protected characteristics defined by the Equality Act 2010. Providers should consult their own Diversity or Equality Offices on these matters (where available), or the Equality Challenge Unit ([ECU](#)) may also be able to offer advice and help.

4.6.1 Young applicants and mature applicants

HE providers should clearly indicate whether they accept applications from students who will be under the age of 18 at the point of entry, and indicate any lower thresholds they may have for applicant or student age. Where professional requirements or other factors (e.g. arrangements for placements) impose age limits on particular programmes, this should be clearly indicated in the admissions policy and highlighted in course information for the relevant programmes.

Providers should also indicate (or link to information on) any ways in which the student experience of young applicants will differ from that of older students – for example, if students must be 18 or older to stay in halls of residence or participate in particular activities. They should also outline any specific support in place for young students.

HE providers should consider whether there are any policies or procedures that specifically apply to mature applicants. If there are, these should be outlined and a clear definition of a ‘mature applicant’ provided. Any programme-specific restrictions on the upper age of applicants should be highlighted both in admissions policy and in course information.

As noted above, where there is no distinction between ‘standard age’ and ‘mature’ applicants, providers may wish simply to affirm their commitment to welcoming applicants of all ages. Where providers are willing to consider prior experiential learning as well as formal qualifications, they may wish to highlight this here.

4.6.2 Care leavers

Providers may wish to include within their admissions policy a brief statement affirming their commitment to supporting students who are care leavers and outlining any specific support mechanisms they have in place (e.g. guaranteed year-round accommodation). Providers may also wish to link to information on any support provided to applicants throughout their application and transition.

Providers that use care-leaver status for contextualised admissions purposes should clarify how this data is collected and confirmed (e.g. whether a self-declaration through the UCAS application is followed up directly with the applicant), and how it is used in the decision-making process. This should be covered by the policy on use of contextual data/information in admissions generally, but providers may also wish to note it in any information specific to care leavers.

4.6.3 Applicants with disabilities or specific learning needs

All providers should – within their admissions policy and/or in their information for potential applicants, applicants and their advisors – declare their commitment to welcoming applications from prospective students with disabilities or specific learning needs, and reassure applicants that they will be given equal consideration on the basis of their academic merit and potential.

The policy should explain why information about disabilities and specific learning needs is collected and how it is used – specifically, that it helps the provider to identify support needs but does not contribute to the academic decision over whether to make the applicant an offer. The policy (or a linked-to policy specifically on this issue) should identify:

- which body or individual is responsible for considering the applicant's support needs
- the timescale, and specifically whether this consideration will take place before or after the issuing of offers to applicants
- how and when applicants will be contacted to discuss their support needs

Providers may also wish to link to further resources or information for applicants with disabilities, or to provide contact details for any enquiries.

SPA anticipates that it should be rare for an HE provider to be unable to meet an applicant's support needs by making reasonable adjustments. However, it is a foreseeable possibility that the provider may need to withdraw an offer from time to time – either because support needs were only assessed after offers were issued, or because an applicant only discloses a disability after receiving the offer. All providers should therefore have a clearly defined policy on this issue, including:

- how the relevant terms in the contract to admit will be presented to and accessed by applicants
- measures for documenting that all reasonable adjustments were considered before withdrawing the offer
- measures for identifying appropriate alternative programmes internally
- measures for supporting the applicant in securing an appropriate alternative programme with another provider
- additional compensatory measures
- channels for complaint should the applicant be dissatisfied

Providers may also wish to review SPA's more detailed good practice guidance on [consideration of disability support needs](#). Providers may also wish to seek clarity on disability support from their own legal advisors and/or discuss their approach with the Equality Challenge Unit ([ECU](#)).

4.6.4 Applicants declaring criminal convictions

All providers should have a robust policy on what to do when an applicant (to any programme) indicates that they have a relevant criminal conviction. This is in addition to policy or procedure for any programmes for which an enhanced disclosure is required (see above, §4.4.5).

The admissions policy should indicate:

- who is responsible for considering the relevance and impact of any convictions declared
- what factors are considered within this context (e.g. duty of care to students and staff, the rights of both the provider and the applicant, whether the conviction would bar entry to a related profession)
- when the criminal conviction is considered – good practice here would be to perform the academic assessment first and only assess criminal convictions for applicants to whom the provider intends to make an offer

- that information on applicants' criminal convictions is appropriately safeguarded and only made available to the relevant admissions staff

HE providers may wish to consult SPA's [Criminal Convictions: Statement for Good Practice - Issues and Recommendations for admission to higher education courses and programmes](#) when developing or reviewing their policy on applicants declaring criminal convictions.

4.6.5 International applicants

The admissions policy should contain or link to information on key issues impacting on international students. Since some of these issues – e.g. determination of fee status and English language requirements – actually apply to all applicants, or because applicants may not be clear about the definition of 'international' in this context, providers may wish to avoid placing this information in a specific 'international applicants' subsection of the policy.

It would, however, be advisable to ensure that information for applicants – e.g. the prospectus and the admissions website – collects together information that will be of particular relevance to international students in a clearly identifiable section. Such issues may include:

- who is responsible for determining fee status, how and when it is assessed, including a commitment to ensuring fee status eligibility will be consistent with UKCISA guidance
- a statement of compliance with UKBA regulations, an emphasis on the need for a Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS) and an outline of the related procedures, stressing any action required of applicants (e.g. completing a pre-CAS questionnaire); where relevant, providers may wish to declare their Highly Trusted Sponsor status
- whether international applicants should apply directly or through a third-party agent or either, and the details of any agencies working on behalf of the provider
- information about satisfying English language requirements, which may include a list of accepted qualifications

4.6.6 Refugees and asylum seekers

HE providers may wish to give consideration to any specific needs of refugees and asylum seekers in drafting and reviewing their admissions policy – for example, owing to the circumstances in which they had to leave their home, some refugee applicants may be unable to submit qualification certificates and require other arrangements to substantiate their claims. SPA has published [a guidance note](#) for recruitment and admissions staff that seeks to highlight some of these issues.

4.7. Changes to and discontinuation of programmes

SPA would not consider it good practice to make changes to or discontinue a programme of study during an application cycle, and particularly after applications have been received and/or offers made for that programme. However, in exceptional cases this may be necessary, and HE providers should have policies in place to deal with such cases.

For changes that occur before offers are made, providers should refer to the comments in Section 4.3.1, regarding information provided to applicants and their advisors. Providers should also have a policy in place for applications received after a course has been discontinued, which may cover whether any application fee charged by the provider will be recovered or whether a UCAS choice can be withdrawn.

Where changes are made or a programme is discontinued after applicants have been made an offer, the admissions policy should clearly outline what next steps will be taken. These should include:

- informing offer-holders of any significant changes or of discontinuation at the earliest appropriate opportunity (specifying who has responsibility for contacting the applicant)
- providing advice and support to offer-holders on the options available to them and their best course of action
- where appropriate, giving offer-holders help with securing an offer on a suitable alternative programme internally or at another institution

HE providers may also wish to outline likely factors that may lead to changes to or discontinuation of a programme.

4.8. Appeals and complaints procedure

The *QAA Quality Code* expects all HE providers to have professional procedures for handling appeals and complaints that ‘are fair and accessible ... conducted expeditiously and in accordance with a published timescale’ (B2, Indicator 3, p. 10). The *Code* specifically requires that applicants are informed ‘at the earliest appropriate opportunity’ about the availability of an appeal and complaints procedure and the timescale for handling any appeals or complaints that are received.

HE providers should either include their appeals and complaints procedure within the admissions policy or clearly link to a separate appeals and complaints procedure while simply stating their commitment to fair and professional handling of complaints in the admissions policy itself. Where admissions appeals and complaints procedures are included within a general student appeals and complaints policy, the relevant policy document (as well as the admissions policy) should make this clear.

HE providers may wish to consult SPA’s [Good Practice Statement on Applicant Complaints and Appeals](#), as well as the relevant section of the *QAA Quality Code*, when developing and reviewing their appeals and complaints policy.

5. Conclusion and institution examples

The production, dissemination and implementation of high-quality, comprehensive admissions policy and procedure is fundamental to running a fair, professional and transparent admissions process across all forms of HE provision. The good practice outlined in this document is designed to support HE providers in developing, enacting and reviewing their admissions policy and procedures, as are the related [checklist](#) and [gap analysis](#) tools.

SPA is always keen to assist HE providers in developing and reviewing their admissions policies and happy to review admissions policy documents, resources permitting, and highlight any potential areas of concern. Providers that wish to take advantage of this opportunity should contact enquiries@spa.ac.uk (tel: 01242 544891) in the first instance.

We also welcome your feedback on all aspects of this good practice statement and the associated tools. If you have any comments or queries – or would like to highlight additional good practice that you think we should cover here – please get in touch via enquiries@spa.ac.uk.

5.1. Institution examples

The following examples are drawn from HE providers’ publicly available admissions policies and procedures, and are for illustrative purposes only. Their inclusion in this list does not necessarily mean that SPA endorses the content or structure of these documents, and individual discretion is advised in deciding what elements, if any, to incorporate within your institution’s own admissions policy.

Aston University (UG and PG)

Comprehensive admissions policy, plus briefing sheet for teachers/advisors <http://www.aston.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/applying/admissions/>

Buckinghamshire New University (UG, PG, part-time and professional)

Comprehensive admissions policy, including mapping to (previous) B2 Indicators http://bucks.ac.uk/content/documents/Formal_Documents/Academic_Quality/Admissions_Policy_and_Procedures.pdf

Queen's University Belfast (UG)

Comprehensive admissions policy (UG-only) <http://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/StudentPlus/MarketingRecruitmentandAdmissions/admissions/UndergraduateAdmissions/AdmissionsPolicy/>

University College, London (UG and PG)

UG information for applicants <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/prospective-students/undergraduate/apply>

PG information for applicants <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/prospective-students/graduate/apply>

UG admissions policy <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/academic-manual/part-4/ug-admissions>

UG good practice <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/academic-manual/part-4/ug-recruitment-admissions>

PG admissions policy <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/academic-manual/part-4/graduate-admissions>

PG good practice <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/academic-manual/part-4/pg-recruitment-admissions>

University of Cambridge (UG)

Brief admissions policy <http://www.study.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/info/policy.html>

Staff handbook <https://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/admissions/handbook/>

Information for applicants <http://www.study.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/apply/>

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