



**Review of the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions
(SPA) Programme from 2012 and proposals for the future**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The Review

The review of Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) was commissioned by UCAS with the objectives of assessing the effectiveness, impact and value for money of the SPA programme from 2012 to present, the future demand for services and options for future funding and delivery.

SPA's mission is to promote fair admissions and access to higher education in the UK by developing and leading on good practice in the recruitment and selection of UK students. The broad objectives of SPA are to work with higher education providers (HEPs) and other stakeholders to provide a central resource to help HEPs develop and update their admissions practice and policies in order to enhance quality, transparency, reputation and fairness. SPA was set up in 2006 and is based at UCAS. Over the period 2012-13 to 2014-15 SPA funding is changing with Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funding reducing to zero, and UCAS funding increasing to cover the difference. The programme has a budget for 2014-15 of £410k, and employs a small team of 4 full-time and one 0.6 part-time members of staff working on the objectives plus one administrative support officer.

The review was both formative and summative in nature and drew on perspectives and feedback from across the sector. The fieldwork included interviews with SPA staff, partners and stakeholders (35 respondents), a qualitative interviews survey with a sample of HE staff (24 respondents), an online survey of HEPs (78 respondents) and a consultation workshop for admissions practitioners at the UCAS Annual Review Meeting (9 participants), resulting in 146 total responses. The sample included representatives from Scotland (15), Wales (6) and Northern Ireland (2).

2. Review of SPA

The review concludes that most users rate their experience of SPA very highly and overall the programme shows a high degree of effectiveness against the activities identified in the delivery plan. SPA is a shared resource and the success of the programme is generally attributed to the extensive expertise, understanding of the sector, and hard work and commitment of the small team. The team's depth of expertise and understanding in HE admissions is recognised and respected by HE admissions practitioners. SPA's approach has been 'non-judgemental' - offering examples of best practice and working with HEPs rather than prescribing directive solutions. They are in a position to get to grips with what is happening in HEPs and in a trusted position to find out about current admissions practices and to identify likely future trends.

The setting of objectives and workplan through the SPA Steering Group have underpinned the approach and seem a good mechanism to get consensus on how to prioritise the work given the range of needs and issues across the sector and UK nations. However, there are issues around the extent to which the programme has set and reported on 'SMART' indicators of success.¹ There are challenges in being able to identify clear outcome indicators given SPA is one contributor to good practice whose success relies on HEPs to implement the good practices without compulsion. However, SPA may benefit from greater scrutiny and stronger focus on collection of evidence of impact in the future. The SPA Steering Group could play a stronger role in supporting SPA in setting

¹ SMART refers to a planning process involving agreement of Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timebound indicators.

performance and outcome indicators and in ensuring that good practice is sufficiently evidenced based.

It was repeatedly reported that SPA is perceived as being independent, which supports buy-in from HEPs. This has meant that SPA has been in a position to act as 'broker' between admissions staff and policy makers and other stakeholders, such as UCAS and funding councils.

The review sought to conduct an assessment of SPA taking account of the impact across the diversity of HEPs in the sector, and locational differences related to the different policy contexts in the UK nations. There are differences in the take-up of SPA by types of HEPs and location. Differences in policy context have affected the focus of work, for example, contextualised admissions (CA) in Scotland is a requirement of Scottish Funding Council (SFC) policy on Outcome Agreements, as is the use of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) as part of these. SPAs work in Scotland has been working with HEPs to improve their understanding of how CA can be used, and lessons transferred to other parts of the UK (CA is not a requirement but is encouraged in England). The recent development of a 'Community of Practice' approach for HE in FE work has enabled SPA to engage more widely with FECs, and there may be further potential for this approach.

3. Future role of SPA in current context

Promoting fair admissions and access to higher education in the UK by developing and leading on good practice in the recruitment and selection of HE applicants has been the underlying aim of SPA. The HE landscape has changed and continues to change. Continued leadership in good practice is required in this field.

Whilst good practices were identified as the key focus in most cases, some respondents also saw a continuing need for SPA to play a role in helping HEPs to consider the implications, impact and response to the continuous policy and other changes occurring in HE, and in proactively anticipating where wider changes could impact on admissions. Guidance on good practice enables institutions to ensure they are managing applications fairly taking account of the principles established by the Swartz review and considering the applicant/student experience. SPA guidance and good practice is increasingly linked to SPA as a resource for advice on changes and change management.

Issues related to the need to address the potential risks of negative developments associated with the marketisation of HE featured heavily in the comments made by HEPs on the future role of SPA. Some point to a particular need for continuing support to admissions officers during a turbulent period in HE where the market-led environment is dominating admissions. There are opportunities for SPA linked particularly to supporting quality processes in HE. In the review many HEPs say the Schwartz Principles of fair admissions are more relevant than ever and their importance was recently confirmed in the revised Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Chapter B2.

Overall there appears to be an appetite for more strategic leadership of the fair admissions agenda i.e. more active promotion of good practice, and interest in the development of a shared, credible, and nationwide evidence base for fair admissions while acknowledging the institutional autonomy of HEPs over admissions policy and practice.

SPA is perceived to be at arms-length from particular interests and therefore is in a good position to support HEPs, working with funders and stakeholders to champion fair admissions and good

practice. The independence and autonomy of SPA has underpinned HEP buy-in. However, some respondents would like SPA to be more 'critical' and less 'friend' and to offer firmer directions on practice. There was also a desire for more evidence on the benefits of fair admissions practices for institutions and applicants.

A key challenge in the delivery of SPA's objectives is the increasing complexity of the work in admissions and related areas, which may make good practice harder to identify, and may require new ways of working for SPA. Moves to address these concerns include a new Toolkit among other things. At the same time, there was desire for SPA to continue paying attention to the context of different HEPs as well as different provider types in order to stay relevant across the UK.

4. Future demand for SPA services

The review sought feedback on demand for existing SPA provision (or those in current development) and looked at potential new types of support. Note respondents were asked about their likelihood of using different types of provision but this was not linked to whether or not the services would need to be paid for in future. Overall there is broad support for more of the same type of provision and the consensus view seems to be that SPA should continue to prioritise the production of good practice and then identify ways of bringing practitioners together that allows for sharing/discussion. No SPA services were identified to discontinue but there is potential for more 'ready to use' tools and modules to save HEPs effort, and increase consistency, coupled with a desire by HEPs to be more self-sufficient through improved tools. There is also some support for more engagement related to tackling risks emerging as a result of increased marketization and for building the evidence of different practices on fair admissions. Feedback on possible new areas of work for SPA suggests that the greatest demand is for:

- Workshops/discussion forums on admissions policies and practices (61% of online survey respondents would definitely be interested in using);
- A resource which provides advice on what constitutes fair admissions (60% would definitely be interested in using);
- A strategic level resource able to explore and help HEPs to respond to sector issues which affect admissions (60% would definitely be interested in using);
- Online training modules for admissions decision-makers (59% would definitely be interested in using, especially for new admissions staff and academics).

SPA could consider adapting materials for different audiences. In particular, briefer summaries of online guidance could be useful for communicating with senior managers in HEPs beyond admissions professionals including Vice-Chancellors (VCs) and Pro-Vice-Chancellors (Pro-VCs). Communication of key messages through partner organisations may be an appropriate approach. Strategic engagement with senior management could help to maintain and develop the profile of fair admissions and increase sector buy-in for the long-term. To enable SPA to engage at a more strategic level more could be done to make the case for how and why fair admissions practices benefit individual institutions.

There was some demand for SPA to do more to look at fair admissions issues for those not applying through UCAS and to review if SPA should look at issues around admissions for international students.

5. Impact of SPA

It is clear that HEPs use a range of external or internal sources to review what they do in admissions. Monitoring of take-up suggests that many HEPs do look at SPA resources, amongst other materials, to inform their approaches.

SPA has had an impact on the sector in terms of developing standards that constitute good practice. This is a key area of success through SPA good practice statements, dissemination of issues for consideration in admissions, briefings and checklists. SPA appears to have achieved good success in its dissemination to admissions practitioners through resources, events, website, email updates, and attendance at meetings and conferences. There may be more to be done to reach senior staff in strategic positions in HEPs.

SPA is an influencer on HEP admissions practice, working with and alongside UCAS and other key stakeholders, HEPs themselves and other sector bodies. SPA's impact appears to have been most with HEPs who have decided to raise their game on good practice and professionalism, with a range of external and internal drivers underpinning this.

SPAs influence appears to be greatest on HEPs with 'Mixed' and Centralised admissions, with medium (5,000-15,000 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) students) and small (less than 5,000 FTE) providers. New providers or those new to HE also benefit significantly from SPA's expertise as they can draw on existing knowledge in starting out their admissions work.

SPAs work with QAA has meant that the QAA Quality Code now has fair admissions at its heart; general consensus is that this is due to SPA's involvement. Although not policy per se this seems to be their biggest win outside of their support to individual institutions. SPA has also played an important role in working with the representative bodies (e.g. in relation to Competition Law) and with the funding councils (e.g. HEFCE equivalent qualifications).

6. Funding

SPA is a shared resource that the HE sector benefits from but the incentive structure of higher education is shifting towards individual payments for individual services. The challenge here is to preserve this shared resource for the benefit of all institutions. SPA provides efficiencies for the sector since it saves HEPs time and effort in conducting their own research to establish good practice ways of working in admissions.

Ideally SPA should be funded on a sustainable basis to reduce uncertainty for the sector and ensure that fair admissions continues to be promoted across all HEPs in all four nations. A piecemeal approach to funding inevitably limits the ability to plan for the longer term and drives overhead costs in administering multiple payments.

When asked how SPA should be funded, the majority of HEP respondents suggested that the funding

councils should continue to be the major funders of SPA, although some acknowledged that may be less likely in the current context of cuts to government budgets.

In consulting with current funders, some small-scale support appears likely to be forthcoming from Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland (DELNI) and from Welsh HEPs through the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). Universities UK (UUK) has expressed an intent to continue to make a small annual contribution. UCAS has expressed a willingness to continue as the major funder of SPA, subject to the results of the current review and Board approval. Options for funding from the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) might also become available at some stage in the future. Apart from these, no other existing funders of SPA (or indeed any other stakeholder organisation) gave an indication that they would be willing to be a funder of SPA.

Well over a third of the HEPs in the online survey who responded to the question said their institution would not be prepared to pay for SPA services, with the FE sector appearing particularly reluctant. There were varying degrees of support and appetite among HEPs for a subscription model (i.e. a model whereby HEPs would pay a subscription to access a range of SPA provision). HEPs appear keenest on funding options that take into account the size of their institution. Having an increase in the UCAS capitation fee was the least preferred option, although several people in qualitative interviews said this was a good solution as payment through existing budget lines would be easier to justify and administer. HEPs indicated it was more acceptable to pay for some services than others for example training, conference fees and possibly tailored consultancy services. It should be noted that many respondents said they were not budget holders/funding decision-makers.

There were many comments relating to the implications of different funding models on the independence of SPA, and a concern that whichever funding model was adopted this should not compromise the direction of the service.

Overall there was no obvious solution that addresses all the expectations/wishes of the sector. Funding SPA via UCAS (capitation fee) has the advantage of being applicable throughout the UK regions, however the majority view is that governance would need to be completely separate.

7. Key findings and future proposals

SPA is highly valued by the sector and is perceived as having a positive impact on processes, practices and policies and it is recommended that the programme should be sustained. Having a shared sector-wide service is important because it provides an efficient way to support professionalism in admissions.

In terms of 'what works' to get fair admissions and professionalism, the provision of good practice materials appears to be a minimum, and may work best when supported by opportunities for HEPs to discuss and share approaches in context.

There is scope for developments on:

- Consolidation of good practice materials into the development of training content and/or training for admissions professionals and admissions decision makers;

- Products targeted at a more strategic level;
- More research/development of the evidence base for fair admissions working in partnership with HEPs but also involving stakeholders where appropriate, and with a view to raising the profile of SPA with senior managers and policy makers.

The world of HE admissions is becoming more complicated, with devolution, diversity in the sector, and the increased marketization of higher education. In the future, SPA will benefit from continuing to focus its work thematically taking account of HE contexts, identifying good practice and providing the evidence base for this. A stronger emphasis on quantifying the impact and setting SMART goals will also be important. Given the continuous changes in the higher education landscape there will be a wide range of issues facing admissions professionals and directions in which SPA could travel. Further work is needed to identify and agree the priority areas, which should be based on where the need and impact will be greatest. The core service should be equally applicable, and available, to the whole of the UK. However, SPA needs to give more focus to how good can be applied in different contexts (this should also strengthen the relevance of the good practice to different types of HEPs).

If UCAS decides to continue to fund SPA, feedback from HEPs suggests there is a demand for at least the same level of service as currently provided and therefore funding at at least the same level is likely to be required. At the same time SPA could start to develop an income generation plan such as charging for training, conferences and possibly offering paid for consultancy to HEPs that need detailed support. HEPs would like the funding councils to continue to support SPA financially, even if this is a small amount, in order to add to the legitimacy of SPA's independence from any one body and as a service for all HEPs of all types.

The findings emphasise that HEPs believe that there is a real risk of disengagement by the sector if SPA is perceived as being part of UCAS rather than as an independent programme as is currently the case, and a risk of the potential loss of expertise which is valued by sector. This should however be mitigated by governance of SPA being maintained through the SPA Steering Group. Overall, having broad representation on the Steering Group, and a regular programme of meetings to debate and agree SPA objectives and workplan, appears important to ensuring that SPA takes account of varying different needs across the UK HE sector. It appears especially important, given the practical delivery constraints associated with a relatively small resource, that the priorities and actions followed are agreed transparently.

SPA, its funders and the HE community including UCAS and UUK should work together on a programme of building the evidence base for fair admissions and in this way support the development of clear practice and policy messages for the sector.

1 INTRODUCTION

This is the report of the review of the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme undertaken between November 2014 and January 2015. The review was commissioned by UCAS with the objectives of assessing the effectiveness, impact and value for money of the SPA programme from 2012 to present, the future demand for services, and to make recommendations about future funding and delivery.

The review was undertaken by a collaborative team led by ARC Network in partnership with Dr Anna Mountford-Zimdars, and overseen by a review group representing funders, higher education providers (HEPs) and other stakeholders.

SPA's mission is to promote fair admissions and access to higher education in the UK by developing and leading on good practice in the recruitment and selection of UK students.² The broad objectives of SPA are to work with HEPs and other stakeholders to provide resource outputs to help HEPs develop and update their admissions practice and policy to enhance quality, transparency, reputation and fairness. The programme was set up in 2006 following the recommendations of a government funded independent Admissions to HE Review Group which recommended the creation of a central source of expertise and advice on admissions issues:³

"Its purpose would be to act as a resource for institutions who wish to maintain and enhance excellence in admissions... lead the continuing development of fair admissions, evaluating and commissioning research, and spreading best practice."

A common feature of UK admissions is that admissions autonomy is enshrined in primary legislation. The HE Review Group identified a number of key principles for fairness in admissions which SPA would support and promote (Box 1). Although the Schwartz review covered England, the issues were UK-wide and SPA was created as a UK-wide programme with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) as the main funding body.

1.1 Structure of the report

The report is structured as follows:

Section 1.2-1.3 gives a brief overview of the review research, summarising the research questions, the context for the review and the methodology.

Section 2 reviews the governance and delivery arrangements and considers the effectiveness of SPA in terms of meeting the current objectives, the take-up of SPA services by HEPs and feedback from HEPs.

Box 1: Schwartz Report Key Principles for fairness in admissions:

- Transparency
- Provision of consistent and efficient information
- Ability to select students, as judged by achievement and potential
- The use of reliable and valid assessment methods
- Minimisation of barriers to applicants
- Being professional in every respect and underpinned by institutional structures and process.

² SPA has no remit for international admissions.

³ Schwartz, S. (2004), Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice, Admissions to Higher Education for the Department of Education and Skills (known as the 'Schwartz Report')

Section 3 considers the context for SPA, looking at implications of on-going changes in the wider context of UK higher education. It includes feedback from stakeholders and HEP respondents on their perceptions of the future role(s) of SPA.

Section 4 looks at the information collected from HEPs to assess which types of services are most needed/demanded and views on future directions and specific services.

Section 5 assesses the evidence of the impact of SPA in terms of the outcomes for institutions and any wider benefits.

Section 6 reviews funding options and models.

Section 7 sets out the key findings and conclusions of the review, including conclusions for SPA and current funders.

1.2 Research Questions

The key questions for the research were:

What impact has SPA achieved in terms of generating positive changes to admissions policies and practices, by what processes and to what effect? Impact was assessed in a range of ways, with particular attention to the role of SPA in terms of its core mission of promoting good practices in admissions to higher education and promoting quality, transparency, reputation and fairness, and in relation to the implications for HE admissions in practice and benefits for applicants.

What is the value attributed to SPA in terms of benefits of different kinds of support to individual institutions and the HE sector? The research sought to assess which SPA resources/engagement opportunities have been most helpful and beneficial.

What is the demand for SPA services including potential new services which could best support HEPs in the current context? The research explored the extent to which HEPs and other stakeholders identify a need for support on HE admissions and views on the role of SPA in the current HE context.

What are the potential funding options and models to achieve sustainability of the provision in future? Over the period 2012-13 to 2014-15 SPA funding is changing with HEFCE funding reducing to zero, and UCAS funding increasing to cover the difference. With no confirmed funders beyond July 2015, the research sought to explore appropriate funding models. Research with HEPs and other stakeholders including current funders was used to investigate different funding options and models. The research considered models of core funding and funding for specific projects, and the role of individual HEP and sector agency contributions.

1.3 Method of approach

The review was both formative and summative in nature, and drew on perspectives and feedback from a variety of stakeholders. The research method included:

Stage 1: Background research

Desk research was undertaken to gather insight into the workings of SPA and to inform the policy context. This was supported by an audit of SPA's activities and use of monitoring data in order to review the performance against the workplan. Key sources included programme documentation, reports and statistics, conference papers and seminar/workshop feedback.

Stage 2: Stakeholder research

A total of 35 semi-structured interviews (telephone and face-to-face) were completed representing 6 SPA staff members, 15 partner organisations involved in the funding, delivery, management or governance of SPA. Respondents included representatives from SPA, UCAS, the UK funding bodies and others. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with other stakeholders (telephone), which included the QAA, school sector representatives and other interest groups, such as potential funders and government bodies. The interviews captured views of progress and future directions for SPA. Annex 1 provides a complete list of the stakeholders consulted by type of institution/organisation.

Stage 3: Fieldwork with HEPs

The fieldwork with HEPs was designed to achieve a balance of qualitative and quantitative information as follows:

- *Qualitative interviews*

A series of qualitative interviews (telephone) were undertaken with a sample of 24 senior admissions staff from 23 HEPs, for example Director of Admissions or similar and a sample of senior management staff (for example at Vice-Chancellor/Pro-Vice Chancellor level). The sample frame sought to achieve cross UK coverage and coverage of a range of types of HEPs. The interviews were used to assess levels of engagement with SPA, satisfaction, to understand the impact of SPA in different institutional contexts and value added, and to explore future demand and funding options.

- *Online survey*

A survey of HEPs was used to gather quantitative information from a wide sample of HE staff through an online questionnaire. The survey was piloted through the members of the SPA Review Group. Overall 78 responses were achieved. The largest group of respondents (72%) were HEIs. Most of the remainder were HE in FE providers although two 'other' providers responded⁴. The respondents were mainly those with previous experience of SPA: over eight out of ten (86%) of respondents to the online survey of HEPs as part of the review said they had used SPA services, with 4% non users of SPA and 10% were 'not sure'. Seven out of ten respondents to the online survey gave further information on their institution. The profile by HE grouping for these respondent was in order: UUK (21); Guild HE (15); The Russell Group (11); Association of Colleges (AoC) (5); University Alliance (2); Million + (2). Some 15% indicated there did not belong to any of these groups. Analysis of those who gave further information on their job role (68% of the total) shows the largest group of respondents had responsibility for Undergraduate Admissions (46); followed by Post graduate Admissions (33); and Part time admissions (27). Responsibilities of some respondents covered Student recruitment (14); Widening Participation (17); Applicant experience (17). The largest group described their job title as Head or Director of Admissions (23) or Admissions Manager (18). Other job roles of respondents included Pro-Vice-Chancellor/Vice-Principal (3), Head of Widening Participation (3), Academic Registrar (2), Head of Student Services/Experience (2).

- *Practitioner workshop*

A consultation workshop for admissions practitioners at the UCAS Annual Review Meeting,

⁴ Described as 'alternative provider' and 'private college'.

which was designed to assess levels of satisfaction with the SPA programme and establish priority objectives for the future.

The sample included representatives from Scotland (15), Wales (6) and Northern Ireland (2).

Although the sample is relatively small, the response rate is considered good in view of the short timescale for the review and the timing that coincided with a major holiday period. Information on the total number and profile of participants in this review information is summarised in Table 1.1. Data on the profile of respondents by type is given in Annex 1. Results of the online survey are given in Annex 2.

Table 1.1: Overview of individuals consulted as part of the review

	Number of respondents
SPA team	6
Stakeholder Research (partners, funders, and other stakeholders)*	29
Qualitative interviews with HEPs**	24
Participation in UCAS practitioner workshop*	9
Quantitative survey of HEPs	78

*1 also qualitative interview. ** 4 also partners/stakeholders.

2 REVIEW OF SPA

2.1 Introduction

This section summarises the organisation of the SPA programme and discusses the services provided. It explores the evidence about the effectiveness of SPA in terms of meeting and delivering the programme objectives. The assessment of effectiveness is based on two main approaches: firstly looking at coverage of the work, feedback on delivery of activities and satisfaction of users with different types of activities; secondly looking at the extent to which SPA has met its strategic objectives and annual priorities in the current plan. Evidence is presented on the strengths and weaknesses of the current arrangements. The extent to which SPA activities drive changes in HEPs, and feedback on the impact of the provision at different levels is dealt with separately in Section 4.

2.2 Governance and delivery of the programme

Current arrangements for governance and delivery of SPA

Governance: The SPA Steering Group oversees the delivery of objectives. The work programme is agreed annually: the SPA Director makes proposals on areas of work, based on internal expertise and consultation with the sector,⁵ which are then considered and shaped by the SPA Steering Group. This includes specific deliverables requested by the funding councils, which are set out in annual grant letters. The SPA Director works with the team to establish and refine what SPA considers are the topics of most benefit to the sector, and the operational plan is agreed at a subsequent meeting (usually in June). Generally the team's proposal in the plan is followed fairly closely.

Delivery SPA employs a small team of 4 full-time and one 0.6 part-time members of staff working on the objectives plus one administrative support officer to provide PA support to the Director and to support the team. The SPA team work up the delivery plan and agree team responsibilities (led by the Director).⁶ Several members of the team are relatively new in post and staff changes have had impact on recent ability to deliver on time.

Operational support UCAS hosts SPA and a Memorandum of Understanding is in place which sets out in detail the services that UCAS provides to SPA (e.g. HR functions, IT support). The memorandum states that although SPA is completely autonomous in its operation, UCAS is responsible for the overall accountability of the funding and SPA's Director is accountable to the Steering Group, although line managed via the UCAS management structure.

2.2.1 Setting SPA objectives

⁵ Consultation with the sector on the areas of work included is mainly undertaken through contact with UK-wide HEP stakeholders and funders at meetings (both 1 to 1 and wider meetings) and conferences.

⁶ For example delivery for the current plan was underpinned by three 'away days': the first was to finalise the objectives for the full operational plan that was approved by the Steering Group; the second two were to finalise staffing arrangements to aid the setting of performance objectives for 2014-15 and the schedule of activities for the year.

The original grant letter from HEFCE stressed the following aspects of the programme:

- A resource for institutions that wish to maintain and enhance excellence in admissions practice and policy. It will lead on the continuing development of fair admissions, bring together and evaluate existing research as well as commissioning new research, and encourage identification and organise dissemination of effective practice.
- Provide support for staff in HE involved with admissions procedures and processes including academic and administration staff, and link to UCAS Continuing Professional Development programme for admissions staff.
- Build on admissions work already being done in the HE sector and link into the extensive networks within UCAS, the Higher Education Academy (HEA), and those of other related bodies. It will support all institutions offering HE learning opportunities in the UK with due regard for differences in strategy and operation across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It will also link in with other sector organisations, including the Association of Colleges (AoC), the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), further education colleges, schools and private training providers. The Programme will ensure synergies with existing work undertaken by both UCAS and the HEA.

The specific objectives for the SPA programme and the workplan, are agreed on an annual basis by the SPA Steering Group (see below). The objectives set for the SPA programme have been developed and expanded since the programme was set up in 2006:

- Objectives around reviewing and building up the evidence base for good practice in fair admissions have been balanced with dissemination of these practices and development of communication mechanisms, and working with stakeholders;
- The scale and breadth of SPA activity has varied over time;
- There appears to be an evolving distinction between ‘strategic’ objectives around leadership in admissions, and ‘operational’ objectives in terms of offering support in specific areas.

It was agreed by the SPA Steering Group that for 2012-13 to 2014-15 four core objectives would remain the same, with the operational plan focussing on the areas and issues that would most benefit the HE admissions sector. The current programme objectives and a review of activities to address these are given in Section 2.5 below.

2.2.2 The SPA Steering Group

The minutes of previous Steering Group meetings show there has been quite a lot of change in representation over the last 18 months, with limited engagement from some sector bodies. The group is an active discussion forum for issues affecting admissions (including detailed discussions about pre-entry issues such as qualification reform), and regular updates from member organisations, in particular from UCAS.⁷ Clearly the group is also used as a communication channel from other bodies to those involved in admissions (e.g. from UCAS and HEFCE to HEPs/other stakeholders). Time spent on planning and reviewing the programme appears to be more limited

⁷ A recommendation would be for minutes to be published and for them to make stronger links between topics debated and what SPA does in response, and for greater clarity on the actions, responsible persons and deadlines agreed.

with no evidence of any sub group work to undertake any detailed analysis of what has been achieved through the programme or detailed discussion on possible future directions.

The online survey sought feedback from HEPs on the Steering Group arrangements as a mechanism for ensuring SPA addresses the needs of HEPs. The results suggest overall agreement: of 66 HEPs who responded to this question, most (72%) of respondents overall (78% of SPA users) agreed that the Steering Group ensures its work meets the needs of the whole sector (of which 33% (37% of users) strongly agreed). The discussion and reflection on the key issues facing admissions from a range of perspectives and localities in the Steering Group was seen to be important to underpin SPA's role in working across the sector. For some there may also be a lack of awareness of the Steering Group arrangements in the sector even amongst users: one in five SPA users neither agreed nor disagreed whether the Steering Group ensures SPA meets the needs of the whole sector.

"...it's impossible to meet all priorities across the UK in a small team but the discussion ensures the decisions are taken in an open and transparent way" (Steering Group member)

There is some suggestion that the Steering Group, whilst offering a useful forum and appropriate network for discussion issues related to fair admissions, could do more to call SPA to account especially in terms of impact. Based on a review of Steering Group minutes, increased focus on the task of SPA governance would be desirable. There is good cross sector representation on the group but group membership could be reviewed to ensure that the members have the skills and expertise needed to drive any changes forward. The expertise present might require particular attention if SPA started to offer paid for services. This is likely to mean adding to membership⁸. This could raise new challenges and one option could be for smaller working groups to meet, for example to scrutinise the work planned to meet specific objectives.

2.2.3 Relationship with UCAS

The relationship between UCAS and SPA appears as prime importance not only in terms of day to day operations in the running of SPA which is hosted by UCAS, but also because the work of the two is in many ways complementary. The UK-wide UCAS admissions system is a unifying feature across the admissions landscape for full-time undergraduate applicants. The UCAS admissions system was set up to help applicants to navigate the complexities of a devolved approach to HE admissions, and also plays a role in addressing the training needs of HEPs and admissions staff to support fair access. UCAS is part of the governance arrangements for SPA (both the CEO and the Director of Policy and Research are on the SPA Steering Group). The SPA Director is line-managed by UCAS' Director of Policy and Research, and regular meetings are held with strategic leads in UCAS. SPA coordinates regular briefings with key UCAS staff including policy, relationship managers, the HEP team as well as teams in Data analysis, Strategic product development and Professional Development. Sessions have been run by SPA for UCAS staff members as well as at UCAS events for members e.g. on Equality and Diversity with ECU. Joint projects include work on Tariff, Qualification changes, and Contextual Data Service.

⁸ Further information on the SPA Steering Group including a list of members can be found at <http://www.spa.ac.uk/aboutus/governance>

The relationship between SPA and UCAS appears to be mutually beneficial and in some cases the different organisations bring different perspectives and objectives to the same issue. For example, SPA's work on the Student Number Control (SNC) in England was designed to aid HEPs thinking about planning and managing admissions, in parallel to dissemination by UCAS of online information on the SNC for applicants and support for HEPs with new online resources and data analysis/reports. There is a suggestion that there is further scope for bringing together expertise from SPA and UCAS in a complementary way: SPA's focus on explaining implications of policy changes in terms of good practice in entry criteria and offer making, aligns well with UCAS explaining how related changes to admissions processes will work. Joint work is underway on aspects of the new UCAS tariff, and SPA is on the NQIS Advisory Group and TAG.

At the same time, a tension is arising in the fact that SPA is funded, based and line-managed at UCAS and yet is set up to operate independently from them. Management of the team and establishing close working links is difficult within this context.

2.3 SPA activities

SPA works to build consensus on what is professionalism and good practice in the recruitment, selection and admission of students. This is achieved using evidence from the sector, desk based research and the expertise of staff, who work directly with managers and practitioners in HEPs and stakeholders in the sector. By identifying and sharing good practice resources, SPA aims to improve awareness of good practice in the sector. SPA has taken up the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group⁹, and has developed a collaborative approach to the development of guidance to the HE sector through facilitating 'National Expert Think Tanks'.¹⁰

"...an objective and independent programme, a shared service for HEPs...not auditors or regulators...We aim for 'all boats to rise with the tide'" (Partner)

SPA provides guidance to the HE sector both on issues of **practice** within admissions (e.g. competition guidelines and guidance on dealing with applicants with criminal records) and on admissions **policy** (e.g. on the use of contextual data to inform admissions decision-making) as well as providing guidance in relation to **developments in the sector** (e.g. annual survey of showing developments in devolved/centralised admissions structures). In terms of work programme areas, SPA has sought to respond to the emerging issues in the sector: issues emerging from a number of institutions are included in the workplan when considered to fit with SPA objectives, or proposals made for the next operational plan. Section 2.4 reviews progress to the priorities identified in the current workplan and objectives. There have been just under 100 SPA online good practice briefings

⁹ In 2012 SPA established the national Fair Admissions Task and Finish Group as part of an objective to revisit the principles of fair admissions as outlined in the Schwartz Report on Fair Admissions to higher education. Each of the five principles of fair admissions were explored in detail looking at both internal and external factors that impact on fair admissions. The Group also considered new issues that were not appropriately addressed by the existing principles. <http://www.spa.ac.uk/information/fairadmissions/fairadmissionstask>

¹⁰ Topics have covered SNC in 2013, Decision Making 2014, Contextualised Admissions in Scotland 2014, and Qualifications (in 2015). SPA facilitates HEPs to work on topics or mini projects that increase their knowledge, this is shared at a residential (2 or 3 days) where information and intelligence gained is discussed, analysed and written up, and used by SPA to produce a resource for the sector.

(printed and online materials) since 2009.¹¹ The most recent guidance includes Admissions Policies Good Practice Statement, and Admissions Policies: Checklist for HEPs (April 2014); Criminal Convictions: Statement for Good Practice (February 2014); College HE Admissions: HE in FE SPA Guidance (August 2013). Some materials are updated annually: guidance on Planning and Managing Admissions: Confirmation Action Plan, and information on the basket of contextual data and information available for HEPs via UCAS.

The various components of the SPA programme are described in Box 2. Tailored consultancy services were considered on the recommendation of the 2011 review of SPA but not taken forward, primarily as SPA was set up to work with all HEPs regardless of their ability or willingness to pay, and because of limitations in what could be provided by a small team.

SPA staff members also link extensively to existing HEP networks¹² which is seen as part of HEP engagement and also part of a 'broker' role between the HE admissions sector and policy makers. The 2011 evaluation of SPA recommended more formal links with other organisations and this has been taken up by SPA, for example: links with UUK have been enhanced and the SPA Director has spoken at a number of UUK events and conferences; joint working includes a project with the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU). Getting wide engagement at a strategic senior level in HEPs remains a key issue.

Box 2.1

The services and products which SPA provides include:

Continuous services:	Answering queries and giving individual advice and guidance on admissions topics (telephone and email). Partner interviews and desk research suggests that in terms of calls, emails and face to face contact between SPA and HEPs, queries on admissions issues of what is good or not good practice, advice on admissions and student recruitment issues, planning and management and restructuring and internal policy changes are always high on the list of support needs requested by HEPs. Issues on how HEPs can improve what they do in terms of the applicant experience and 'smarter' working, appear to be increasingly important.
'Products':	Good practice statements, issues for consideration and checklists on admissions topics, usually disseminated through online developments. Checklists are now included as part of good practice materials to give HEPs a fast overview of actions needed. A 'Toolkit' is currently in development, linking to new good practice;
Events:	SPA holds a number of SPA events during the year that are generally well

¹¹ <http://www.spa.ac.uk/support/>

¹² Meetings that the SPA Director regularly attends include ECU Sector Bodies Equality Forum, GuildHE Admissions and Recruitment Network, UCAS NQIS Advisory Group and other networks, Universities Wales PVC Group (on invitation). The Director of SPA or senior staff have twice a year (where possible) catch up meetings with Universities UK, Universities Scotland, Universities Wales, BIS, all HE Funding councils in UK; OFFA, ECU, UCAS, GuildHE, AoC; Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission; Russell Group, Million+ ; Buttle UK, and annual catch up meeting with QAA, HEAT, NEON, Realising Opportunities; Sutton Trust, University Alliance.

	attended and SPA staff speak at and run workshops at national networks and events. ¹³ There has been a trend towards more SPA-led events for which SPA can set and manage the agenda rather than attending and presenting at national events (a trend partly due to declining attendance from HEPs at national events -a result of time and financial constraints). The number of SPA events increased from 3 in 2012/13 to 7 in 2013/14. Events tend to be related to guidance and good practice and emerging issues in the sector. It was reported that the number of UCAS CPD programme event sessions based on SPAs work has decreased over time.
HEP visits:	SPA engages through HEP visits either at the request of an institution or following a request from SPA (where there may be good practices of an issue of interest to discuss). There has been a trend to more focussed visits to HEPs to consider specific themes and issues rather than general collection of good practice. The number of visits has been on the increase (from 28 in 2012/13 to 45 in 2013/14) and 25% of UK HEPs have had direct visits.
Research and dissemination.	Undertaking and commissioning research into admissions issues e.g. Contextualised Admissions Examining the Evidence 2013.
Projects in partnership with other stakeholders.	Examples include: Association of Colleges (AoC) FE in HE Community of Practice; project with ECU on Equitable admissions for underrepresented groups ¹⁴ ; SFC funded work with ECU on equity and diversity issues in Scottish Colleges from an admissions perspective; project with the QAA and colleagues on chapter B2 of the Quality Code relating to admissions ¹⁵ ; and a joint ButtleUK-SPA workshop: supporting care leavers through admissions and a related call for evidence.

2.3.1 Coverage of activities

SPA provision is offered free to all UK HEPs. In some cases a small charge may be made for certain types of events, subsidised by SPA. SPA was created to work with HEPs with full-time home/EU undergraduate admissions to inform and support a fair admissions system. This has since been developed by the inclusion of postgraduate references in good practice documentation.¹⁶ Following the review SPA that took place in 2011¹⁷, SPA took up a recommendation to work with private providers, however this has not been on a proactive basis. HEPs engage with SPA as they wish without compulsion.

¹³ Examples include the UCAS Admissions Conference, Action on Access Annual conference, National Care Leavers Conference, Westminster Briefings, Wales PVC Teaching and Learning Network etc.

¹⁴ <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equitable-admissions-for-underrepresented-groups/>

¹⁵ <http://www.spa.ac.uk/support/goodpractice/admissionspolicies>

¹⁶ Plus limited work for part-time admissions.

¹⁷ External Evaluation of the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions programme, July 2011 at http://www.spa.ac.uk/documents/AboutUs/External_Evaluation_of_SPA_July2011.pdf

The present section considers the extent to which the current arrangements are effective at engaging HEPs. Engagement of HEPs in the SPA programme appears to currently be approached in the following ways:

- **Open access resources.** The main resource is the SPA website. An online toolkit is in development 2014-15, and this was considered by SPA to have the potential to add value in terms of dissemination and uptake of good practice;
- **Direct correspondence.** SPA undertakes regular email updates (usually weekly) to UCAS correspondents, Heads of Admissions, and other stakeholders as well as an occasional printed newsletter. SPA uses the weekly email list to invite HEPs to events.
- **Through existing networks.** One of the initial objectives of the programme was to use existing professional networks for admissions staff to provide input to the programme and to harness good working relationships across all types of institutions involved in HE admissions. SPA has worked hard to make full use of the UCAS Groups and Forums throughout the UK, although in some cases SPA's attendance tends to be restricted due to staffing constraints.
- **Through HE sector bodies.** Engagement is through Universities UK (UUK), Universities Scotland and Universities Wales, or representative bodies: GuildHE and its Admissions and Recruitment Advisory Group, Academic Registrars Council Admissions Practitioners Group, Association of Colleges, The Scottish Admissions Practitioners.
- **HE specialist groups.** SPA engage with specialist groups such as the Arty Admissions Group and the Russell Group Admissions Subgroup, and all the HE mission and strategy groups e.g. Russell Group, University Alliance and Million+. SPA co-ordinates the AUA-SPA Applicant Experience Network, which has over 300 members and aims to run two annual events .

With regard to communications, the view emerged from the research that SPA have improved the website and digital communications and that these development have gone hand in hand with more regular events and opportunities for HEP admissions staff to discuss issues with the SPA team. There appear to be on-going difficulties in pulling together accurate contacts lists especially for those not on UCAS lists (e.g. those involved in part time admissions).

Issues were raised throughout the review about the specific needs of the HE in FE admissions sector; it is clear that in many colleges HE is a small part of admissions job roles and thus practitioners can be hard to reach. SPA is addressing this issue through a Community of Practice (CoP) approach. The CoP helps to spread the work wider than reliance on a small team could and may offer a degree of sustainability. There may be further potential for this approach, for example a similar approach may be used to support Contextualised Admissions work in Scotland.

Box 2.2: HE in FE Community of Practice

The research highlighted that the CoP has increased engagement of the FE sector with the SPA programme and that it has provided support to those operating in a particularly challenging role [FE Admissions staff usually have a much broader remit and the suggestion is they can lack access to relevant HE networks]. The CoP is described by one college as a 'mechanism for making the work of SPA more relevant to FE providers'. The strength of the CoP appears to lie in its ability to bring individuals together to share practice and discuss changes affecting HE admissions within the FE context. One college described how the CoP had brought their institution into contact with another similar college that had resulted in positive joint working. The institution thought that 'peer support'

was a real benefit and that this should continue to be an outcome for the network. The HE in FE annual conference was also considered a key mechanism for bringing practitioners and managers together and the belief was that it had grown into a well attended event that was recognised as the ‘go-to’ conference for those delivering HE admissions in the FE sector. There was also the belief that the CoP had allowed HEPs to be more self sufficient, that with good practice in place and a well established network there was less need for detailed 1-1 support through the SPA programme and perhaps this points to a sustainable model for the future.

Take-up of SPA

SPA monitor the engagement of different HEPs/provider types through attendance at events, meetings and visits. Over the two year period 2012-14 SPA engaged with 76% of HEPs: 82% of HEIs engaged compared to 62% of FE in HE providers. The largest group of HEPs who have not engaged are specialist or private providers. The share of HEPs engaged is lowest in Northern Ireland and London (in the latter case as a result of the large number of small private providers in London). Engagement by FE sector grew substantially, particularly in workshops, conferences led by SPA and events in partnership with UCAS (SPA monitoring data).

Whilst the majority of HEPs consulted in the online survey for the review had links to SPA, there are clearly gaps in terms of who uses SPA. Only a small proportion (three out of 78) said they did not use SPA, but a further eight answered ‘not sure’. The largest group of those who had not used SPA services said they were unaware of the existence of SPA, or lacked information on the services available. There may be a need for further awareness raising: one person said “*Know next to nothing about it, so more information and a higher profile would be appreciated*”. Some stakeholders, especially those in the college sector, suggested SPAs work is not currently reaching all who could benefit. It was suggested that those HEPs who do become aware are quickly convinced of the value of the work if their awareness can be raised. Of those who were aware of SPA, only one person said they did not think SPA services would be useful. A respondent from FE sector said: “*Initial thoughts were that the SPA services were more for Universities rather than FE providers offering HE provision.*”

Views on relevance and profile

Most HEP respondents to the online survey agreed that SPA is relevant to all parts of the UK (Table 2.1). Only a small share felt SPA is not relevant for all types of HE admissions. The vast majority said SPAs brand is well known and widely recognised across the HE sector. However, these results should be treated with caution given that the sample is skewed towards existing SPA users.

Table 2.1: Please indicate the extent to which you agree/disagree with the following:

Answer Options	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Count
SPA is relevant for all parts of the UK	28%	44%	28%	0%	64
SPA is relevant for all types of higher education admissions	35%	47%	17%	2%	66
SPAs brand is well known and widely recognised across the HE sector	23%	55%	16%	6%	64

2.3.2 Engagement of HE Staff

It is clear that SPA has worked with a range of HEP staff that may include those at strategic levels. Registration at events ranges between 1 and 20 per HEP, with an average of 5 per institution. In direct work with HEPs, SPA staff aim to reach at least the Head of Admissions and heads in related or specialist areas such as Equality and Diversity and Data analysis/research.

Survey results suggest the main categories of staff who attend SPA events (in ranked order, percentages indicate the share of institutions responding to the survey had sent these types of staff to SPA events): Admissions Manager(s) (80%); Head or Director of Admissions (69%); Head of Widening Participation (20%); School/Faculty/Department Admissions staff (27%); Recruitment staff (12%); Admissions tutor (10%). Attendance from staff from other service departments is less prevalent: Head of Student Services/Experience (3%); Academic Registrar (2%); Chair of Admissions Committee (2%); Head of Equality and/or Diversity (2%); Head or Director of Marketing (2%). Only a small number of HEPs said that their most senior staff attend with Pro-Vice-Chancellor/Vice-Principal attendance at 2%.¹⁸ Whilst it would be useful to spread the profile amongst a wider range of staff or more senior staff in practice this has not been a priority and has depended on the interest and arrangements in place within the HEPs attending, and the time available within the SPA team to link into different levels of staff.

In general, the following factors were said to influence the level of engagement: time, phase of admissions cycle, time available from senior staff and multiple priorities of some staff who have a wider remit than just admissions (for example, in the case of academic admissions tutors).

Sometimes, SPA's work was not widely known in institutions beyond admissions professionals and some respondents suggested that SPA could undertake awareness raising at Pro-VC (education) or even VC level. There was a perceived dilemma here between expanding provision and awareness and the potential risk of diluting the core service to admissions professionals.

2.3.3 Feedback on SPA

Survey headlines: Use of SPA

By far the largest group of respondents who used SPA services said they did so for general information relevant to the HE sector (90%). Two-thirds (66%) had used SPA for support on specific undergraduate admissions issue(s) in their institution. One in five of respondents had used support on specific postgraduate admissions issue(s) in the institution (of those identified as having post-graduate provision).

The survey suggests HEPs have engaged with SPA in the following ways in order of prevalence across all respondents. Users of online resources are by far the biggest group (90% of respondents who used SPA). Around three-quarters had linked to SPA through attendance at SPA workshop(s) or conference(s) (76% of user respondents) or engaged with SPA at other events (78%). Many said they were in contact through emails from SPA (75%). Direct support was less well used but still by most who responded to the survey: six in ten had consulted with SPA staff directly (in person/telephone/mail) (60%); or through SPA visit(s) to institutions (55%). A few respondents said

¹⁸ Other staff mentioned were: Quality and Enhancement Manager; Quality Officer; Assistant Registrar; Widening Participation Officer; Qualifications Officer and also Planning Officer.

they had linked to SPA in other ways: hosting a visit in response to SPA request to shadow Confirmation; making a presentation at an internal conference for staff; research postgraduate study.

Amongst users of SPA responding to the survey there appear to be differences in how HEPs use SPA, although the contact with the programme for the largest group of users is quite frequent. Well over half (57%) said they use SPA ‘often’ (defined as fairly frequently on a regular basis); Almost two-fifths (37%) had used SPA occasionally (a few times only); and the remainder of users had contact with the programme only infrequently (not used in last two years).

Satisfaction with SPA

Overall the online survey feedback from HEPs suggests that most users rate their overall experience of SPA very highly (Table 2.2). Direct support from SPA staff was rated most highly (4.8 out of 5), although not all had used this, followed by resources and guidance which had been more widely used. Institutional visits were rated 4.7 although less well used. Events appear highly valued where staff can not only learn about specific good practice or issues but feedback from participants shows they highly value the networking opportunity with colleagues. Further discussion of take-up and use of different types of activities is given below. HE in FE providers rated SPA slightly higher than HEIs (4.9 compared to 4.7) although there were much fewer in the sample. At the same time, small providers (less than 5,000 FTE) gave a slightly lower rating on average (4.5). GuildHE members although rating SPA highly, scored the programme slightly lower on average (4.4). Respondents identified as having ‘Mixed’ admissions systems (different approaches depending on School/Faculty/Department) rated SPA as 4.9 on average compared to 4.8 for those with centralised systems and 4.4 for those with any form of devolved decision-making system (Applications arrive at the centre, decision-making is devolved, either the centre or departments then processes them).

Table 2.2: Satisfaction with SPA services

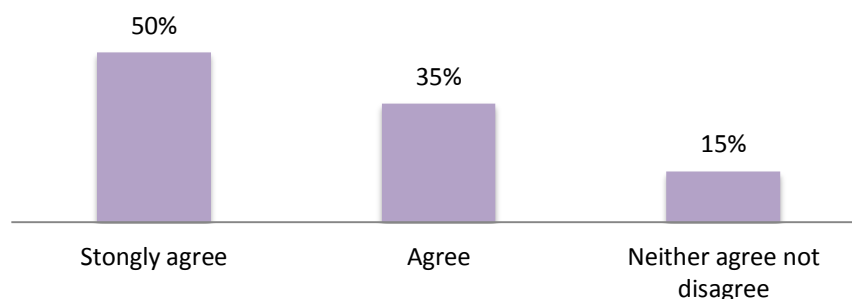
	Average score (out of 5)	Count (excludes not applicable)
Overall experience of SPA	4.7	60
Workshops and events	4.5	56
Resources and guidance	4.7	61
Institutional visit(s)	4.7	36
Direct support from SPA staff	4.8	45

Source: HEP online survey

The majority agreed that SPA was useful and responsive, of which over half of respondents to the survey strongly agreed (Figure 2.1). It appears however that currently some HEPs in the sector are not involved enough with SPA to comment (15% neither agreed nor disagreed).

Figure 2.1

SPA is a useful resource that responds to what institutions say they need



Source: HEP online survey

"If SPA didn't exist, we would have to invent it again" (telephone interviewee)
"An invaluable and very supportive resource for all admissions practitioners!"
"A superb service overall, very helpful to a small institution like ourselves."
"Excellent source of information, advice and guidance to HEIs in developing policies"
"SPA is an excellent resource, providing both written and face-to-face support, discussion and context to the job of admissions to HE" (Online survey respondents)

2.3.4 Feedback on activities

Good practice materials and other guidance

The SPA good practice materials and other guidance were found to be the most widely used and welcome resource. 90% of users in the survey used SPA online resources. The 'Top Five' most widely used guidance topics were: Undergraduate admissions policies and responsibilities; QAA quality code for HE; Offer making; Complaints and appeals; Criminal convictions. In terms of use of guidance: HEP comments indicated use of SPA guidance and good practice information as "reference", and in some cases to ensure policies meet QAA requirements. Other comments indicated a distinction between guidance that is useful to improve practice and other guidance/resources that are useful in stimulating discussion (e.g. on consumer and competition law). SPA materials save admissions team time and effort in making practice examples accessible without having to do their own research. At the same time, there was feedback that SPA reports can be too dense and should also have briefer 'take home' messages or action points for institutions, this could also make publications more accessible to a wider audience.

A minority but important criticism emerging from the review research was that it is not always clear the extent to which the good practices gathered and promoted by SPA is backed up by systematic research (rather than more anecdotal evidence) and that more could be done to build the evidence base on the benefits of changes for HEPs and fair admissions. There was also suggestion that SPA guidance notes could be more sensitive to the different types of HEPs and courses (currently sensitivity sometimes restricted to art and design). Depending on the target audience, SPAs

materials could be 'snappier' and this issue was raised by HEPs and stakeholders: VCs want clear short messages. However in terms of use by admissions practitioners the materials appears to be accessible and useful as a reference when making changes in admissions (discussed further in Section 4 below).

"The online resources are well-written and comprehensive"
"SPA usefully collates good and best practice from around the sector and makes it available in a single, readily accessible format with excellent signposting to relevant legal or regulatory requirements. This work (which would take an individual institution a long time to do alone) means less time is spent collecting such examples and links and more time reflecting on one's own practice in order to make a positive difference."

SPA events

Three-quarters of users in survey attended SPA events and 78% engaged with SPA at other events. SPA events were noted to be helpful both in terms of content and advice but also in developing networks. Training events for the sector link to dissemination of SPA good practices and guidance. Although there are not a large number of events it appears that the ones SPA do run are high impact and HEPs seem to value SPA events more highly than those offered by private organisations. The sense emerged that HEP staff who attended events feel they go away from SPA events with more than they contributed. Those who had been involved in the 'Think Tanks' felt meeting under Chatham House Rules was especially helpful.

In interviews Heads of Admissions indicated that they see SPA events as a very valuable staff development opportunity. Several mentioned how they would encourage their admissions staff to attend a learning opportunity, as well as bringing knowledge back to the institution.

"SPA's events are very useful for building one's network and for breaking various topics down into bite-sized chunks. They are amongst the most directly beneficial events available in the admissions sector."
"a great development opportunity. I usually circulate the details around the whole team"

Direct support from staff

Six out of ten had consulted with SPA staff directly (in person/ telephone/mail). SPA programme data suggests queries on admissions issues of what is good or not good practice, advice on a range of admissions and student recruitment issues, planning and managing issues, restructurings issues and internal policy changes are always high on the list of things admissions staff ask SPA about. The feedback suggests that HEPs find the SPA team accessible ('can pick up the phone') and un-bureaucratic in offering help. The Director was named and praised in several interviews as having extensive expertise (there might have been a concern about an over-reliance on the experience of one individual prior to the recent appointment of two new staff which have contributed to confidence in the credibility of the team and their expertise).

"Very approachable staff with good broad knowledge of the sector"
"SPA staff are very engaging and supportive"
"The work that SPA does, the guidance they give whether as individuals is always professional and neutral and gives you the tools to come to your own decisions"

A quarter of HEPs had direct visits in the period from 2012/13-2013/4 (SPA monitoring data). Over half (55%) in the HEP survey had taken advantage of a SPA visit in the last two years. Visits have dual purpose – support to HEPs and information gathering for SPA. The research with HEPs highlighted that individual support gets down to ‘nitty-gritty’, and that SPA staff are happy to ‘get their hands dirty’ and think issues through with admissions professionals.

“...able to commit time and people resources on a personal level and understand all aspects affecting all institutions”

“invaluable... spent time with admissions staff and practitioners involved, explaining, giving independent view, dealing with questions and challenges... able to talk with an informed voice about what other people are doing and good practice ideas”

“They have taken on the role of medieval/pre-internet tellers going from town to town telling people what others are doing – a great way of sharing best practice

“the staff member from SPA provided a report which was useful in helping senior executive at the university understand (from a neutral point of view) what decisions and the way they had organised staffing had brought about the issues and hopefully they will try to avoid this in future years””

SPA provides HEPs with access to sector wide perspectives across the UK

It was clear from the discussion with HEPs that when changes are made in admissions this is usually with a view to what other HEPs are doing. A key part of the perceived value of the SPA programme and resources was in providing insights from a range of HEPS with a view to identify effective practices which support fair admissions.

“...what SPA is able to do is to collate information from lots of providers and say this is probably a good way of doing it so adopt as much of it as you can”

“it’s certainly been useful because it gives information and a global picture of what others are doing”

“What we value most about SPA is that it is a central source of expertise in admission and good practices and it would be more difficult to find out what is going on and to obtain information if they didn't not exist - it would not be impossible, but it would take longer.”

“SPA are willing to help and offer expertise and to bring examples of best practice that would not otherwise be available”

HEPs indicating particular benefit tended to be those who might otherwise have limited access to intelligence from the sector:

“if left to us we would have to rely on contacts: we don’t have enough and others may be reluctant to share”

For some HE sector stakeholders, SPAs work has been an important source of insight on HE admissions that they might not otherwise have had access to. It was raised that this type of intelligence is increasingly important as HEPs appear less likely to share information, due to concerns over competition law. SPA perspective is pan-UK with an expert awareness of devolved and diverging policies - providing a key asset for the sector in being able to pull this knowledge together.

2.4 Progress to current objectives and delivery of SPA

The objectives for the latest operational plan, agreed in June 2014, reflect the four on-going objectives since 2012.¹⁹ The workplan identifies the priority areas and focus to address the needs identified by the team in consultation with the sector and agreed through the Steering Group.

Commentary of progress and issues raised during the review are given in Table 2.3. The review research suggests that in terms of SPA's core aim to provide definitive expertise, advice and good practice on fair admissions to the UK HE sector and other stakeholders, SPA has been able to build up a wide bank of expertise and resources that now represent an important and unique resource for the sector. Written guidance and resources help to spread the expertise beyond the direct support available from the small SPA staff team. There is a sense that SPA has put in place advice that constitute good practice through the good practice statements, issues for consideration, briefings and checklists. It is clear different institutions are at different levels of maturity, and SPA resources provide a library of knowledge on which to draw in developing institution appropriate admissions policy and practice. SPAs approach of being a 'non-judgemental sounding board' is valued and HEPs are happy to engage with this approach and this puts SPA in a good position to engage in open and honest debate about what is happening within admissions at institutional level. The downside is some stakeholders would like SPA to take a more critical approach. The expertise on good practice is a most valued aspect of the programme although there is a minority view that the evidence to support good practice is not definitive enough and there is some work to do on reaching the whole of the UK and the full breadth of the sector. The work on contextual data as an example of an in-depth piece which included detailed research, has provided a stronger evidence base in relation to this aspect of admissions, and there is demand to take the evidence base further, especially in Scotland. Engagement of the HE in FE sector appears to be growing and this is supported by a Community of Practice approach as a way of extending the reach and providing a degree of self-support, however this group is seen as raising challenges and may require even more focus and emphasis. Given the range of competing themes and developments in the sector it appears that there has been a (probably inevitable) delay in the focus on part-time provision, but with scope to develop building on SPA current HEP research.

¹⁹ 1. To provide definitive expertise, advice and good practice on fair admissions to the UK HE sector and other stakeholders; 2. To examine and research the evidence base for the use of contextual data in admissions in the UK HE sector. Develop advice and good practice on contextual data for the UK HE sector and other stakeholders; 3. To work with staff in HE in FE and new HE providers and stakeholders to highlight the role of fair admissions and good practice in admitting students to HE; develop and provide definitive expertise, advice and good practice on admissions to these institutions and other stakeholders, UK wide but with a focus on England; 4. To identify and work with staff in HE managing part-time/flexible admissions to develop advice and distinct (if required) good practice, UK wide but with a focus on England.

Table 2.3: Commentary on current SPA objectives and achievement

Objective	Findings	Comments
<p>1. To provide definitive expertise, advice and good practice on fair admissions to the UK HE sector and other stakeholders.</p> <p>The following are identified as areas of work/influence: Deregulated student numbers; Qualification changes, routes into HE and UCAS tariff; Toolkit; Equality and diversity issues impacting on admissions (e.g. WP and disability); Input into national WP strategies; Advise UCAS on admission strategies and policy changes; Applicant experience strategies; Admissions infrastructure; Indicators of fair admissions</p>	<p>HEPs and others see SPA as providing expertise on good practice and this appears to be the most valued aspect of their work.</p> <p>Some question the validity of the good practice (is the underpinning research rigorous enough?). Although this is a minority view it does exist and therefore has an impact on the credibility of the programme).</p>	<p>Good practice is at the core of what SPA does and should remain so. Main issue is that stakeholders sometimes believe this is not definitive enough and there is some work to do on reaching the whole of the UK and the full breadth of the sector. Belief that SPA concentrates on England as this is where most of funding comes from, although obviously that has been changing and will change moving forward.</p> <p>Broad issue that SPA do not have a plan to evaluate the impact of their good practice and cannot track which institutions are accessing it. This should be paid attention to in the online developments underway.</p>
<p>2. To examine and research the evidence base for the use of contextual data in admissions in the UK HE sector. Develop advice and good practice on contextual data for the UK HE sector and other stakeholders</p>	<p>Feedback from interviewees suggests there is a belief that this has been well achieved in the sector and this is an example of their work at its best, again the issue is one of reaching the sector and capitalising on the evidence base further.</p>	<p>Work on contextualised admissions in Scotland has been funded and has been valued but there is a desire that SPA take this to a new level and start to find ways of helping HEPs evidence the impact of their use of contextualised data. Opportunity for toolkit for HEPs.</p>
<p>3. To work with staff in HE in FE and new HEPs and stakeholders to highlight the role of fair admissions and good practice in admitting students to HE; develop and provide definitive expertise, advice and good practice on admissions to these institutions and other stakeholders, UK wide but with a focus on England.</p>	<p>Although SPA aims to offer the same level of services, HE in FE is identified as more difficult to engage with as often HE admissions are only one responsibility for the individual/team involved.</p> <p>The CoP has successfully brought SPA to a wider group of FE providers and the work of the CoP was reviewed favourably with interviewees.</p>	<p>The CoP is still not engaging widely enough across the sector (perhaps only 50 colleges involved) and the more general work of SPA is not meeting the needs of this group. It is unclear which FE institutions are using the good practice and stakeholders indicate that more could be done to assess reach and impact of the CoP.</p>
<p>4. To identify and work with staff in HE managing part-time/flexible admissions to develop advice and distinct (if required) good practice, UK wide but with a focus on England.</p>	<p>SPA has begun to work on issues that impact on part time provision. These staff are seen to be more difficult to engage with as there is no national network. SPA received 50 replies to a survey of part-time admissions and is currently undertaking analysis.</p> <p>As this is only a part of the range of issues covered by the research it was not clear from the survey and interviews how well this objective been achieved.</p>	<p>This area of work is only recently been prioritised within the workplan.</p> <p>Only 15% in the online survey said SPA had been more than slightly influential in admissions to part-time and flexible provision in their institution (discussed further below).</p>

A SPA communication and dissemination strategy sits alongside the four programme objectives but desk research identified that this area of work does not seem as well formed as other aspects of SPA’s operational plan. Improvements have been made to the SPA website and digital communications with the sector through use of a regular email update. Consolidation of good practice materials into an online toolkit is in progress and this is considered to have great potential to add value in terms of dissemination and uptake of good practice.

SPA has aimed to identify and work on a wider range of admissions contexts including in the different administrations of the UK: the programme has sought to meet the needs of different audiences by being responsive to emerging issues and proactive in terms of the nature of the workplan reflecting a range of different policy objectives.²⁰ Flexibility within the team and the SPA workplan to respond to emerging issues has been important in how SPA has been able to respond to the support needs of institutions, and it has to be recognised that the expertise and commitment of the individuals within the team has also played an important part. At the same time, given the emergence of new trends and pressures it is important to consider the extent to which SPA can continue to work in this way and how changes in the external environment for SPA could change the need and appropriate delivery mechanisms going forward. These issues are picked up in Section 3 below.

2.5 Emerging findings

The evaluative research elements of the review sought to identify the extent to which the current structures support the effective delivery of the programme objectives. The research suggested certain strengths of the model, but also highlighted a number of weaknesses and tensions, as outlined below.

Strengths	Issues/Opportunities
<p><i>Delivery/Services</i></p> <p>SPA has reviewed and documented key issues in the admissions environment and now has a strong base of materials and methodology in place</p> <p>Contextual advice sensitive to the organisational context of HEPs. Particular pieces, e.g. SNC, competition law, contextual data</p> <p>Expert shared resource plus direct support to HEPs if requested. Helpful in 1-1 to develop policies that fit the context of the institutions</p> <p>Independence valued</p> <p>Community of practice helps to extend reach</p> <p>High quality work</p> <p>Responsive to queries</p>	<p>Can’t widely offer certain services such as feedback on admissions policies due to lack of resources</p> <p>FECs that are not part of the CoP perhaps do not get all the support they need</p> <p>Contextual data work seemed particularly relevant for selecting institutions, would like to see more pieces for recruiting institutions</p> <p>SPA reports could have clearer messages or action points for institutions, this could also make publications more accessible to a wider audience including senior staff at strategic level</p>

²⁰ Regional specialists or groups were not considered practicable due to time and resources issues for HE staff and therefore SPA’s approach is to use existing groups and meetings.

<p><i>External relationships</i></p> <p>Strong networks and well connected which benefits HE</p> <p>Partnerships with complementary organisations add value. Collaborative events such as that with Equality Challenge Unit particularly well received</p> <p>SPA is a sounding board for UCAS</p>	<p>Clear governance separation from UCAS, opportunities and threats come with co-location with UCAS</p> <p>Relationship between SPA and UCAS an issue</p> <p>Probably more potential, depending on direction within UCAS, for further joint working with UCAS – e.g. a joint research programme to build the evidence base for good practice recommendations, and/or enhanced delivery of CPD/training for admissions staff in partnership with UCAS</p>
<p><i>Team</i></p> <p>The SPA team has significant experience and practitioner backgrounds in HE admissions</p> <p>Obviously good communication at team level and clear identification of responsibilities.</p> <p>Respected and professional approach</p> <p>Helpful individual(s), willingness to interact</p>	<p>A small team and unable to meet all priorities. Have to be realistic about scale of provision and/or events. Intensive 1-1 support cannot be offered to all</p> <p>Delivery plan emphasises that SPA staff are the main asset and that they have worked in the sector and therefore their professional expertise is important, but begs the question of how SPA staff will retain their professional ‘currency’.</p>
<p><i>Governance</i></p> <p>The Steering Group meets quarterly and brings together a wide range of representatives from across a broad range of stakeholders</p> <p>Documents show SPA engaging well at strategic level and have clear objectives and operational plans</p> <p>Representation of pre-HE on the Steering Group helps to enhance emphasis on what is happening at learner level</p>	<p>Some belief that SPA mission statement and strategy could be clearer</p> <p>SPA model of delivery has not moved forward since inception (although this is by far the minority view)</p> <p>The Steering Group are presented with plans and progress reports but there is limited discussion about the strategic direction of SPA</p> <p>Steering Group meetings could do more to hold SPA to account, the communication/ dissemination plan is not well developed, KPIs are vague.</p>
<p><i>Reach</i></p> <p>Community of Practice approach has helped engage FE in HE sector</p> <p>Numbers engaged by SPA events and visits has been rising</p> <p>SPA event at Scottish Funding Council admissions conference always completely oversubscribed, scope for expansion.</p>	<p>Need to balance competing priorities</p> <p>Currently no good internal database of all the contacts SPA has got, reliance on UCAS lists, individual contacts in institutions and personal knowledge. Lack of clear communication and awareness raising strategy of what SPA offers</p> <p>Opportunities exist to extend the reach across the sector, especially with FECs</p> <p>Engagement with institutions can be ‘reactive’ based on existing networks, could be more proactive in engaging with new institutions and especially with recruiting institutions</p> <p>Visuals and branding in SPA communication could be enhanced to increase impact</p> <p>Private providers open to/need support</p>

3 CONTEXT FOR SPA AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

3.1 Introduction

Promoting fair admissions and access to higher education in the UK by developing and leading on good practice in the recruitment and selection of students has been the underlying aim of SPA and the HE landscape has changed and continues to change. This section looks at the current context for SPA, in terms of the policy context and key drivers in the Higher Education sector, and discusses the implications for supporting professionalism in admissions today. It includes a review of the perspectives emerging from the fieldwork elements on the role of SPA, and demand for particular types of services. The emerging findings are summarised in Section 3.6.

The organisation of the programme around a yearly operational planning process appears to have been important to ensure responsiveness to changes in the sector. Full year progress reports and plans are presented to the SPA Steering Group, and some interviewees referred to the necessity to retain annual activity planning and a degree of flexibility as the pace of changes impacting on HE admissions is moving swiftly.

3.2 Discussion of SPAs relevance in the current context

Cultural change is a key ambition of SPA: much of the work of SPA is focused on change management and increased professionalism, but often at the institutional level and it is greatly impacted by very many factors (discussed further in section 5 below). The period since the creation of the programme has been a period of noticeable, rapid and large-scale change in HE admissions requiring SPA to respond. The present research considered the extent to which the original rationale for SPA remains valid, and the implications of key trends in the HE sector on the continuing need for services to support professionalism in admissions. Annex 3 summarises the trends identified during the review with potential for the biggest impact on the SPA programme, and should be read in conjunction with the discussion of relevance.

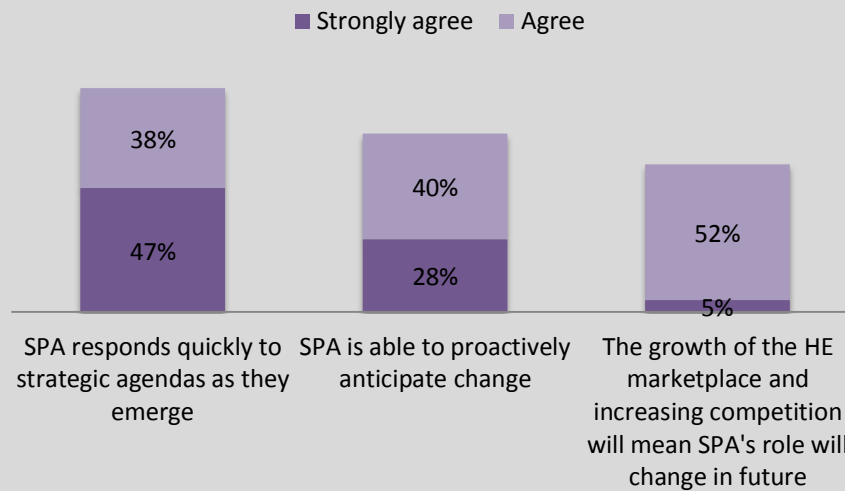
Interviews with staff and feedback from other partners suggests that SPA has been proactive in ensuring it has not only 'horizon scanned' but reacted with agility to the changes and developments in the sector (as evidenced by the range of issues covered). This is supported by feedback from HEPs who rated the programme over 4 out of 5 on average on its responsiveness to sector changes. Views were more mixed on whether SPA is itself a driver for changes in admissions, although overall the responses from HEPs suggest that the largest group of respondents believe SPA drives changes. Discussion of the drivers of changes in admissions and the impact of SPA is dealt with further in Section 4 below.

Box 3.1: Working in a changing context - HEP online survey headlines

HEPs were asked to comment on the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements relating to how SPA operates in the wider context for HE admissions. Findings include:

- The vast majority of respondents agreed that SPA was responsive to strategic agendas in the sector (Figure 3.1), of which the largest group strongly agreed;
- Half agreed SPA proactively anticipates changes, although fewer strongly agreed;
- Many were unsure on whether the growth of the HE marketplace and increasing competition will mean SPAs role will change in future: the largest group (47%) neither agreed nor disagreed), although the tendency was towards agreement, there was not much strong agreement (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1: Agreement with statements



Based on 66 responses, including non-users.

The review of the current sectors issues (Annex 3) raises a number of issues pointing to specific future directions and ways of working. Further discussion of the implications of current trends for operational issues and delivery strategy are discussed in detail in subsequent sections. Key points emerging in relation to the role of SPA:

- The diverging HE policy context presents challenges in delivery of the SPA programme, increasing complexity of the work in admissions and related areas, coupled with the fact that institutions are looking to introduce efficiency gains and finances are tight, may present opportunities but require new ways of working. To an extent SPA is already addressing this through moves to introduce an online 'Toolkit' among other things.
- SPA will need to pay more attention to unpicking the context in which different HEPs operate, as well as taking account of different types of provision, if SPA is to remain relevant across the UK. The continued divergence and structural changes in the sector (e.g. increased private provision, mergers in FE) may make establishing good practice more challenging. SPA provides an overview of what is occurring across the UK. In doing so, there is a balancing act between providing generic guidance and needing to make guidance relevant to the specific contexts in the four regions. Scotland has been mentioned here repeatedly as operating in a different context from the other three regions of the UK. Devolved education powers mean Wales operates differently from the rest of the UK.
- Quality developments in HE particularly QAA Quality Code Chapter B2 on Recruitment, selection and admission has refreshed HEPs interest in changes to admissions, and is a key area of opportunity to be explored (discussed further below). Changes in quality review, leaner risk based methodologies will become commonplace and SPA will need to adapt.
- There is scope for further coordination at a strategic level between SPA and UCAS to lead on/meet the professional development needs of admissions professionals.
- With lessened controls and increasing competition, some, although not all, HEPs believe that the need to demonstrate a fair admissions process within a marketised environment is growing (described further in box 3.2).

- Admissions processes are being more closely considered within a wider student experience, Widening Participation (WP) and Widening Access. SPAs work on fair admissions has thus far been set apart from fair access agenda and there are some calls that it should remain so. The work may increasingly overlap with quality systems in HE relating to improving the student experience. There is continued scrutiny of admissions processes and decision-making and the existence of SPA was identified as signalling that the HE sector is serious about fair admissions and about good practice.
- The pace of change in the HE sector is not slowing. There are many forthcoming developments which SPA users see a role for support on (changes to the UCAS Tariff being a key one).

Box 3.2: HEP views on SPAs role in a competitive HE marketplace

There were a number of comments made about the role of SPA in a context of increased HE competition and diversification. The following are taken from the online survey:

“SPA is, essentially, the guardian of the principles of fair admissions and an authoritative and independent voice. As competition grows it will become ever more important that institutions are not just aware of the principles of fair admissions but that they actively employ them to ensure the sector acts in the best interests of all people who might benefit from higher education. To that end, SPA’s role is more important now than ever before and the benefit of its guidance is very useful in supporting admissions professionals in the face of new challenges (whether internally or externally driven) and in helping to disseminate best practice.”

“As you get different stakeholders emerging within the HE space I see SPA as being a key part of ensuring that all providers are ensuring that they are conducting themselves in an appropriate way in terms of how they admit students.”

“As HE admissions becomes a more diverse and competitive marketplace, it will be increasingly necessary for SPA to exist as an organisation that provokes the sector and institutions to consider and address issues of fair admissions. Its role will perhaps need to broaden beyond admissions policy and the formal admissions process to more explicitly encompass HE recruitment practices.”

“Supporting best practice and professionalism, informing and influencing policy change (local and national), and supporting and encouraging ethical practice in an increasingly competitive environment.”

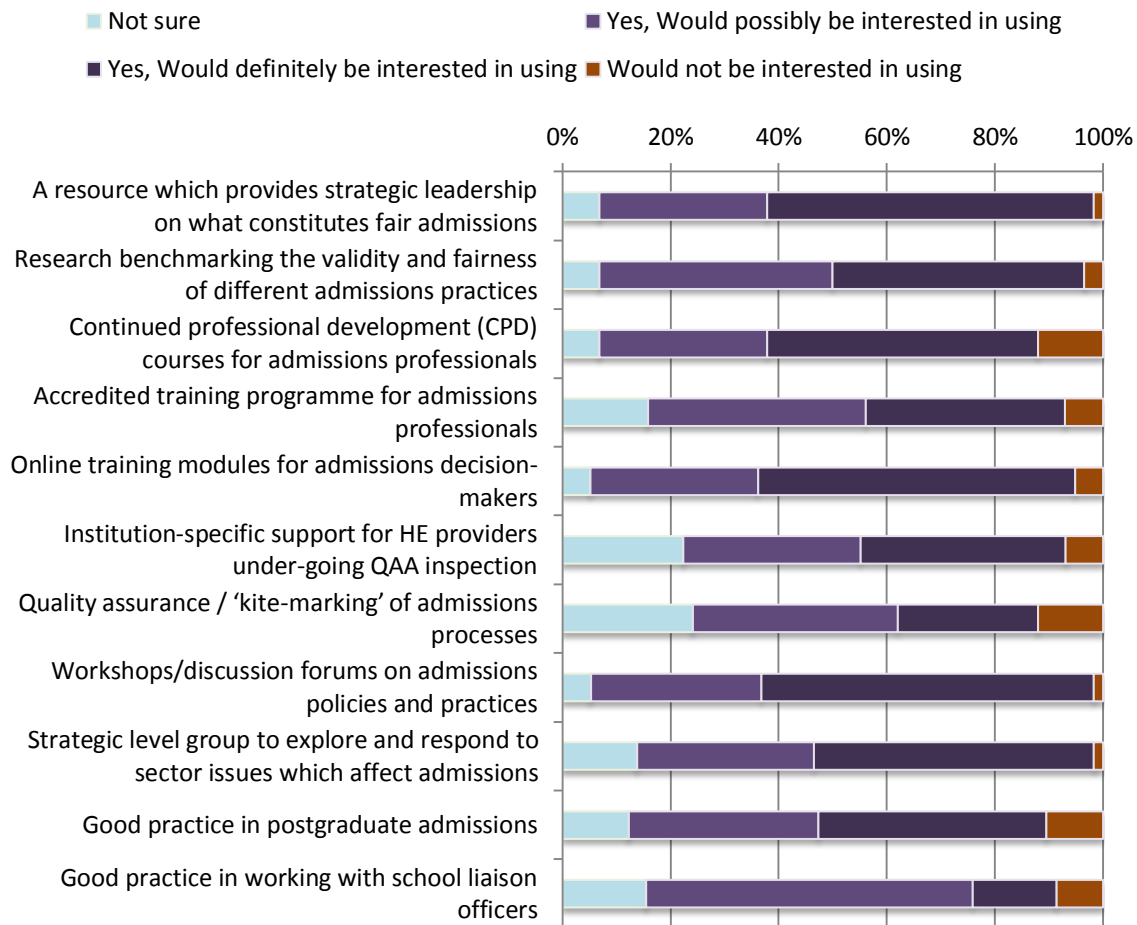
“...as a champion for rules, standards and fairness as HEI move towards a competitive environment. We are already seeing some unhelpful behaviours, and having a body such as SPA providing good practice guides and challenging unfair practices will become even more important.”

3.3 Views on future directions for SPA

In terms of programme activities the research with HEPs suggests in general there is support for more of the same type of provision from SPA, but also some support for more leadership related to dealing with the implications of policy changes affecting admissions and tackling issues emerging as a result of increased marketization, and linked to building a stronger evidence base for different practices on fair admissions. Plus there is support from parts of the sector for certain types of more formalised professional development provision/training. There is less support for SPA having more of a kite-marking role although the benefit of SPA for quality audits (QAA inspection) is an area

where some HEPs would welcome more provision. Figure 3.2 gives the results of the survey of HEPs asking which types of services they would be most interested in using in future. The fieldwork with stakeholders and HEPs was also used to collect ‘free text’ perspectives on the role of SPA in the evolving higher education sector, and the different aspects of future provision are discussed below. There was generally quite good support for all the options discussed, although different types of HEPs may have different needs of SPA.

Figure 3.2: Please read the list below and tell us to what extent your team/your institution would have an interest in using the following types of admissions support services in future:



To a certain extent a sense emerged from the research with HEPs that differences between needs of admissions practitioners links to different types and contexts of HEPs, with a distinction between those that have need of SPA as:

- A source of *advice and guidance* to the sector on helpful practices including awareness raising of pitfalls challenges and issues with a view to professionalise the sector. Particularly relevant to admissions staff in HEPs with limited resources, new staff or those with multiple roles.
- SPA as a *forum for sharing* on areas that are relevant and current with admissions: SPA comes out as a welcome focus for linking to and learning from others (which helps to contextualise

understanding of the benefits and pitfalls of different admissions practices).²¹ Particularly relevant to admissions staff in HEPs with fewer contacts with other providers or opportunities to draw on wider knowledge and understanding in the sector. One could envisage an even a stronger role for SPA in enabling the sector to provide support to each other. Some institutions talked positively of making new contacts through SPA and arranging opportunities to talk/visit beyond the SPA events and this could be prioritised more by SPA.

- SPA as *broker between HEPs and policy makers*, and supporting responses to new policies and developments: The benefits of an independent but highly skilled/knowledgeable group of people that anticipate upcoming changes and also provide a quick response to changes in policy is widely acknowledged in the sector, especially in the context of giving practitioners the opportunity to discuss issues in a 'safe' forum and to consider the wider implications of policy and procedural requirements.

The responses from HEPs suggest that most admissions professionals are in favour of SPA continuing to provide advice and guidance on admissions. Key words highlighted in comments from HEPs included: '*authoritative*', '*impartial*', '*independent*'.

"As a source of information and in providing good practice guidelines in an every changing market place"

"...a central point for advice, guidance and best practice for admissions professionals; raising awareness of possible future impacts; giving HEP's the tools in order to inform their own strategies"

"Role as an independent advisor to HE staff, to ensure fair admissions to all applicants and to share good practice."

The findings in relation to HEP engagement in different future options for SPA are discussed below. The survey sought to assess the future demand for different types of SPA provision in terms of the extent to which respondents thought they were likely to use different types of existing and new services in future. These questions did not include whether or not HEPs would be willing to pay for each of the various types of provision in future (i.e. the price sensitivity in relation to each of the different types of provision described below was not tested).

Workshops/discussion forums on admissions policies and practices

Almost all the HEPs surveyed said they would definitely or possibly be interested in using a resource which provides workshops/discussion forums on admissions policies and practices (61% of 58 survey respondents who responded in relation to future options for SPA said they would definitely use workshops/discussion forums and a further third (32%) would possibly be interested). The opportunity to share ideas and information about current and future practice with colleagues across the sector appears to be considered beneficial. SPAs role in bringing together HEPs to share practices appears to be a key element in how many HEPs see SPA as fulfilling their guidance/good practice role. Work on sharing good practice in admissions policies and practices was central in this respect, although many respondents also made the link to the provision of policy-related guidance and support to respond to changes as they emerge in the HE sector. Some identified an expanding

²¹ The format of SPA events has changed to make them more interactive and allow time for networking.

need for advice and guidance on admissions, including in particular vital need in the HE in FE sector where there is less resource.

“Enabler of discussions relating to HE policy and changes required to practice in light of policy changes”

“...giving practitioners the opportunity to discuss issues in a safe forum and to consider the wider implications of policy and procedural requirements”

“The opportunity to share ideas and information about current and future practice with colleagues across the sector is really beneficial”

“Very helpful to have facilitated opportunity to discuss policies and practices”

A resource which provides strategic leadership on what constitutes fair admissions

Some 60% of HEP survey respondents said they would use strategic leadership on what constitute fair admissions (plus 31% possibly). Some respondents indicated this would be highly valuable especially if aimed both at admissions professionals and at PVC/VC level. Specifically mentioned included ‘top level’ executive summaries, case studies, tools for self-analysis and key ‘checklists’. One respondent suggested ‘strategic guidance’, rather than leadership, would be helpful. There were some comments suggesting that the issue of what is ‘reasonable’ adjustment to account for context was an area where some HEPs would welcome specific guidance.

SPA has focused on supporting admissions practitioners (and the evidence suggests the programme has been responsive to those running admissions services) and is less focused on taking a strategic lead, although SPAs role in supporting funding bodies and government departments needs to be recognised. The SPA programme is influencing practice rather than policy by and large. There is some belief that this needs rebalancing and that there is a need to be more authoritative in their good practice and take a more strategic role with stakeholders and others working broadly on fair access issues. One respondent in the stakeholder interviews (a VC) had never heard of SPA or interacted with them and found them redundant (‘I can’t see the problem that SPA is seeking to fix’). He elaborated that he was seeking to develop a contextual offer policy, but SPA had not given guidelines of how to do this. Indeed, the research highlighted that while SPA has been positively received by the people they have interacted with and who they have engaged with, those without personal experience or engagement with SPA were, perhaps inevitably, less positive about the organisation. The perhaps limited impact of SPA at VC and ministerial level also needs to be viewed in light of concerns to the opposite end voiced by some stakeholders and partners. Here, some with a positive view concerning SPA’s impact and future voiced concern that there could be ‘mission creep’ and that the removal of core funding might lead to SPA trying to be ‘all things to all people’ rather than focusing on their core mission of supporting professionalism in admissions. Those working closely with SPA materials and resources (mainly admissions practitioners) do not particularly see that SPA should work directly with VCs but find ways to support admissions staff to advocate for the ‘right’ policies at that level. They believe the good practice does this already as it ‘adds weight’. A sense emerged from admissions practitioners that SPA need to continue to help HEIs counter any ‘dark forces’ within their institution.

“...using specific items of SPA best practice as evidence to support our policies and approaches in debates with other part of the institution on future strategy”

The role of SPA in communicating between HEPs and policy makers on admissions issues was also mentioned by a minority of respondents, who referred to SPA as “..a neutral honest broker with sector-wide insight”, and “...encourage / enable institutions / UUK to take principled positions and not be cowered into positions of ‘anything goes if the market says so’”.

Online training modules for admissions decision-makers

These would definitely be used by most (59%) of respondents and possibly by 31%. Some comments suggested particular potential for SPA to take a greater role in providing training for new or developing admissions staff to cover good practice in different aspects (described by one as potentially a single source to promote a basis of knowledge which HEPs can work to). The benefit of online provision in spreading the reach was noted in some comments.

“...one-stop-shop” for new Admissions staff... Yes, each institution does things slightly differently but a basic, initial training course of this kind would be of huge benefit.”

“Highly valuable, especially for academics and new staff”

“Resources that assist academic colleagues would be most useful. Relatively easy to keep support staff up to date. Interviewing good practice, what does fair admissions mean in reality”

“...something to tackle decision makers’ ‘unconscious bias’”

“would enable us to train more staff and build into professional development/induction”

Strategic level group to explore and respond to sector issues which affect admissions

Over half (52%) said they would definitely be interested in this type of provision (plus 33% possibly). The pace of changes impacting on HE admissions (particularly policy changes and those related to increased marketization) came up as an underlying concern, and pleas for support to help admissions professionals to keep abreast and respond in a constantly changing environment were typical. Some people saw this role as going even further to more proactively seek to drive change.

At the same time some raised issues in relation to how this type of proposal might work with regard to other strategic networks (the Academic Registrars Council and UUK etc.) and within qualitative interviews some commented that working more effectively with existing bodies and networks was a more realistic way forward for SPA.

“My view is that they have their ear to the ground and already anticipate changes in the sector and identify the guidance which might be available to HEIs in implementing these changes”.

“Prompting and investigating change”.

On-going training/CPD for admissions staff

In principle, many respondents indicated some support for this idea, depending on the level any future CPD programme is aimed at. Half (50%) said they would definitely be interested in this type of provision (plus possibly 31%). There was a suggestion that training provision might be most useful for middle-ranking posts. Specialist sessions were identified by some as being a need since these are hard for institutions to provide internally (e.g. qualifications changes, legal changes). At least one respondent queries how this would fit with the provision of training from UCAS. Clearly face-to-face paid for training and CPD is costly for HEPs and although online learning can provide cost savings it lacks the networking element, for which SPA is so valued.

"..individuals stepping up from heavily directed roles to ones with greater latitude to think and act individually and for whom role-specific training is not otherwise available."

Research benchmarking the validity and fairness of different admissions practices

Research benchmarking the validity and fairness of different admissions practices was highly rated in terms of future use (around half (47%) would definitely use and a further 43% would possibly use this). Some comments distinguished roles in relation to decision making by academic staff compared to administrators (with the implication any future provision should support both models). The difficulty in undertaking research of this type was raised as an issue.

"This will be a valuable resource for those planning change within their admissions operations and reviewing policies"

"...this is important especially as a large group of institutions at the moment seem to be engaged in a race to the bottom in terms of their entry criteria and admissions practices".

Good practice in postgraduate admissions

Good practice in postgraduate admissions came out relatively high on the list of provision than HEPs would use (over two-fifths (42%) would definitely use and over a third (35%) possibly). Comments show many think some specific PG work would be desirable (and it was suggested especially postgraduate research provision which varies more significantly to undergraduate provision than postgraduate taught provision (normally) does). At the same time the opposite view was also mooted: postgraduate taught might be easier or a first step for expansion, postgraduate research has a range of unique issues.

"specific PG good practice could be a powerful tool in ironing out-dated practices"

Institutions have tended to evolve this themselves and there must be a wealth of information and experience that could be shared, must be particularly difficult for institutions with a relatively small postgraduate population

"Whilst many admissions issues span UG and PG, there are some that are specific to PG (perhaps particularly re. PGR selection) that would benefit from particular exploration"

Institution-specific support linked to QAA assessment

Institution-specific support for HEPs under-going QAA inspection received support from most respondents, although less widely than the above (38% would definitely and 33% possibly use it) Comments and suggestions included SPA to support a "preparedness check"; Guidance on the best practice relating to gathering and storing the evidence required for meeting the indicators; and specific material on "Liability of third party in review process". The link between SPA and QAA also featured in open-ended questioning to HEPs of what they would like in future.

"I think offering some kind of consultancy or audit would be really useful to assess how we are actioning our policies in line with what we have submitted to the QAA. Development plans would also be really useful similar to what the QAA provide."

"Summary of suggestions/action points on current policies would be useful; current QAA online resources extremely useful"

Accredited training

The idea of accredited training was less well supported overall than training per se. Just over a third (37%) said they would definitely be interested and two-fifths (40%) said possibly. HEPs provided a number of new ideas, including the idea of in-house training at HEPs (whether SPA could work with a HEP or other stakeholder to develop a qualification or some form of recognition for the attributes that a professional admissions practitioner would need). SPA could have a role in helping to develop the 'professional attributes' rather than conferring qualifications. One respondent wondered whether if SPA had a role in getting staff up to speed on the professional attributes (that SPA approved in some way) a QAA review could be less onerous for an HEP as they were already able to demonstrate quality assurance. Overall there was not much support for accredited training, and this type of provision would be resource intensive and probably require a new set of skills at SPA. At least one respondent raised the issue of needing to understand how this would overlap or complement existing programmes (e.g. existing AUA programmes). One HEP respondent supported the idea of accredited training because they felt increased occurrences of sessions would enable them to send more staff.

Overall there is little evidence to suggest that formal accreditation processes would achieve buy-in from the sector and whether institutions would pay for this. The dominant training model is currently on the job training and developmental CPD. HEPs are interested in the content and quality of the training more than in the accreditation status.

"CPD for our staff is very important and admissions often get overlooked in this area because there are not obvious options for them"

"...would be good to have a programme that supported admissions professionals in terms of the current context for admissions; understanding of different bodies (UCAS, HEFCE, OFFA); legal considerations. At the moment people have to absorb these things and work out what they need to know and how they can find it out as there is no overall programme that brings these things together"

'Kite-marking' HEP admissions

On the issue of quality assurance / 'kite-marking' of admissions processes, there was some positive support although comments suggest views are rather mixed. For example, one person said *"This could be very valuable both in terms of reputation with applicants but also internally"*, whilst others were more guarded and did not see the need or highlighted the issue of principles of institutional autonomy. The qualitative research with HEPs found little interest in any kind of kitemark or regulation but belief that SPA should help HEPs to adhere to relevant quality code (underpinned by a belief that the sector is already massively regulated). This was echoed in comments from the online survey: a small number were concerned about the implications for HEPs in terms of policy and resources. For example, one person commented: *"...could become very politicised. As a sector, we are heavily regulated, and this would add to this burden."* Some sector-wide bodies would like SPA to be able to evaluate or provide an evaluation toolkit that marks HEPs against criteria, possible with 'teeth' for failure to comply, this would move SPA more in the direction of a regulator. By and large individual HEPs did not share this view and valued the 'critical friend' approach and that it was possible to 'talk freely' with SPA and whilst institutional autonomy featured as a caveat in any future role of SPA, at the same time, there was a sense emerging from some parts of the HE sector that some admissions professionals would like to see more common standards across the sector. Some

people saw specific roles in relation to offering challenges to bad admissions practices. These ideas are explored in more detail in Section 4 below, along with discussion of specific opportunities for new products and services emerging from the research.

“To provide an independent source of support to HEIs in responding to changes in the environment impacting admissions in a way which will protect the interests of applicants”

“To maintain and promote fairness in admissions”

“Questioning the 'easy win' for relying on academic qualifications and personal statements”

Good practice in working with school liaison officers

There was not much outright support for good practice in working with school liaison officers (only 16% would definitely use it, although most (60%) would possibly use it). The demand appears mainly from those with a Widening Participation/Widening Access role to see more ‘joined up’ work in this area who welcome this as a means to closer relationships with key 'access to HE' staff and schools liaison, marketing, etc. Seeing best practice of how different professionals should work together would be interesting to some in order to assess the success of their particular approach.

3.4 Emerging findings

The research suggested certain strengths of SPA and opportunities in the current context, but also highlighted a number of tensions, as outlined below.

Strengths/Opportunities	Issues
<p>If SPA weren’t there would not be anyone on the horizon to fill the role</p> <p>Fair admission remains pivotal, continued need for SPA</p> <p>Maintaining a single service of professionalism in admissions across the devolved regions. SPA shares understanding of different nations between the nations and this is an important role for future</p> <p>Without SPA the remit to have standards in admissions would fall back to UCAS. SPA can take a view that UCAS can’t take</p> <p>Dialectical, trusted relationship between SPA and HEPs. SPA careful in not judging institutions whilst giving examples of best practice</p> <p>Embedded within sector and networked with other institutions like QAA</p> <p>Can identify where the sector is going and what the challenges are. Have finger on the pulse of HE. Institutions are happy to talk frankly and openly with SPA, not that many organisations have that level of trust, legitimacy and engagement with HEPs</p> <p>SPA is proactive in identifying future developments. Helps HEPs to respond more</p>	<p>Identifying best practices may be increasingly challenging given increasing diversity in the sector</p> <p>The evidence base is weak in terms of the benefits of the good practices to institutions</p> <p>Fair admission in a marketised context requires new rulebook? Admission mercenary, it is ultimately about bums on seats. (although SPA is the only cross-sector body where institutions co-operate in a competitive area)</p> <p>Scotland could potentially have different quality agency from England</p> <p>Admissions professionals can be moved to planning, finance, or registry, perhaps decline in current admissions professional as we currently know them</p> <p>Diversity of sector and devolution of nations, competition between nations</p> <p>Push for SPA to act more like a regulator, little appetite in sector for this</p> <p>Future QAA chapter reviews of B2 might review the relevance of the Schwartz principles, but also QAA’s future unclear</p> <p>Because admissions work is becoming much more complex, case for keeping SPA focused on</p>

<p>appropriately</p> <p>Network of intelligence. Close links to some policy makers. SPA has no hidden or partisan agenda which makes them credible to work with from the perspective of other sector wide bodies</p> <p>SPA is an independent honest broker. Can provide point of view from whole sector in national consultations, e.g. QAA</p> <p>SPA could be more critical and less critical friend (contested)</p> <p>Work more at VC, Pro VC level</p> <p>If SPA is concerned with fair admissions not fair access will need to position selves – but with scope for being creative about overlaps in agendas. Will need to clarify position in relation to bodies that working in different areas</p> <p>If SPA became more strategic it could support future developments in the sector/future policy changes. This might be relevant to any future efforts regarding PQA, which is seen as a key factor in fair admissions (although SPA would need time to develop this area of work).</p>	<p>current mission rather than expand mission</p>
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4 DEMAND FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF PROVISION

4.1 Introduction

This section discusses the level of demand from HEPs for different types of SPA services and products (focusing on operational matters of what and how provision is delivered, as distinct from views on the potential future role(s) of SPA in the HE sector discussed above, although there is some overlap in this respect). It is important to note that the sense emerged from the interviews that there is some lack of clarity over what services SPA delivers and most HEPs saw SPA as a team of individual experts or a source of good practice on specific issues; they did not necessarily see the programme as providing 'services'. Nevertheless, the research with HEPs and stakeholders provides a way of assessing the continuing level of demand for types of current provision and views on the potential for new types of products and services.

4.2 Demand for different types of provision

The feedback on different types of products and services sought views on both the existing SPA provision (or those in current development), and looking at potential new types of provision emerging from the HEP feedback. Overall the consensus view emerging from the representatives of HEPs interviewed seems to be that SPA should continue to prioritise the production of good practice and then identify ways of bringing practitioners together that allows for sharing/discussion. One of biggest themes identified in the research with HEPs is whilst SPA is delivering the right services they need to be better promoted and more relevant to the breadth of the sector. With limited resources, this might mean the SPA team need to work more on focused topics and concentrate their time on dissemination of good practice and bringing people in the admissions community together. A key issue for services and products of the future will be exploring more the link between fair admissions and professionalism – what does it mean now in terms of the principles of fair admissions and what are the indicators that fair admissions is happening (particularly in the light of increased competition between HEPs, any new HE bill or any possible moves to increase regulation of the sector).

The research found there is some belief from the sector that SPA should focus more on making good practice more accessible and ensuring good practice does more to support HEPs assess their own policies and practices – i.e. help them to be more self sufficient. By doing more to help the sector access and navigate good practice and perhaps focusing more on the 'products' that come from good practice would reduce the need for visits and 1-1 support. There is also the suggestion that online learning opportunities (for example webinars) may help reach those that cannot get out to events and that would help increase efficiency of delivery.

A key debate for the future, depending on the direction of travel will be whether SPA has the appropriate skills and resources to meet these challenges. SPA staff need to be admissions experts, understand the policy and strategic drivers both in the institutions and wider community, and know how to use data. Some proposed developments to the programme may have resource implications and need new staff with new skills and/or to draw on skills from UCAS or elsewhere e.g. in web based tools and digital developments; teaching/training skills etc.

Key findings in relation to different types of SPA provision are outlined here.

Good practice guidance	There is most demand for good practice statements/briefings (92% of respondents said they are likely to use these in future). There was some demand for more 'ready to use' materials that were easily applied to different HE contexts (One person comments: <i>"SPA already produces resources that HEPs can adopt and adapt for their own uses. More of these 'plug and play' tools and modules would save HEPs effort, increase consistency and help to ensure and promote good practice in admissions across the UK."</i>). Shorter summaries for a more strategic level audience would also be welcomed. Consolidation of the online materials into a 'Toolkit' will be important to further embed the SPA materials as a coherent resource.
Events	Workshop(s) or conference(s) are seen by most as a likely way of engaging with SPA (85%). One respondent noted that more events and workshops on areas that are relevant and current with admissions staff will help to support the continuance of colleagues from different universities having good working relationships with each other.
Information exchanges ('Think Tanks') ²²	Over half (54%) were interested in National Evidence Think Tank events, which some said need to continue to be face-to-face meetings (<i>"a lot of conversations happen over snack or a lunch, sort of things you can't say publicly"</i>).
Direct support	<p>Three-quarters (75%) expect to use SPA through Guidance via telephone/email; and most (61%) indicated they are likely to use a SPA visit to the institution. One HEP respondent said: <i>"I would strongly welcome focused consultancy visits that enabled us to call on expertise to consider some of the strategic and operational challenges that we are grappling with"</i>.</p> <p>Visits currently serve two purposes – HEPs get advice but SPA learn about the sector and visits are currently an important way of ensuring SPA staff are up to date and in helping them to identify current practices. There was some evidence that offering visits as a consultancy service may help SPA move to an income generation model. HEPs felt that detailed visits and feedback on admissions policies were too much to expect from the current service but that HEPs should be able to access this on a fee paying basis. The general belief that SPA should offer a range of additional consultancy services was expressed by a range of stakeholders (and to a lesser extent by HEPs) but this was seen as a good way to ensure SPA focused on good practice as its core service.</p>
Training	Some evidence that training would be valued by the sector as very little available specifically around admissions and belief that this could be charged for at commercial rates. Whilst there was no particular interest in accredited training, training around the policy and issues for those new to admissions was of interest. The need for work on a career progression framework for admissions staff was noted by a minority but viewed as being overdue in the sector. Basic training in

²² There is an ambition to grow SPA Think Tanks into longer-term specialist groups of HEP staff to research and evaluate particular issues or elements of admissions work that need deeper investigation than one HEP working alone could accomplish, with the aim to define and refine good practice in these areas across the UK.

	fair decision-making appears to be the main aspect, although some people identified specific issues to be included (these included issues such as fee assessment, assessing international qualifications and Tier 4 considerations).
In house training	It was suggested SPA could work with a HEP or other stakeholder to develop a qualification or some form of recognition for the attributes that a professional admissions practitioner would need to do their job. SPA could develop the professional attributes that are needed for a Head or Admissions or other admissions staff. These could be self-assessment by the member of staff and could be part of a personal development plan or maybe performance appraisal. It was suggested if staff were up to speed on the professional attributes that SPA approved this could support meeting QAA standards (i.e. being able to demonstrate quality assurance).
Online training ²³	Offering online training could be opportunity for SPA but needs to be balanced against the potentially high set-up costs. Also, a lot of what is valuable about SPA's current events is the facetime and networking opportunity that is greatly reduced in online provision. One cannot have remote meetings and frank exchanges under Chatham House rules, this space for genuine exchange is becoming more important as admission becomes more competitive between institutions.
Other	Most said they would use SPA help to liaise/work with other institution(s) (58%). A private provider respondent highlighted that efforts had been made to set up a working group in the past. They indicated much interest in seeing this re-established in future.

4.3 Themes and issues identified by HEPs

There appears to be a strong belief from the sector that SPA need to be highly thematic in their work and by focusing on key issues they can put more resource into making good practice relevant to the breadth of the sector. In terms of the themes and issues identified in the research, and linked to the above discussion, there were some tensions and differences in perspectives in relation to an approach that would either: consolidate on proven good practices linking to building admissions practitioners understanding of fair admissions approaches; focus on current challenges for the sector and the implications for admissions/emerging sector responses; or continue to deliver a mix of the two. Either way the researchers concluded that rather than trying to offer good practice on all aspects of admissions SPA should focus on key themes and areas to promote good practice in fair admissions (which could link to responding to current challenges for the sector). This may mean archiving some of the existing material or deprioritising material that is not used as regularly/not as valued by HEPs. To understand the latter SPA need to make sure they have mechanisms in place to track what is being accessed and also to make the step beyond that towards developing evidence on what is making a difference to admissions in practice.

²³ The trend to fewer people at events (due to time and cost) suggests that digital technology is key to wider developments in the future. SPA are developing an on-line toolkit to enable admissions and other staff in HEPs to use and learn from our resources in good practice and professionalism. Recent developments of expanded online and digital media resources appear to have received a great deal of support from those testing them (this should support in-house training and development within HEPs).

The qualitative interviews suggest that work on contextual admissions has been of particular value and some commented that this was because there was more focus on building up the evidence base including use of external researchers to conduct a formal study. Although use of external researchers has impact on small budget it may be cost effective as it may have the potential to have a bigger impact. Contextualised admissions is an example of where HEPs and stakeholders are looking for clearer evidence. Some interviewees saw scope for a toolkit to evaluate effectiveness of contextualised admissions.

The survey of HEPs highlighted a number of themes as a potential future focus for the SPA programme and these are discussed in Table 4.2. However, there was a notable split between HEPs and other interview respondents. HEPs generally preferred the focused remit of SPA on admissions although some already drew heavily on SPA with regards to their widening participation or widening access work. Some HEPs thought help with postgraduate admissions might be welcome. Some other stakeholders saw scope to expand SPA and asked for a student-focus. HEPs voiced some concern that this might amount to ‘mission creep’ and concern that additional activities within an already small team might take away from core activities or dilute the quality of the core service offered.

The themes identified during the review as potential future focus for SPA are described here.

HE in FE	The FE sector stands out as an area for further attention. FE sector often do not have different admissions processes and policies for HE provision and therefore need support that takes account of this. The CoP approach may be helping to spread the impact but more could be done to extend its reach.
Postgraduate provision	Highlighted as increasingly important (where relevant to HEPs), and an area where HEPs would like to see more events to bring institutions together in sharing good practice. Postgraduate admission is clearly important from a social mobility and institutional perspective, there would be value for SPA to look at what constitutes good practice in this area Several respondents commented on their desire to see a workshop on the postgraduate admissions theme.
Wider changes affecting admissions	The strongest voices were around the need for admissions staff to be supported around SNC (where relevant), equalities legislation, tariff changes and curriculum reform. Admissions staff need support to help others in their institutions understand the changes happening at pre HE level as well as being able to understand the changes for themselves (for example it will frequently be admissions staff that need to inform the wider academic community about the impact of curriculum changes such as decoupling of A and AS levels). There were comments indicating interest in the opportunity for practitioners to be involved in strategic discussion about sector issues. HEP responses indicate advice and guidance on the 2017 qualification reforms would be considered extremely helpful.
Admissions practices	Themes identified include the recent trend for making unconditional offers. Comments included <i>“It would be helpful to look at good practice/fairness issues given the emerging tendency for institutions to offer incentives of various sorts for applicants to make a particular</i>

	<p><i>institution their firm choice.”</i></p> <p>Others would like to see more focus on 'direct' admissions practices, how they differ from UCAS in order to inform best practice and the applicant expectations (recognised as a challenging area).</p> <p>Other themes of interest coming out of the survey were wide ranging including: the role of the academic admissions tutor in a professional admissions operation; good practice in interviews (which may increase in prevalence as competition increases); Admissions tests (which may increase if AS levels end).</p>
Student centred approaches	<p>Several respondents identified issues in this area as one they would like to see SPA focus on in future, including: Developments related to meeting objectives relating to widening participation in HE; Developing role of admissions into enrolment and induction week planning; Work on the equality agenda and admissions. Research on the applicant experience and how admissions acts as the 'glue' between marketing and planning to encourage smarter working in HEPs for the benefit of applicants has been noted as an area of development for SPA. Quality issues within the application experience strategy and admissions/ transition process underpin most things in admissions and a leaner risk based methodology is one that SPA will need to address.</p> <p>Changes as a result of the Competition and Markets Authority have put more focus on consumer protection (the CMA/HEFCE and others focus on student/applicant protection).</p> <p>Some identified scope for liaising with other sector-level organisations to be part of a life-cycle approach to higher education support. For example, good practice in admission might align with good practice in student retention and success.</p>
Widening participation/widening access and fair access	<p>There is scope for more focus on social mobility issues particularly around possible increased used of contextualised admissions. The issues are complex and attention may need to be paid to the implications if HEPs take a more positive approach to 'Building a class'.</p> <p>Comments from a few HEPs suggested some would find more support and guidance on non-standard qualifications helpful. This would build on SPAs work in relation to the treatment of applicants with qualifications such as the Access to HE Diploma (about 25,000 applicants in England and Wales) and work with the QAA on trying to improve the understanding of HEPs in the grading and changes to the qualification.</p> <p>Other HEPs indicated they would like SPA to focus on specific topics including: guidance on admissions for refugee and asylum seekers; detailed comparative research of admissions tests in relation to WP.</p> <p>SPA has already begun work in relation to care leavers and there are many other equality and diversity issues still to address. It has been suggested SPA could initiate a benchmark survey for the sector so that individual HEPs could compare how they do.</p>
Extending focus to different student groups	<p>Some interviewees indicated that moving forward SPA could do more to look at admissions issues for those not applying through UCAS (including teacher training), and to review if SPA should look at issues around admissions for international students (in the context of a globalised HE market with growing pressures on admissions services to meet the</p>

requirements of the UK border agency).

4.4 Emerging findings

Particular opportunities and threats for SPA provision are highlighted below.

Opportunities	Threats
<p>Work more efficiently with tighter resources. Use virtual environment for support/online training More toolkit type publications, not everyone wants to read long reports Move towards centralised admissions means SPA more easily communicates with key individuals Meet FE sector needs outside community of practice Facilitate sector working together outside events Raise profile with institutions and individuals not already engaged. Raise awareness of admissions toolkits for academics in devolved admissions systems Continue working with UCAS and potentially other bodies in providing CPD for staff Offer individual level toolkits for professional admissions practice (plus institutional ones) Toolkit on contextualised admission for institutions Develop self-assessment tool for institutions Train the trainer: develop more individuals to deliver training on behalf of SPA Some demand in helping prepare for QAA audits, not only admissions but beyond More consumer-focus in admissions area Could have more events where they bring a range of key people together to discuss important issues Could offer secondments to SPA for practitioners to maintain close links with the sector, could offer secondments from SPA to keep the SPA's team's expertise up to date More co-run events with other bodies such as UUK, Universities Scotland, Equalities Unit, UCAS CPD</p>	<p>Uncertainty regarding long-term funding Balance small team capability with a range of demands SPA resources need to stay relevant in changing times Postgraduate admission, need to see further scoping of demand in sector before potential expansion into this area Danger of 'mission creep'</p>

5 IMPACT OF SPA

5.1 Introduction

A key question for the research was does SPA make a difference and how? *Particularly, what impact has SPA achieved in terms of generating positive changes to admissions policies and practices, by what processes and to what effect?* The research sought to make an assessment of the impact of SPA's activities on fair admissions, and admissions policy and practice in universities and colleges. Impact was assessed in a range of ways, with particular attention to:

- Sector views on the overall influence of SPA in driving changes in admissions;
- How HEPs use SPA and the extent to which HEPs identify benefits/changes in different areas, with particular attention to SPAs aims of driving up standards in admissions to higher education and promoting quality, transparency, reputation and fairness;
- Evidence of impact in relation to the implications for HE admissions in practice and benefits for applicants;
- Evidence of impact in relation to policy changes.

The analysis takes account of HEP feedback on the implications of the services that SPA has provided for their policies and practices, as well as the extent to which different parts of the HE sector have different needs of SPA. The extent to which SPA is a strategic influencer of admissions policy versus reactive to HEI-led developments was also a particular factor for consideration.

The SPA team and SPA Steering Group have been working to identify measures of impact, although this remains a difficult areas and the evidence base is not well developed. SPAs self-evaluation has focused on analysis of the activities (events, enquires, meetings) to understand the take-up, gaps and to collate feedback, but it is not clear the extent to which this has feed through to understanding and implementation of good practice and professionalism in HEPs. A key theme emerging from the research interviews is that more focus needs to be put on outcomes and benefits of SPA good practices and the need to deliver a more evidence-based approach to what is delivered.²⁴ The review identified a number of potential sources of new information on the impact on HEPs, however it was not possible as part of the review to systematically analyse these:

- Trends in QAA Quality Assessment/comparative data on the results of QAA assessment at HEP level to assess the extent to which changes in admissions as a result of SPA had improved HEP performance on quality measures;
- Trends in complaints received from students/comparative data on complaints as a means of assessing whether changes in admissions as a result of SPA had made a different to the applicant experience (taking account of any other changes impacting on complaints such as increased tuition fees).

²⁴ It was suggested that a national call for evidence on what has changed in the sector in admissions over the last ten years and SPAs role in that change could be completed to coincide with the 10 year anniversary of SPA (2015-16) and inform future support to HEPs.

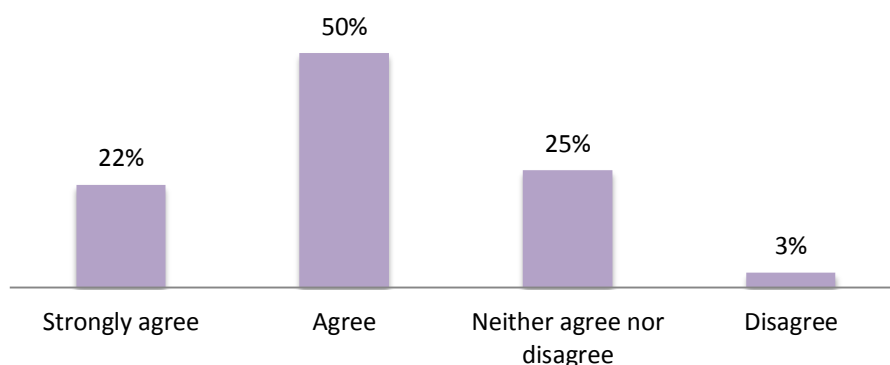
5.2 Drivers of change in admissions

Experience suggests that generally HEPs use external and internal information when they to review what they do in admissions. SPA resources are widely available and it is expected that HEPs will be able to access these over time, although SPA are currently unable to effectively monitor usage of their online materials. SPA resources on changes in admissions - especially recent materials such as on SNC changes, outcome agreements in Scotland, the QAA quality Code B2 changes, Welsh Baccaulaureate – have the potential to drive change within institutions. At the same time, internal changes may also be a driver and an area where SPA can contribute to supporting HEPs to make changes by offering good practice examples.

Survey results from HEPs suggest that most people agree that as a strategic leader in the admissions field SPA drives change, although only around a fifth strongly agree. There is a relatively high level of ambivalence (a quarter neither agree or disagree), which may reflect lack of knowledge of SPAs impact. As might be expected, the current users of SPA are more likely to see SPA as a driver.

Figure 4.1

As a strategic leader in the admissions field SPA drives change



“SPA asks institutions to examine themselves in a friendly and helpful way. Unless there are funding or freedom of information requirements, institutions can otherwise be reluctant to examine the questions SPA raises”

SPA aims to improve the level, understanding and implementation of good practice and professionalism in HEPs. Implementation of new practices is seen to be at the point of HEPs making changes in their admissions. The quantitative research with HEPs suggests that many institutions are experiencing a significant level of change in admissions:

- The vast majority (94%) indicated some recent changes to admissions policy (of which around a quarter (24%) said these were significant/substantive changes);
- Almost all (98%) indicated changes to admissions procedures (of which over two-fifths (41%) said these were significant/substantive changes); and
- Most (86%) said there had been changes to admissions organisation (26% had significant/substantive changes to admissions organisation).

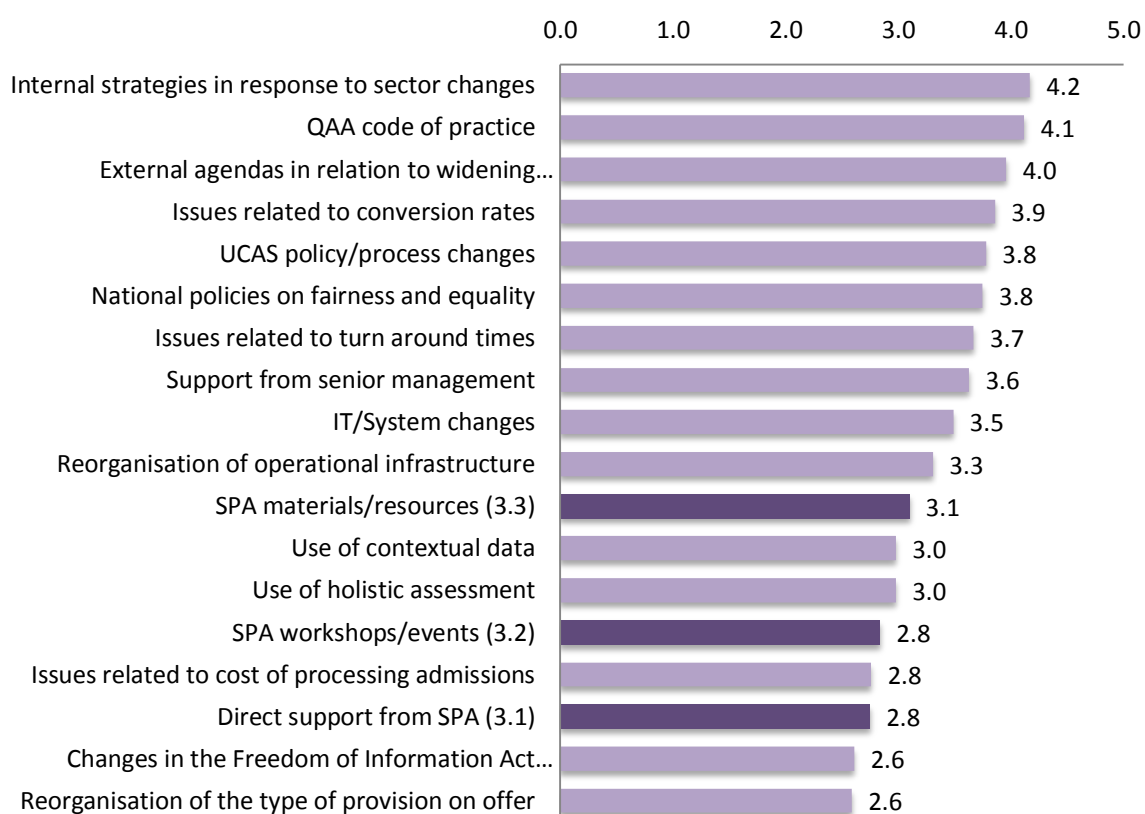
A handful of HEP respondents referred to the fact that SPA can be ignored if HEPs chose to (as was a concern from stakeholders). Clearly this is an issue for the impact and effectiveness of SPA since the programme will only have an impact if HEPs are open to implementing policies and practices in a way that generates change, given the institutional autonomy of HEPs.

“as a HE provider we want to do things the right way but it is not possible to adopt every best practice”

The online survey was used to gather perspectives on the importance of various aspects in driving any changes which were identified as having taken place in institution level admissions policies and practices in recent years (since 2011) (on a scale of 0 to 5 (where 0 = ‘not at all important’ and ‘5’ = ‘very important’). The results, presented in Figure 5.1, suggest the following, in order of most importance across the sample as a whole:

- Internal strategies in response to sector changes came out as the most important driver of admissions changes (4.2 out of 5 in importance on average).
- The QAA Code of Practice was found to be the next most important driver of change across the sample of institutions (rated 4.1 out of 5 on average);
- External agendas in relation to widening participation/widening access and growth in sector have also been relatively important (4.0). National policies on fairness and equity were mentioned by fewer respondents overall as being important although these come out as important for some institutions (3.8); followed by use of contextual data (3.0);
- Issues related to turn-around times were high up on the list of drivers for a large number of institutions with change in admissions policies and practices (3.9 in importance on average), followed by issues related to conversion rates (3.7);
- UCAS policy/process changes were said to be a relatively important driver of recent changes in admissions (3.8), and some respondents identified an important driver as being IT/System changes (3.5);
- Reorganisation of operational infrastructure in the institution was important in just under half (49% of cases) (rated 3.3 in importance on average), and reorganisation of the provision on offer had driven change for 23% (rated 2.6 in importance on average);
- In relation to way of assessing and selecting applicants, the use of holistic assessment had been an important driver of changes for well over a quarter of institutions in the sample (rated 3.0 in importance on average);
- Issues related to cost of processing admissions were identified by around a quarter in being an important driver although overall this came out as a less major factor underpinning recent changes in admissions (2.8);
- Changes in the Freedom of Information Act (right to feedback) were rated as 2.6 in importance on average, although just under a third (31%) said this had been an important driver in their particular institution.

Figure 5.1: How important are the following in driving changes in your admissions, on a scale of 0 to 5 (where 0 = 'not at all important' and '5' = 'very important').



*Figures in parenthesis refer to scores from SPA users as opposed to the overall sample.

5.2.1 Influence of different SPA provision on changes in admissions

Results in relation to the influence of SPA in driving changes in institutional level admissions policies and practices suggest that SPA materials/resources have the most direct impact across the board rather than workshops/events and direct support, reflecting the fact that more HEPs have used the materials/resources than more direct support services. Support from Senior Management/ Executive/Vice Chancellor comes out as relatively more important overall in driving any changes that have taken place at institutional level: 63% overall said this had been important or very important (rated 3.6 in importance on average). Figure 5.1 ranks the various SPA drivers in the context of other drivers of changes in admissions order of importance (based on the overall HEPs responses on a scale out of 5). SPA activities with less take-up will have had less impact on the sector overall. For those who have used them, SPA activities appear to have made a difference although the strength of the impact is only strong for a minority of HEPs (figures in parenthesis are for SPA users only). SPAs influence needs to be seen in relation to the other drivers of change:

- Two-fifths (39%) of HEPs with changes in admissions who used SPA good practice rated it as extremely or very important in importance in driving changes, and a further 35% said it was 'moderately' important. The following were highlighted in HEP comments as being particularly useful in supporting changes: Admissions complaints, interviews, criminal convictions, mistakes in admissions decisions; Good practice in considering applicants with disabilities; Guidance on

QAA changes; contextual data, admissions policies, and preparation for Confirmation and Clearing.

- Around a third (30%) with changes in admissions who attended SPA events rated them as extremely or very important in driving changes, and a further 37% rated them as moderately important.
- A quarter of those with changes in their admissions who had direct support (institutional visit or direct contact with staff) rated it 4 or 5 in importance in driving changes. A further 37% rated the direct support as moderately important.

SPA links to HEPs in various ways and has to balance breadth and depth of contact across the sector. This needs to be borne in mind when thinking about what works to generate the greatest impact: work with individual HEIs to review their admissions practices is generally considered to be usually very successful but time intensive, and therefore has to be balanced in terms of return on investment and fit with the objectives. However, the programme has clearly been keen to work with individual HEPs on a one-to-one basis and this is found to be beneficial to all HEPs through the process of learning and feeding into the general development of ideas and good practice.

In general, it appears changes in admissions in the sector tend to be through internal process of reflection and looking at what others are doing. Comments from Admission's Managers suggest that SPA is a 'go to' source when work on new or updating admissions policies and practice is required.

5.3 Impact of SPA at Institutional level

5.3.1 HEP policies and procedures

Commonly interviewees (mainly admissions managers and heads of admissions) referred to SPA as a 'change agent' with a role in *spreading good practice/improvements across the sector*. The impact that SPA has had appears to be in parallel with other influences on HEPS: SPA is likely to be only one element in the equation.

The results of the online survey, outlined in Table 5.2, suggest that overall SPA influence more HEPs in these areas: dealing with specific applicant issues; dealing with complaints and appeals; processes to assess applicants; applicant feedback. Overall across the sample of respondents the impact has been less in: admissions to part-time and flexible provision; the applicant experience strategy; age and admissions; dealing with non-standard qualifications. At the same time the strength of the influence tends to be 'moderate' in most cases. Some of the HEPs in the sample identified very strong impact in terms of how they deal with the context for HE operations (identified as very or extremely influential for 34%). A quarter (25%) said SPA had been extremely or very influential in how the plan and manage their admissions processes.

Table 5.2: Please indicate how influential support of any kind from SPA has been in relation to different aspects of your operations

	Extremely influential	Very influential	Moderately influential	Slightly influential	Not at all influential	Count	Average (out of 5)
How you deal with specific applicant issues	8%	25%	29%	27%	10%	59	1.95
Dealing with complaints and appeals	2%	38%	19%	34%	7%	58	1.93
Dealing with the context for HE operations	17%	17%	26%	20%	20%	54	1.89
Processes to assess applicants	3%	33%	21%	31%	12%	58	1.84
How you plan and manage your admissions processes	5%	20%	34%	34%	7%	59	1.83
How you give feedback to applicants	5%	24%	31%	24%	16%	58	1.79
How you make offers	3%	19%	36%	26%	16%	58	1.69
How you assess the applications you receive	0%	20%	42%	20%	17%	59	1.66
Applicant experience strategy	2%	19%	32%	20%	27%	59	1.47
Age and admissions	2%	10%	17%	45%	26%	58	1.17
Dealing with non-standard qualifications	2%	12%	17%	36%	33%	58	1.14
Admissions to part time and flexible provision	0%	6%	9%	31%	54%	54	0.67
Other areas*	0%	23%	31%	46%	0%	13	1.28

*Other areas mentioned included: communicating and documenting policies, improvement in terms and conditions of offer, response to QAA, criminal convictions.

In order to assess differences in influence on different types of institutions, the scores at provider level were aggregated to get an overall sense of the influence across all aspects of admissions. Analyses of these results suggest that SPA has had most influence on average on HEPs with ‘mixed’ admissions. The scoring of influence on HEPs with centralised admissions was only slightly below that on average for mixed system HEP, however, those with devolved admissions did not rate the influence as highly on average. HE in FE providers rated SPAs influence higher on average than HEIs. The average score on influence was highest for medium sized providers (5,000-15,000 FTE students), followed by small providers (less than 5,000 FTE). Large institutions scored SPA less on average and the very large institutions had the lowest average score.

Overall the results of the survey suggest SPA appears to have made more inroads in to HEPs admissions procedures and processes than policies, although in the qualitative fieldwork HEPs most frequently interviewees referred to guidance on admissions policies, contextualised admissions work, and guidance on admissions interviews as having most impact. Examples were identified in the research of HEPs using SPA materials in a wide range of circumstances: e.g. SNC changes, Outcome agreement requiring CA in Scotland, QAA quality Code B2 changes and internal changes such as a restructuring following a new VC arriving, or a new IT system. Qualitative research suggests in some cases use of SPA guidance has coincided with other key drivers for changes in admissions, a key one being the imperative to reduce HE costs, e.g. through a move to centralised organisation.

“Even with increased competition and different fee categories across the UK, Admissions Managers generally try to ensure decisions are made in a fair and transparent manner and SPA guidance is invaluable in this regard”

Not all institutions have the same level of maturity in all areas of admissions policy and practice, however the feedback from HEPs suggests that the consideration and application of SPA resources provides a good basis for making enhancements.

Box 5.1

HEPs were asked if possible to give example(s) of ways in which SPA has informed policies or practices in admissions (survey responses December 2014). The results of the survey and qualitative interviews highlight that SPA has most commonly played the following to roles:

Meeting standards	<p><i>"We annually use the guidelines to directly inform our policies and procedures and update them and this helped us also prepare for our recent QAA review."</i></p> <p><i>"We have amended our processes in how we deal with specific applicant issues in response to SPA's guidance."</i></p> <p><i>"I think in general it has just been in helping us to communicate the policy in a proper way and to make sure that we have it documented in an orderly manner which is easy for students and stakeholders to reference."</i></p> <p><i>"Tightening up of admissions policy and admissions guidelines, the improvement of our terms and conditions of offer. General guidance has been invaluable."</i></p> <p><i>"The workshop we attended on the QAA has really informed how we look at the Admissions Policy and what we include"</i></p>
Benchmarking	<p><i>"We routinely benchmark our policies, for example on dealing with criminal convictions, against the SPA best practice guidance."</i></p> <p><i>"Useful point of reference on wider sector practice and or constraints, particularly when faced with institutional pressure to adopt a behaviour which may be helpful in income-generation terms but is unhelpful in terms of applicant experience"</i></p> <p><i>:...excellent expectation benchmark"</i></p>
Documenting processes	<p><i>"...re-wrote the admissions policy in the light of information provided by SPA."</i></p> <p><i>"Use SPA's information on fair admissions to influence the way admissions is carried out across the university"</i></p> <p><i>"...currently made changes to our criminal convictions process and have utilised the SPA good practice guidance to do this"</i></p>
Planning admissions operations	<p><i>"It provided a really useful basis to plan Confirmation and Clearing - lots of elements that I might not have thought of, alone, or even in consultation with staff."</i></p> <p><i>"...particularly helpful in a tariff review changes and impact on applications choice and behaviour. In addition helping with 'gathered field' concept and number planning on popular courses"</i></p>
New policies	<p><i>"...providing frameworks for us to consider options, and in ensuring that new and revised policy and practice is approved and embedded, by enabling us to refer to expertise from an impartial external body."</i></p> <p><i>"Have used many of the online resources in developing our own policy"</i></p>

	<i>statements, and the information and signposting has been very useful”</i>
	<i>“Very helpful in development of our Contextual Admissions Policy”</i>
	<i>“Our use of contextual information and considering applicants who declare a criminal conviction”</i>
Checking cases	<i>“I contact SPA on a frequent basis for advice over difficult cases, just to ensure we are treating the applicant in a fair and consistent manner. they are experts in terms of fairness and transparency in admissions”</i>

5.3.2 Building expertise of admission staff

It was noted that admissions in HE is often one with a high turn over of staff with promotions or moves to other areas, indicating on-going need for the resources to build and maintain a level of expertise. HEPs clearly use SPA as a staff development opportunity, and feedback from individuals shows that the knowledge and insights gained through contact with the SPA programme can build their confidence and help them to operate more strategically. Some individuals have linked to SPA over time across several institutions, taking the knowledge and expertise on admissions practices with them (for example, transferring particular learning into different contexts). There was some indication that professionalisation through SPA may have helped to retain some individuals in admissions posts.

5.3.3 Impact on applications to HE entry

The review group was concerned to test whether SPA has made any material difference to the situation of applicants and potential applicants to HE, and specifically under-represented groups of applicants. Systematic evaluation of this level of impact is difficult although the research sought to draw on HEP and stakeholder views in order to provide some sense of the implications of SPA in this respect. SPA considers its role to include supporting IAG on progression to HE/increasing transparency to applicants and advisers, in particular through the applicant experience approach. It is acknowledged that there is not enough good quality IAG for applicants and their advisors, but working with applicants and their advisors is not considered part of the core business. SPA understands its core business to be to support HEPs to do this better through improved transparency in entry criteria, information on courses, and in areas such as feedback to applicants, use of entry profiles, the KIS and clear conversion engagement. The feedback from HEPs was that links to SPA had led to changes in these areas: feedback to applicants was identified in particular (linked to new requirements to provide information to those who apply).

SPA has been able to shine a spotlight on some emerging practices, to encourage HEPs to think carefully about their impacts for applicants. Perspectives of pre-HE and other representatives on the Steering Group were that SPA provided a means of raising issues with the sector, and that SPA had helped to mitigate risks of potentially unhelpful practices as a result. This is an example of SPA taking a strategic role and a more critical approach.

HEPs generally preferred the focused remit of SPA on admissions although some drew heavily on SPA with regards to their widening participation/widening access work. SPA appears to have helped to embedded policy changes that promote widening access to HE. The SNETT review outcome on contextual admissions was useful in getting HEPs, Education Scotland, SFC and Scottish Government to work together to achieve the aims of WP. Whilst some stakeholders saw scope to expand SPA and

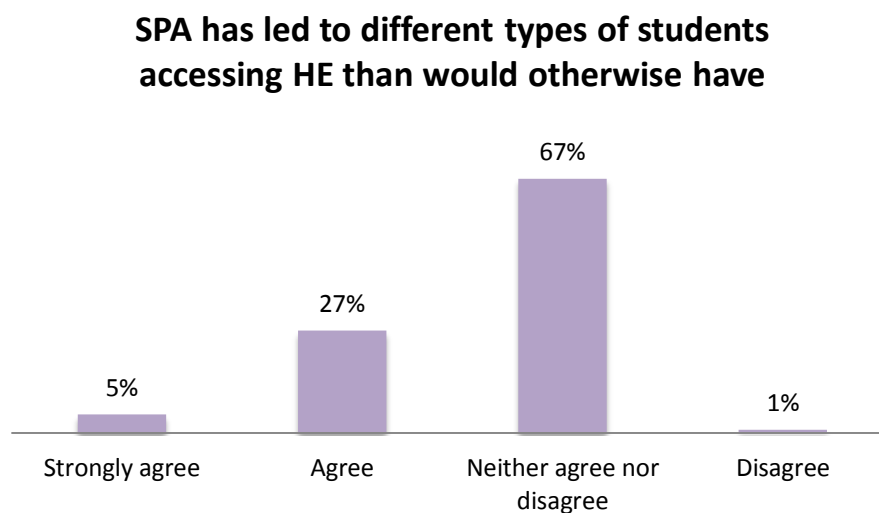
asked for a student focus, HEPs voiced concern that this might amount to ‘mission creep’. Some respondents expressed the view that UCAS had repositioned itself as primarily serving applicants and this had increased the importance of SPA as a practitioner facing body. However, the research with HEPs suggests that the dichotomy between serving applicants and institutions is somewhat misconceived as admissions professionals also have serving applicants at the heart of their systems and a fair admissions system for applicants makes institutional sense. There was a feeling among practitioners that SPA is supporting students by supporting professionals.

“As director of admission, I want students to have a very positive experience of applying to university, I am not interested in putting barriers in their way and I am not interested in creating a complicated system for the benefit of the institution”

“It is a student-facing system... the world has flipped in the last 10 years, students have a choice where they go and they take the money with them. The concept of there is “THEM” the students and “US” the professionals in admission is a false dichotomy”

There is however a lack of evidence as to whether SPA has made a difference to the types of students accessing HE than otherwise would have. There was some support for this idea at HEP level – around a third either agreed or strongly agreed – and some examples found in interviews. The largest group however appeared to lack information to assess whether SPA had made a difference (67% neither agreed nor disagreed).

Figure 5.3:



Box 5.2: HEP level perspectives on benefits for applicants

Example 1

The Head of Admissions from one large university spoke positively and enthusiastically about the tangible effects engagement in the SPA programme has had on their institution. In particular, he valued the ‘impartial evidence base’ upon which he could draw and which added weight to proposed changes to admissions policies and practices that needed to be implemented within the institution. Work carried out to articulate entry criteria for each programme had been a direct result of working with SPA and the Head of Admissions was confident that this had a positive impact on recruitment, ensuring the ‘right’ students were applying and accepting places. The institution did acknowledge that evidencing this impact in a quantifiable way was not easily achieved, especially given that the

institution had undergone major internal reorganisations which mean isolating cause and effect was not feasible. The institution was also able to identify the SPA programme as major influence on the university's practices around unconditional offer making. Again the weight of SPA and the good practice documentation allowed the Head of Admissions to 'shift' the senior management team and the results, in his opinion, is a much fairer system than originally proposed.

Example 2

The Admissions Manager from the college spoke positively about their engagements with the SPA programme and were in no doubt that the support received had moved their HE admissions policies and practices forward in a significant way. As a 'tool for change' the work of SPA had provided the staff with 'the conviction they needed to establish new ways of working' and the view is that the college is now better placed in the HE market and are recruiting the 'right' kinds of students. The SPA programme was deemed to have been particularly valuable in developing practices relating to admissions interviews and admissions decision-making; the Admissions Manager felt this had resulted in 'removing barriers for applicants'. The college were proud of their excellent QAA audit and there was a strong belief that their connection to the SPA programme had supported this outcome.

5.3.4 Policy level impact

Overall, influencing wider relevant HE policy is not a role SPA has actively played, although this might have been expected in terms of providing a strategic lead to influence policy approaches. SPA has influenced some areas of policy, for example having an influence on support in government for endorsing contextual admissions. SPA has also helped to implement policy in Scotland by helping to develop a framework for contextual admissions. SPA has met regularly with Welsh Government officials on issues of contextual admissions and contributed to ongoing review of HE in Wales.

In general SPA's approach appears to have been one of 'behind the scenes', and the programme could have made a difference: affecting QAA is a key point – it is unlikely the code would have included fair admissions to the same extent and as this is one of the most significant drivers of institutional change it could be argued it is the biggest win for SPA at this strategic level. However, more work is needed to evaluate the impact of this (for example examining institutional QAA reports to establish whether is any trend towards improvement against relevant aspects of the code).

Research with policy makers showed that stakeholders use their contact with SPA to get a closer understanding of the sector, SPA represents the views of admissions sector to them. Although there were no specific examples of the difference that made, there was a sense that decision makers were in touch/had a beneficial understanding of needs and issues of HEPs through their relationship with SPA.

"...of direct benefit [to policy maker] as communication with SPA allows reach into the sector and vice versa"

"...communication between funding councils and HEPs is very prescriptive and SPA is a mechanism for better dialogue"

5.4 Value for money

Value for money was considered from the perspective of economy of the services (cost to deliver), the efficiency of services (relationship between level of activity and inputs) and effectiveness

(relationship with the outcomes achieved). The review has found an impact but a lack of rigorous evaluation strategy for SPA means it is difficult to judge, however given the small resource of SPA it seems more than proportionate to the financial input. Clearly SPA costs over and above the direct funding levels because some support is in kind from UCAS. Lack of data on how far SPA is reaching (i.e. no data on who is using good practice and no attempt to assess their engagement in the full breadth of the sector) also makes value for money (VFM) difficult to assess.

It is however clear that HEPs are getting value for money as staff have access to free services that are highly rated and which save them time and effort in conducting their own research and establishing the best ways of working (the review found that if SPA did not exist then HEPs may still seek to ensure fair admissions but the process would take more time and perhaps get they would get their more slowly). Without SPA, work on fair admissions would be more resource intensive for HEPs or they would need to seek external consultancy support (with higher costs and possibly less expertise, and potential for less consistency across the sector and nations).

Clearly the largest cost to SPA is staff and the generally agreed view is that for a small team they pack a punch. Interviewees frequently commented on the scale of what they achieve given their small resource. Almost all acknowledged their professionalism, expertise, energy and accessibility that adds to the picture that the money is well spent.

5.5 Emerging findings

The assessment of impact of SPA identified some strengths in the current model, as summarised below, but also some issues relating to the extent of impact across the sector as a whole and how it is measured.

Strengths	Issues
<p><i>Institutional level impact</i></p> <p>SPA has a level of recognition amongst admissions practitioners and is considered to save HEPs time and effort in terms of accessing good practices from other HEPs</p> <p>For some admissions practitioners SPA is a 'go to' source and is seen as an essential service</p> <p>SPA is acknowledged as informative on a range of current and upcoming, and has helped HEPs to respond to policy changes</p> <p>SPA highlights good practice</p> <p>SPA has helped or triggered institutions to formalise admissions criteria</p> <p>SPA resources are a 'tool for change'. Resources for sharing good practice and getting ideas</p> <p>Adds value to what HEPs are doing by enabling them to benchmark against sector wide practices</p> <p>Sense that has impact at institutional level and had helped to professionalise the sector</p> <p>Helpful to some HEPs in specific areas:</p>	<p>Engagement with institutions can be 'reactive' based on existing networks, could be more proactive in engaging with new institutions and especially with recruiting institutions</p> <p>Not everyone will read guidance notes and good practice even when they exist</p> <p>Lack direct engagement with senior management and VCs</p> <p>SPA works with admissions and outreach staff who can lack internal clout</p> <p>Weakness in terms of evaluation of impact of the good practices. Move beyond account of activities to account of impact</p> <p>SPA needs to do more to measure the impact of different strands of work. Some areas may be more conducive to measuring impact than others. For example, SPA could identify impact of their work by examining whether QAA audits are stronger in institutions working with SPA in relation to the QAA requirements</p>

<p>developing a criminal convictions policy; contextual data useful; unconditional offer making and applicant interview feedback; competition law</p>	<p>Advice given by SPA can be ignored by institutions Good practice is only useful when current, this can change quickly</p>
<p><i>Impact on applicants/HE entrants</i> Feeling among practitioners that SPA is supporting students by supporting professionals HEPs want student-facing systems and SPA supports this: students have a choice where they go and take the money with them</p>	<p>The impact of SPA on institutions developing policies or the make-up of students can be difficult to quantify The general belief is that schools, colleges and learners are not aware of SPA (although disagreement as to the importance of this).</p>
<p><i>Policy level impact</i> Although SPA mainly service HEPs other stakeholders benefit. Government departments and representative bodies seek SPAs advice SPA are well recognised by institutions and feature heavily in OFFA statements, especially with regard to good practice in admissions SPA has helped the funding council understand the complexities in admissions Have influenced a change in government, for example in endorsing contextual admissions Helped Scotland develop a framework for contextual admissions</p>	<p>SFC cannot use SPAs work to judge institutions progress to fair admissions Some of the impact of SPA e.g. professionalising the sector, influencing the QAA introduction to Chapter B2, can be difficult to quantify</p>

6 FUNDING

This section summarises the current funding arrangements before going on to look at findings in relation to different models of funding explored in the fieldwork, including opportunities to generate income. It discusses the willingness of users of SPA services to meet core costs through a subscription or capitation model, or through a paid for consultancy service or on a pay per use basis, and compares other organisations which have gone down the route of HEP funded provision. It reviews the results from the consultations and online survey of HEP staff, and provides some emerging conclusions.

6.1 Current funding arrangements

The SPA programme was fully funded from 2006 (for two years in the first instance, subsequently extended) supported by the HE funding councils of the UK, and hosted by UCAS²⁵. The HE Funding Councils from all parts of the UK, along with UUK, funded SPA until 2012-13, with HEFCE being the major funded and with UCAS providing an in kind contribution. The current SPA programme costs approximately £410k in the current year (down from just under £440k in 2013-14). The funding profile for the last three years by source is given in Annex 4. The funding arrangement for the three years to July 2015 involved a budget based primarily on joint funding from HEFCE and UCAS (with UCAS funding ramping up as HEFCE funding declines), with additional support from DELNI and UUK. The SPA Director worked to gain additional sources of funding from HEFCW,²⁶ from the SFC for project work in Scotland, and the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU). While some of this additional funding is a small proportion of the SPA's operating budget, it represents the symbolic buy-in sending a signal to the sector regarding the value these organisations attach to SPA.

In addition to direct funding, the programme receives funding in kind from UCAS (including facilities and HR support), which means that the true cost of running the service is higher than their level of funding. UUK also provides funding in kind for staff time to act as a broker for SPA to access networks and contacts through UUK.²⁷ The budget is managed by the Director and Head of Professionalism in Admissions in collaboration with the UCAS Finance Business Partner who works with the SPA Director to monitor monthly expenditure.

Insecurity in funding has been a threat to the delivery of SPA objectives, and time and energy has been spent negotiating funding (which has not always come to fruition). Ideally moving forward SPA should aim to secure funding agreements over a period of years (at least 3) in order to ensure medium term sustainability and credibility with HEPs, and to allow for more concentrated efforts on the delivery of the objectives.

Staffing accounts for the majority of funding through pay, with the other main funding headings being expenditure to support travel/visits/meetings and SPA conferences and events. Funding from HEFCE and the other funding councils is approved via an annual grant letter to UCAS, and the UCAS Board approves the UCAS funding contribution.

²⁵ SPA is not a separate legal entity and an organisation is needed to host SPA and employ staff. UCAS and HEA were put forward as initial options for hosting, and a choice made for UCAS to maximise potential benefits in terms of the common focus on admissions policies and practices.

²⁶ HEFCW have funded every year except in 2013-14 and are funding in 2014-15.

²⁷ Valued at £7.5k per annum.

As part of the online survey, HEPs were asked to indicate how they think SPA is funded. The results suggest relatively low awareness amongst HEPs of the funding arrangements for SPA. There was a high level of none response to this question (24%), and of those who did respond around a large group (15%) said ‘don’t know’. The largest group (49%) said SPA is primarily funded by the funding councils with contributions from UUK and UCAS; and a small number said it is funded by government (7%), or by UUK (2%). A fifth (22%) said it is primarily funded by UCAS with contributions from funding councils and UUK.

6.2 Funding options

UCAS have expressed willingness to continue to fund SPA subject to the results of the current review and Board approval. Limited financial support from DELNI, UUK and HEFCW also appears to continue to be available, but with only short-term guarantees. Options for funding from the SFC might become available at some stage in future but may require SPA to develop a framework to assess the impact of institutional work on contextualised admissions.

No other existing funders of SPA (or indeed any other stakeholder organisation) gave an indication that they would be willing to fund SPA during the review process. Partnerships/project work funding has a potential contribution to make but does not offer a route to sustain the core SPA services and level of provision. Opportunities for tapping into OFFA/WP funds, recognising the overlaps between SPAs work on fair admissions and OFFA’s interest in fair admissions was raised during the review; with the suggestion that institutions could pay for the part of SPA’s work that deals with widening participation from their widening participation budgets, especially given that most agreements are already in place. However, there is a distinction between this area of SPA’s work and the work that serves to enhancing professionalism in admissions more generally which might be a stretch to justify coming out of WP ring-fenced funds. This resource does not exist in Scotland or Wales.

The current research was designed to further explore the range of options. Overall there was no obvious solution that addresses all the expectations/wishes of the sector. Findings in relation to different funding options explored through the research are summarised in Table 6.1, with further elaboration of the data below.

Table 6.1: Funding options

Option	Opportunities	Issues
UCAS primary funder of SPA Core funding (capitation method)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> UCAS represent whole of UK (but not full breadth of sector) Worthy of note that some HEP respondents thought increase of UCAS fees was most realistic way forward (<i>‘we have to pay UCAS fees so it’s the easiest way to get it approve at the college’</i>) Opportunities exist for joint programmes to be developed/strengthened (research/data analysis & CPD) Strategically SPA and UCAS should be well aligned 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HEP respondents have low preference for increase of UCAS capitation fee Tensions between UCAS and SPA relating to SPA operating independently but funded/line managed through UCAS would need to be resolved Very strong views in sector about implications for the perceived independence of SPA. Strengthening membership/role of SPA Steering Group could help

		mitigate this risk, though governance would be different from usual UCAS practices.
<p>UCAS primary funder of SPA supported by income generation</p> <p>Core funding (capitation method) plus income from training provision and consultancy services</p> <p>Income from doing research projects</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could develop core service (good practice, workshops) that is 'free' at point of use. Some evidence of demand for paid for services which could be targeted (e.g. at institutions with devolved admissions) • Opportunities exist for income generation through project based work in partnership with others • Fee for annual conference (for example current FE in HE conference) is considered legitimate, and likely to be accepted by sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paid for services (training and consultancy) could be tested • Income generation through SPA services could enhance reputation/value of the programme within UCAS • Development of paid for services will require increase in resources at least in short term
<p>SPA as a membership based organisation</p> <p>SPA becomes independent body - Company limited by guarantee & registered charity (for example HEA, ECU)</p> <p>Funded through membership fees & commercial services, plus externally funded projects</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SPA could consider a hybrid model whereby institutions pay a basic membership fee for basic services and then pay additional for some specialised services, this could include visits to the institution as well as conferences and training. • If institutions have to pay for SPA, this will increase scrutiny from the sector • UCAS could continue to offer some funding in line with its charitable aims (may or may not include hosting) • Guild HE & UUK could share their learning/expertise • If membership of SPA was linked to QAA, direct membership could be encouraged/made compulsory • SPA could bid for resources from OFFA source 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other organisations are currently being reviewed (HEA, QAA), institutions may want certainty about other additional costs before committing to funding SPA • Skills of existing SPA team would need to be reviewed & possibly enhanced • Would likely lead to reduction in coverage/use of services • Sustainability an issue • High risk strategy without a core funder • When institutions are making cuts to core academic staff, difficult to make a case for spending money on third parties • Hard to see how SPA could survive the change from central funding to a subscription model (i.e. whereby HEPs pay a subscription to access a range of SPA provision) in a way that saves their independence and keeps buy-in from the sector

6.2.1 Sector views

Whilst there is some degree of acceptance that it is HEPs who benefit from SPA and therefore they should fund the service, the majority of the respondents in the online survey expressed the view that SPA should be supported in future by the higher education funding councils with contributions from others such as UUK and UCAS (66% of HEPs who responded said this). Other options supported by some respondents were: By UCAS with contributions from others such as funding councils and UUK (11%); by UUK with contributions from others such as funding councils and UCAS (11%); by government (9%). Key issues raised were in relation to ensuring coverage across the whole sector, plus a concern for independence of SPA as an organisation outside the control of any other. Typical comments included: *“By being funded through agencies which themselves are funded by HEIs this ensures equal coverage across the sector and a greater level of independence”* and *“...what we want is a good source of advice and guidance across the sector, regardless of an HEIs ability to pay. I think SPA service is too important to become a 'nice to have' rather than essential”*. Other concerns raised through the fieldwork were to avoid a piecemeal approach to funding, and to achieve a degree of sustainability. The funding cycle should be over three (or even five) years.

These views were echoed by some stakeholders who felt that a paid for service or subscription based service would take the sector backwards. Lack of engagement with SPA would affect the applicant experience.

“Need a service open to all otherwise no organisation concerned about the greater good”

There were many comments in the qualitative interviews and online survey of HEPs relating to the implications of different funding models on the independence of SPA, and a concern that the funding model does not compromise the direction of the service (see Box 6.1 for examples). It was particularly important to respondents that SPA was independent from UCAS. Such independence did not have to entail independence in terms of the collection of funds for SPA or geographic location but independence in terms of governance was considered to be crucial. The research found that HEP concerns about independence centred on perceptions about UCAS’ responsiveness to the requirements of HEPs, the numbers of staff at UCAS without hands on admissions experience, and worries that SPA’ activities might become more focused on full-time undergraduate admissions rather than covering the whole admissions landscape.

Box 6.1: HEP views

A key theme arising in relation to funding was the implications of funding on the perceived independence of SPA. Examples of comments taken from the online survey included:

“If possible it would be preferable for SPA to be funded completely independently of UCAS in order to ensure integrity and avoid external influences”

“I think it is important to have SPA as neutral and not one organisation having a bigger influence than another. From the options listed, it seems UUK would be the most impartial”

“Part of SPA’s value lies in its independence from UCAS, which is gradually being eroded as more emphasis is placed on funding from that source. While it is positive that UCAS have plugged the funding gap to enable SPA to continue, this is not the ideal long term position”

“I think it’s important that the funding councils/UUK evidence their support for the work of SPA by at least part-funding its work. Given UCAS’s role, it’s important that it has a stake in SPA, but I would be very wary of UCAS being the major funder”

“Actually happy with the capitation fee approach - but not via UCAS” and “...incorporate into wider subscription e.g. UUK (as effectively now via UCAS), less of an issue - on assumption that the amount currently being paid via UCAS subscription could be transferred”

6.3 Potential for HEP funding contribution

Only one HEP respondent indicated a preference in support of charging HEPs for services. It was clear that the current financial climate was an issue, but also implications for take-up and independence, with HEPs concerned that paid for services could ultimately limit the effectiveness of SPA and the benefits it delivers to the sector.

*“Finding budget to take part will be an issue and risks fragmenting participation by partners”
“If HEI are asked to pay for this they are less likely to access the services, meaning the reach and impact of SPA would be reduced”
“If SPA went to an HEI-funded model my concern would be in relation to its perceived independence and also the need to secure buy-in from enough HEIs in a challenging financial situation”.*

Whilst there was limited support for charging HEPs, however in view of ending of funding council support some identified a preference for a mixed model which includes UCAS, UUK funding councils and perhaps a contribution from HEP's.

*“If incorporated into wider subscription e.g. UUK (as effectively now via UCAS), less of an issue - on assumption that the amount currently being paid via UCAS subscription could be transferred”
“We already pay for these services within the contributions we make to the various agencies”*

Well over a third (37%) in the online survey who responded to the payment question said their institution would not be prepared to pay for services to support professionalism in admissions and fair admissions (Figure 6.1). Of those that would be prepared to pay, the largest group said they would pay only for specific events, visits or advice applicable to their own institution (33%). However, over a fifth would be prepared to pay for good practice and information services to be available to the whole sector but want to pay for specific events and visits separately (22%), and a small group said they would be prepared to pay to enable a wide range of services to be available to the whole sector (7%). The responses indicate an ‘in principle’ position – costs were not identified and in practice not all respondents had the final say on spending decisions.

Based on those who responded:

- The FE sector seems particularly unlikely to pay for SPA: 44% of HE in FE providers compared to 30% of HEIs would not pay for provision.
- Medium sized HEPs (5,000-15,000 students) were most likely to say they would not pay. Over half (55%) of medium size would not pay compared to 29% of small HEPs (<5,000 students) and 37% of large HEPs (>15000 students).
- Most HEPs who were non-users of SPA were not willing to pay - note this is a small sample (4 out of 6 who responded to that question). The others would pay for specific events, visits or advice applicable to their institution.
- Those who said they only use SPA for general advice were least likely to say they would not pay (30%) compared to those who had used SPA on specific issues relevant to their institution.

- Amongst all types of users the type of support used didn't make much difference – the % not willing to pay was the same whether HEPs had received direct support from SPA staff or not.
- Those whose undergraduate admissions was described as 'Mixed' (different approaches depending on School/Faculty/Department) were more likely to say they would not pay (58%) compared to those with fully centralised undergraduate admissions (applications, decisions and processing all dealt with centrally, 31%) and those with devolved decision making (39%).

Figure 6.1: To what extent would your institution be prepared to pay for services to support professionalism in admissions and fair admissions?



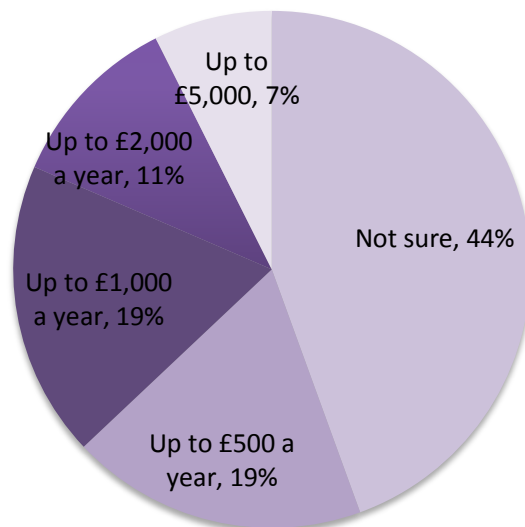
6.3.1 Levels of support from HEPs

Amongst those that indicated a willingness to pay, there was some reluctance by HEP respondents to put a price on SPA services, with 44% being unsure on the level of financial commitment their institution would be willing to make (some of which indicating they were not in a position to comment on behalf of their institution). The largest group who gave a figure (19%) said they would pay up to £1,000 a year, as shown in Figure 6.2. *Note the responses on funding are filtered since some respondents said they would not be willing to pay except for a specific conference or event, or had a preference for the cost to be incorporated into an existing subscription.* As noted a small number of respondents identified willingness to bear a relatively small (c.£500-£1k) for core guidance/advice, but additional costs for events and tailored visits at the request of institutions.

In most cases responses appear to be based on the view of respondents about the level of cost which the institution might be willing to bear given current budgetary constraints although some factored their response on calculation of how actual costs might be apportioned across the sector.²⁸ Some respondents indicated that the level of support would depend on the funding model identified, or in relation to the other demands for funding (for example a number of respondents indicated that their contribution would be limited given UCAS capitation rates are increasing).

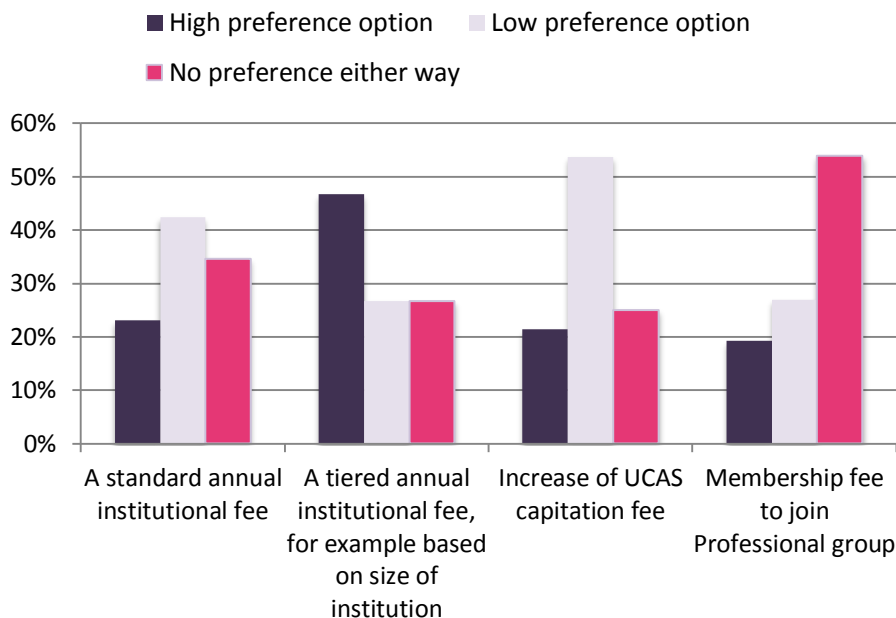
²⁸ For example, one respondent noted the following calculation in their response: "330 HEP's divided by 450k = £1363 each pro rata by size would mean small pay £500 later up to £2k for example".

Figure 6.2: The current SPA programme currently costs around £450k per year to deliver. On this basis please indicate the approximate level of financial contribution your institution would be prepared to make each year:



HEP respondents appear keenest on options that take into account the size of institution. In relation to possible funding models, a tiered annual fee comes out as the preferred option overall across the sample (47% said this was their high preference option), followed by an increase in the UCAS capitation fee (Figure 6.3). There was some expectation from some admission staff that they could not continue to expect a free service – but expressed hope that costs could would not come out of their existing budget.

Figure 6.3: Please indicate your preference for the following funding models:



There was some suggestion that mixed funding models might be possible with HEPs supporting some specific aspects of the work from which they benefit, in conjunction with alternatively funded core provision. Some thought it appropriate for SPA to charge institutions for some services (perhaps

focussed consultancy visits requested by an institution, working to an institution's brief) and for specific events/workshops. A fee for an annual conference may be acceptable to the sector. In many ways this was seen as a way of enabling wider good practice guidance, for example, to be available across the whole sector and not just to those who can afford to pay for them. A few respondents identified they may be prepared to pay both a small generic fee, along with some costs for specific events. However, at least one of these respondents felt charging would reduce the level of engagement the institution could have with SPA events.

At the same time, in view of the current financial constraints on HEP budgets, charging as part of current HE subscription rather than direct payment seems to be preferred. This reflects a view by many admissions practitioners expressed at interview that payment from HEPs for SPA via existing budget lines would be more palatable and easier to justify, not least because this is more likely to be accepted by HEP finance officers rather than appearing as a new charge (i.e. some respondents said that a separate invoice which would need to be picked up from core budgets may be harder to justify and administer). Several people in qualitative interviews said payment via a capitation fee was a good solution, although comments from the online survey highlighted that others thought this should not be via UCAS.

6.4 Models and links to other HE funded provision

There are several examples of higher education sector initiatives that have successfully based their operations on support from the HE sector. Annex 5 provides an overview of the remit and funding of several sector-funded organisations. These vary in size and in terms of the mix of resources from HEPs and other funders. Most of these HE sector bodies are established as charities and are of the nature of a 'professional body' (which is defined as a non-profit organisation seeking to further a particular profession, the interests of the individuals engaged in that profession and the public interest). Some specifically focus on professional development activities whilst others are representative organisations seeking to represent the HE provider members with government and in public life. Others work to facilitate sharing at the level of HE professionals through discussion fora. The list includes some newer types of organisation that aim to maximise the use of new technology (e.g. WONKHE, supported by university partners).

Whilst the examples given in Annex 5 demonstrate some potential for sustainable models of provision based on HE sector support, the overriding conclusion of the research was that the current financial climate is not conducive to adding to this list. Indeed feedback in HEP interviews was that HEPs are looking to cut down the list of bodies that they support financially. Moreover the experience of those who have gone down this route suggests that putting efforts into sustaining the provision based on this type of approach of membership/subscriptions is perhaps not to be recommended since it inevitably diverts attention away from meeting the core objectives and core delivery.

At the same time the following opportunities were identified:

SPA already has close links with many of the sector bodies with an equalities remit such as the Equality Challenge Unit (funded through the UK HE funding bodies and representative organisations). Whilst there does not seem any potential for core funding support from these sources, there may be some potential for continued project based work on a small scale.

SPA may benefit from putting increased efforts into linking to other stakeholders including the representative organisations. This might help to spread the influence of the materials and raise the profile of the programme. Depending on future budget constraints, consideration should be given to seeking reimbursements of costs for SPA attendance at meetings held by representative bodies, funding councils and other stakeholders (i.e. to ask these organisations to consider supporting expenses associated with the SPA inputs).

There are a some examples of bodies with a specific remit on professional development and training of HE staff, including the Association of University Administrators (AUA) (which offers careers enhancement opportunities, networking opportunities) and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) (which focuses on building management and leadership skills of existing and future leaders of higher education). Both of these gain support via individual membership fees. The later was established by UUK and GuildHE and with significant funding from the four higher education funding bodies of the UK, whereas the AUA is based on membership subscriptions and has lower staffing and capacity. It is unlikely that admissions professionals would be willing to bear the cost of SPA professional development as individuals however SPA could perhaps look to link with these bodies to explore the extent to which there might be an interest in commissioning CPD modules/programmes from SPA. Input into existing career development programmes may help spread the skills and knowledge on issues of fair admissions more widely whilst adding value to this type of provision.

6.5 Emerging findings

SPA is a shared resource that the HE sector benefits from but the incentive structure of higher education is shifting towards individual payments for individual services. The challenge here is to preserve this shared resource for the benefit of all institutions. SPA provides efficiencies for the sector since it saves HEPs time and effort in conducting their own research to establish good practice ways of working in admissions.

To gain sustainability SPA would ideally avoid a piecemeal approach to funding and achieve a model that promotes the best involvement of the breadth and depth of HEPs across the sector and nations. A piecemeal approach could also risk that overheads for administering payments would increase the costs of running SPA.

Overall there was no obvious solution that addresses all the expectations/wishes of the sector. Funding SPA via UCAS (capitation fee) has the advantage of being applicable throughout the UK regions, however the majority view is that governance would need to be completely separate.

7 KEY FINDINGS AND FUTURE PROPOSALS

7.1 Findings for how Supporting Professionalism in Admissions can best be provided

The research explored the comparative value of different types of activities as well as for the overall SPA programme. The results suggest future activities will depend on the roles identified and the priority target groups. The research did not identify services or activities that should be reduced/stopped, but there are delivery constraints and recommendations in terms of how services are targeted and promoted. There are also opportunities for more efficient and consolidated delivery e.g. via digital channels, although there would be initial set-up costs involved.

In terms of 'what works' to get fair admissions and professionalism, the provision of good practice materials appears to be a minimum, and may work best when supported by opportunities for HEPs to discuss and share approaches in context.

There is scope for developments on:

- Consolidation of good practice materials into the development of training content and/or training for admissions professionals;
- Products targeted at strategic level;
- More research/development of the evidence base for fair admissions working in partnership with HEPs but also involving stakeholders where appropriate (for example working with QAA to assess impact in fair admissions work with institutions on quality assessments).

The dissemination plan should consider differentiating services and products by SPA audiences, e.g. online training for new admissions practitioners and academic admissions decision-makers, specialist workshops and sessions for institutions to support on-going professional development, executive summary materials for strategic level.

The world of HE admissions is becoming more complicated, with devolution, diversity in the sector, and increased marketization. In this context, SPA will need to continue to focus its work thematically and be able to identify what the good practices are and provide the evidence for this. There are a wide range issues facing admissions professionals and directions in which SPA could travel. Further work is needed to identify and agree the areas where SPA should have most focus, based on where the need and impact will be greatest. Forthcoming challenges in the sector, particularly changes to the tariff will present new areas where SPA support may be needed across the sector.

A key issue is likely to be the continuing need to prioritise out of a plethora of issues that could be addressed. Strong mechanisms to support how SPA sets its objectives and workplan are needed. The SPA Steering Group is useful in bring a wide range of perspectives to the table. The role of the group could be strengthened by work to identify clearer measurable objectives and reporting of outcomes and impacts.

The core service should be equally applicable to whole of UK. However, SPA needs to give more focus to how good practice can be applied in different contexts (as should also strengthen the relevance of the good practice to different types of HEPs). If other bodies wish to fund enhancements within the different nations then this would be a way to add value to the existing levels of service.

7.2 Issues of governance

Issues of governance appear to have particular significance relating to the independence of the programme, how it is perceived by the sector and how it positions itself. Operating in a way which enables close and trusted relationships to develop benefits the programme, with SPA staff being in a position to find out about current admissions practices and identify future trends or concerns. The current governance arrangements have supported the programme to concentrate their attention on the fair admissions agenda and to a large extent allowed the programme to set the objectives and the delivery plan.

At the same time, whilst the perceived independence of SPA is a valuable asset, and benefits the admissions community, there may be limitations in relation to the extent to which the current arrangements have supported agendas that reflect the objectives of funders and external demand for evidence of impact.

The sector are cautious of UCAS being the sole funder of SPA as they believe SPAs focus on fair admissions will be compromised and the concern is that SPA becomes a team of UCAS and is driven by the wider objectives of UCAS. The reality is as potentially the primary funder and 'home' of SPA there will likely be changes to how the service is managed and the challenge is ensuring this does not allow SPA staff and HEPs (who strongly value the neutrality of SPA) to become disengaged.

7.3 Proposals

SPA is highly valued by the sector and there is evidence that it has a positive impact on processes, practices and policies, and it is recommended that the programme should be sustained.

Good practice should be at the core of the service and that it should have a role in supporting those delivering admissions services. If considered appropriate, UCAS could support SPA to target key messages at those individuals/organisations that make strategic decisions and other policy makers.

If UCAS decides to continue to fund SPA, the feedback from HEPs suggests there is a demand for at least the same level of service as currently provided and therefore funding at at least the same level is likely to be required. At the same time SPA could start to develop an income generation plan such as charging for training, conferences and possibly offering paid for consultancy to HEPs that need detailed support, taking account as far as possible of the risks involved in moving from free to paid-for events. The core service could then be open to all HEPs who use UCAS and possibly the team could focus on increasing the quality of their underpinning research and broadening the relevance and reach of their work (for example, UCAS could think about developing a small team of Associates who could be seconded to work with SPA on an ad hoc basis to meet peaks in demand for paid for services).

UCAS's agenda supports fair access in HE admissions and therefore strategically the two organisations could be more closely aligned.²⁹

Opportunities for greater synergy between UCAS and SPA should be explored:

- UCAS should support SPA to build the evidence base for the benefits of good practices to institutions, for example by developing a joint research strand.
- UCAS and SPA could work together on developing joint training, including if considered appropriate developing a framework and programme for the professional development of different grades of admissions staff.

Support from UCAS to SPA on data collection and analysis could also be appropriate. There may also be opportunity for UCAS to help SPA to be closer to schools sector and so ensure good practice is reflective of needs/issues identified by pre HE sector.

The perceived risks which could arise from UCAS funding SPA i.e. disengagement by the sector if SPA is perceived as a part of UCAS rather than an independent programme, and potential loss of expertise of SPA staff valued by sector, should be mitigated by maintaining governance through the SPA Steering Group. The work of Steering Group should be strengthened to ensure there are clearer measurable objectives and performance indicators.

HEPs would like the funding councils to continue to support SPA financially, even if this is to a small amount, in order to add to the legitimacy of SPA as a service for all types of HEPs (including non-UCAS customers).

The funding councils and UUK should also continue to play a role in supporting the governance and direction of travel of SPA via the Steering Group, and in identifying areas where SPA could make most impact to current policy agendas on fair admissions, widening participation, and the student experience.

SPA, its funders and the HE community including UCAS and UUK should work together on a programme of building the evidence base for fair admissions and in this way support the development of clear practice and policy messages for the sector.

²⁹ UCAS is a registered charity. Details of charitable objects at <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/about-us/our-charitable-objects>

Annexes

ANNEX 1: PROFILE OF STAKEHOLDERS AND HEPs INCLUDED IN THE RESEARCH

1a) List of organisations - stakeholders and partners - included in interviews

	Partner*	Stakeholder	Funder	Number of interviewees
SPA				6
UCAS	Y		Y	5
UCAS Board Chair	Y		Y	1
UCAS Board Member	Y		Y	1
QAA		Y		1
OFFA		Y		1
NUS	Y			1
Universities Scotland		Y		2
SPA SG Chair	Y			1
BIS	Y			1
HEFCE	Y		Y	1
HEFCW	Y		Y	2
Scottish Funding Council	Y		Y	1
DELNI	Y		Y	1
UUK	Y		Y	2
Guild HE	Y			1
Universities Wales		Y		1
Association of Colleges	Y			1
HELOA		Y		1
ECU	Y			2
Association of school and colleges leaders (ASCL)	Y			1
Russell group		Y		1
TOTAL interviewees				35

*Delivery staff, supporting delivery, involved in SPA governance structure

1b) HE provider qualitative interview sample breakdown

	HE Institution	FE College	Other	Total
England	9	4	1	14
Northern Ireland	1	0	0	1
Wales	3	1	0	4
Scotland	3	1	0	4
Total	16	6	1	23

1c) Profile of HE provider respondents to the online survey

Which of these best describes your institution:

	Small (less than 5,000 FTE students incl postgraduate if applicable)	Medium (more than 5,000 less than 15,000 FTE students)	Large (more than 15,000 less than 30,000 FTE students)	Very large (30,000+ FTE students)	Total
HEI	14 (18%)	12 (15%)	24 (31%)	6 (8%)	56 (72%)
HE in FE	7 (9%)	1 (1%)	3 (4%)		11 (14%)
Other	2 (3%)				2 (3%)
Not stated					9 (12%)
Total	23 (29%)	13 (17%)	27 (35%)	6 (8%)	78 (100%)

Where in the UK are you:

	Number	% of those who responded
England	41	53%
Northern Ireland	1	1%
Scotland	12	15%
Wales	1	1%
Not given	23	29%

Are you a member of any of the following groups:

	Number	% of those who responded
UUK	21	38%
AoC	5	9%
Guild HE	15	27%
HEA	4	7%
University Alliance	2	4%
Million +	2	4%
The Russell Group	11	20%
None of the above	8	15%

N=55

Which of these best describes your main area(s) of responsibility:

	Number	% of those who responded
Undergraduate Admissions	46	87%
Post graduate Admissions	33	62%
Part time admissions	27	51%
Student recruitment	14	26%
Widening participation	17	32%
Applicant experience	17	32%
Other*	4	8%

N=53

* Included Executive, Overall student experience, curriculum and quality, Policy, Programme Director

Which of these best describes your current position:

	Number	% of those who responded
Admissions Manager	18	35%
Head or Director of Admissions	23	45%
Head or Director of Marketing	1	2%
Pro-Vice-Chancellor/Vice-Principal	3	6%
Academic Registrar	2	4%
Head of Student Services/Experience	2	4%
Head of Widening Participation	3	6%
Recruitment /widening participation staff member	1	2%
Other*	1	2%

N=51

*HE development manager

ANNEX 2: RESULTS OF THE ONLINE SURVEY

Contact with SPA

Has your institution had any contact with the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) programme?

	Total	%
Yes	67	86%
No	3	4%
Not sure	8	10%

How would you describe the type of use you have made of SPA? (tick all those that apply)

	Total	%
General information relevant to the higher education sector	60	90%
Support on specific undergraduate admissions issue(s) in your institution	44	66%
Support on specific postgraduate admissions issue(s) in your institution	8	12%
Other	8	12%

Please tell us which SPA services you/other staff members have used in the last two years (since 2012): Please tick all those that apply

	Total	%
Attended SPA workshop(s) or conference(s)	51	76%
Took part in a National Evidence Think Tank event(s)	19	28%
Engaged with SPA at other events e.g. UCAS, ARC-APG events, Participation in PVC networks	52	78%
SPA visit(s) to your institution	37	55%
Consulted with SPA staff directly (in person/telephone/mail)	40	60%
Used SPA online resources	60	90%
Emails from SPA	50	75%

Frequency of use of SPA

	Total	%
Often (fairly frequently on a regular basis)	38	57%
Occasionally (a few times only)	25	37%
Not used in last 2 years	1	1%
Not stated	3	4%

Who attends SPA workshops/conferences (where applicable)

	Number	%
Head or Director of Admissions	41	69%
Head or Director of Marketing	1	2%
Pro-Vice-Chancellor/Vice-Principal	1	2%
Academic Registrar	1	2%
Head of Student Services/Experience	2	3%
Head of Widening Participation	12	20%
Head of Equality and/or Diversity	1	2%
Admissions Manager(s)	47	80%
School/Faculty/Department Admissions staff	16	27%
Admissions tutors	6	10%
Recruitment staff	7	12%
Other	4	7%

Have you used any SPA statements or guidance on Good Practice in admissions?

	Number	%
Yes	60	90%
Not sure	3	4%
Not stated	4	6%

Influence of SPA

Please indicate how influential support of any kind from SPA has been in relation to different aspects of your operations:

	Extremely influential	Very influential	Moderately influential	Slightly influential	Not at all influential	Count	Average (out of 5)
How you deal with specific applicant issues	8%	25%	29%	27%	10%	59	1.95
Dealing with complaints and appeals	2%	38%	19%	34%	7%	58	1.93
Dealing with the context for HE operations	17%	17%	26%	20%	20%	54	1.89
Processes to assess applicants	3%	33%	21%	31%	12%	58	1.84
How you plan and manage your admissions processes	5%	20%	34%	34%	7%	59	1.83
How you give feedback to applicants	5%	24%	31%	24%	16%	58	1.79
How you make offers	3%	19%	36%	26%	16%	58	1.69
How you assess the applications you receive	0%	20%	42%	20%	17%	59	1.66
Applicant experience strategy	2%	19%	32%	20%	27%	59	1.47
Age and admissions	2%	10%	17%	45%	26%	58	1.17
Dealing with non-standard qualifications	2%	12%	17%	36%	33%	58	1.14
Admissions to part time and flexible provision	0%	6%	9%	31%	54%	54	0.67
Other areas	0%	23%	31%	46%	0%	13	1.28

Please indicate the extent to which you agree/disagree with the following:

	Strongly agree		Agree		Neither agree not disagree		Disagree		Count
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
SPA has led to different types of students accessing HE than would otherwise have	3	5%	18	27%	44	67%	1	2%	66
SPA is a useful resource that responds to what institutions say they need	33	50%	23	35%	10	15%		0%	66
SPA responds quickly to	31	47%	25	38%	9	14%	1	2%	66

strategic agendas as they emerge									
As a strategic leader in the admissions field SPA drives change	14	22%	32	50%	16	25%	2	3%	64
SPA is able to proactively anticipate change	18	28%	26	40%	21	32%		0%	65
SPA's independent steering group ensures that its work reflects the needs of the whole sector	22	33%	26	39%	17	26%	1	2%	66
SPA is relevant for all parts of the UK	18	28%	28	44%	18	28%		0%	64
SPA is relevant for all types of higher education admissions	23	35%	31	47%	11	17%	1	2%	66
SPA's brand is well known and widely recognised across the HE sector	15	23%	35	55%	10	16%	4	6%	64
The growth of the HE marketplace and increasing competition will mean SPA's role will change in future	3	5%	34	52%	27	41%	2	3%	66

Feedback on SPA

Please rate your experience of working with SPA:

	Overall experience of SPA		Workshops/ events (where applicable)		Resources/g uidance (where applicable)		Institutional visits (where applicable)		Direct support from SPA staff	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Very positive	41	73%	31	58%	38	66%	25	74%	34	83%
Positive	12	21%	17	32%	19	33%	8	24%	6	15%
Satisfactory	3	5%	4	8%	1	2%	1	3%	1	2%
Less than satisfactory			1	2%						

Future demand

Which types of services currently provided by SPA are you likely to use in future (please tick those you are likely to use):

	No		Not sure		Yes	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Workshops or conferences	3	5%	6	10%	52	85%
National Evidence Think Tank	5	8%	23	38%	33	54%
Consultancy visit to your institution	1	2%	23	38%	37	61%
Guidance via telephone/email	1	2%	14	23%	45	75%
Help to liaise/work with other institution(s)	5	8%	21	34%	36	58%
Good practice statements/briefings		0%	5	8%	59	92%

Please read the list below and tell us to what extent your team/your institution would have an interest in using the following types of admissions support services in future:

	Not sure		Would not be interested in using		Yes, Would possibly be interested in using		Yes, Would definitely be interested in using	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
A resource which provides strategic leadership on what constitutes fair admissions	4	7%	1	2%	18	31%	35	60%
Research benchmarking the validity and fairness of different admissions practices	4	7%	2	3%	25	43%	27	47%
Continued professional development (CPD) courses for admissions professionals	4	7%	7	12%	18	31%	29	50%
Accredited training programme for admissions professionals	9	16%	4	7%	23	40%	21	37%
Online training modules for admissions decision-makers	3	5%	3	5%	18	31%	34	59%
Institution-specific support for HEPs under-going QAA inspection	13	22%	4	7%	19	33%	22	38%
Quality assurance / 'kite-marking' of admissions processes	14	24%	7	12%	22	38%	15	26%
Workshops/discussion forums on admissions policies and practices	3	5%	1	2%	18	32%	35	61%
Strategic level group to explore and respond to sector issues which affect admissions	8	14%	1	2%	19	33%	30	52%
Good practice in postgraduate admissions	7	12%	6	11%	20	35%	24	42%
Good practice in working with school liaison officers	9	16%	5	9%	35	60%	9	16%

Funding Issues

How do you think that SPA is funded today?

	Number	%
Funded by the government	4	5%
Primarily funded by the funding councils with contributions from UUK and UCAS	29	37%
Primarily funded by UCAS with contributions from funding councils and UUK	13	17%
Primarily funded by UUK with contributions from funding councils and UCAS	1	1%
Don't know	12	15%
Not answered	19	24%

How do you think that these services should be paid for in the future?

	Number	%
By charging higher education providers for these services	1	1%
By the government	5	6%
By the higher education funding councils with contributions	35	45%

from others such as UUK and UCAS		
By UCAS with contributions from others such as funding councils and UUK	6	8%
By UUK with contributions from others such as funding councils and UCAS	6	8%
Not answered	25	32%

To what extent would your institution be prepared to pay for services to support professionalism in admissions and fair admissions?

	Number	Per cent of all (of respondents)
Not prepared to pay for these services	20	26% (37%)
Prepared to pay for good practice and information services to be available to the whole sector but want to pay for specific events and visits separately	11	14% (20%)
Prepared to pay only for specific events, visits or advice applicable to my institution	19	24% (35%)
Prepared to pay to enable a wide range of services to be available to the whole sector (e.g. good practice, advice, events, visits)	4	5% (7%)
Not answered	24	31%

The current SPA programme currently costs around £450k per year to deliver. On this basis please indicate the approximate level of financial contribution your institution

	Number	%
Not sure	12	44%
Up to £500 a year	5	19%
Up to £1,000 a year	5	19%
Up to £2,000 a year	3	11%
Up to £5,000 a year	2	7%

Please indicate your preference for the following funding models:

	High preference option		Low preference option		No preference either way		Count
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
A standard annual institutional fee	6	23%	11	42%	9	35%	26
A tiered annual institutional fee, for example based on size of institution	14	47%	8	27%	8	27%	30
Increase of UCAS capitation fee	6	21%	15	54%	7	25%	28
Membership fee to join Professional group	5	19%	7	27%	14	54%	26

Institutional admissions and changes

Have there been any changes to admissions policies, procedures or organisation at your institution in the last two years (since 2012): (Please indicate the types of changes)

	No changes		Some small changes/alterations		Some changes/changed in part		Significant/substantial changes		Count
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Changes to	3	6%	25	46%	13	24%	13	24%	54

admissions policy									
Changes to processes	1	2%	10	19%	20	37%	22	41%	54
Changes to organisation	2	4%	13	24%	19	35%	14	26%	54

Respondents by type of admissions system and whether there have been any changes in admissions in last 2 years

	Changes in admissions		No changes		All	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Applications arrive at the centre, decision-making is devolved, the centre then processes them	16	30%	1	4%	17	22%
Applications arrive at the centre, decisions and processing are devolved	1	2%	2	8%	3	4%
Applications, decisions and processing are all dealt with centrally	17	32%	1	4%	18	23%
Mixed: different approaches depending on which School/Faculty/Department	14	26%	1	4%	15	19%
None of the applications work is done centrally, it is entirely devolved	4	8%		0%	4	5%
Not stated	1	2%	20	80%	21	27%

How important are the following in driving changes in your admissions, on a scale of 0 to 5 (where 0 = 'not at all important' and '5' = 'very important')

	Not at all important					Very important		Count	Average
	0	1	2	3	4	5			
Internal strategies in response to sector changes	0%		4%	18%	37%	41%	51	4.2	
QAA code of practice	0%	2%	6%	16%	31%	45%	51	4.1	
External agendas in relation to widening participation and growth in sector	0%	2%	6%	20%	39%	33%	51	4.0	
Issues related to conversion rates	2%	2%	10%	14%	39%	33%	51	3.9	
UCAS policy/process changes	4%	0%	6%	22%	41%	27%	51	3.8	
National policies on fairness and equality	0%	0%	16%	20%	39%	25%	51	3.8	
Issues related to turn around times	2%	2%	14%	16%	43%	24%	51	3.7	
Support from senior management	2%	0%	14%	22%	43%	20%	51	3.6	
IT/System changes	2%	4%	10%	27%	41%	16%	51	3.5	
Reorganisation of operational infrastructure	4%	8%	12%	27%	27%	22%	51	3.3	
SPA materials/resources	4%	4%	18%	35%	31%	8%	51	3.1	
Use of contextual data	6%	14%	14%	24%	29%	14%	51	3.0	
Use of holistic assessment	4%	16%	12%	33%	18%	18%	51	3.0	
SPA workshops/events	8%	8%	16%	37%	24%	8%	51	2.8	
Issues related to cost of processing admissions	0%	18%	24%	33%	16%	10%	51	2.8	
Direct support from SPA	6%	8%	24%	37%	20%	6%	51	2.8	
Changes in the Freedom of Information Act (right to feedback)	4%	24%	18%	24%	25%	6%	51	2.6	
Reorganisation of the type of	2%	25%	22%	22%	22%	8%	51	2.6	

provision on offer								
Other	33%		33%	33%			3	1.7

ANNEX 3: REVIEW OF HE TRENDS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING PROFESSIONALISM IN ADMISSIONS

<i>HE Trend</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Implications for SPA</i>
<p>Diverging HE policy context The policy contexts in the UK nations</p>	<p>SPA aims to support HEPs on specific aspects of policy or issues that are a concern and increasingly these vary depending on the administration e.g. support to HEPs with regard to SNC in England; on contextualised admissions under outcome agreements in Scotland; in measuring and targeting disadvantage in Northern Ireland from an admissions perspective. Feedback from HEPs collated by SPA comment on the importance of support to HEPs in a changing environment. HEPs are clearly appreciative of the supportive role of SPA and indication is HEPs need more support as they review policies and procedures in response to changes.</p> <p>SPA staff members are proud of how the programme has engaged with each administration of the UK on their particular issues as well as UK wide issues. Being a valued, reliable, objective and trusted broker between HEPs, between HEPs and stakeholders and between HEPs and policy makers, is considered a key area of success by those involved in delivery of the programme.</p>	<p>There are differences in engagement as the diversity in policy and practices continues to develop. The issues of cross border flows are likely to become more significant.</p> <p>SPAs funding from UCAS and UUK enable the programme to have a UK wide remit even if the programme is not funded by all the various administrations. The work would not focus as much on specific issues in the nations without funding (appears from the research to be a practical matter of resources rather than any lack of willingness by SPA to engage).</p> <p>More divergence is likely in the HE policy context around the UK, and implications in relation to changes to who funds SPA and what for. In light of emerging issues for HE admissions (relating to for example the role of UCAS in providing application services to applicants and HEPs, contextual data policies, student support funding, tuition fees etc.) support to HE admissions is likely to need more sustainable models round the UK.</p>
<p>Quality developments in HE Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is tasked to monitor the extent to which HEPs meet their quality assurance responsibilities</p>	<p>SPA has been a key member of the steering group of the revised 2013 QAA Quality Code Chapter B2 on Recruitment, selection and admission³⁰. One respondent noted that without SPA representation, the word fair admission might have been dropped from the Quality Code.</p>	<p>Chapter B2 of the quality code was revised relatively recently (October 2013) and will thus remain in operation for several years. This means that the integrated reference to SPA in this chapter will remain something quality assurance professionals will look at consulting in preparation for reviews for the foreseeable future.</p>

³⁰ Working with the QAA and colleagues on chapter B2 of the Quality Code relating to our work on admissions <http://www.spa.ac.uk/support/goodpractice/admissionspolicies>

HE Trend	Comments	Implications for SPA
	<p>The quality code also refers to SPA guidelines as examples of further resources for good practice.</p> <p>SPA have continued to support all HEPs in considering and implementing the QAA Professional development requirement.</p> <p>UCAS and SPA have worked together in the provision of CPD for HEP admissions staff.</p>	<p>Changes in quality review, leaner risk based methodologies will become commonplace and SPA will need to adapt.</p> <p>In relation to development of training, there is scope for further coordination at a strategic level between SPA and UCAS to lead on/meet the professional development needs of admissions professionals.</p>
<p>Diversification of HE context</p> <p>In the last years, HE policy changes have created a greater degree of diversification in the UK HE system.</p>	<p>SPA background documents identify new HEPs as a clear target group however it is not clear how this will be achieved.</p> <p>Continued divergence of the sector and increase in private provision. Means establishing good practice more challenging than ever.</p> <p>Considerable structural changes in FE sector (mergers, closures).</p> <p>In terms of any demand that SPA currently cannot meet (in both scale and nature of work), there appears to be a demand to visit individual HEPs on certain topics that are exercising them/their senior managers particularly institutional restructuring and planning and managing admissions.</p> <p>Smaller or newer HEPs can also have particular development needs associated with establishing admissions operations or developing policies potentially with less resources than some of the larger HEPs.</p>	<p>If anything, level of risk is increasing for individual HEPs and for the HE sector in general. With lessened controls and increasing competition, the need to demonstrate a fair admissions process is greater than ever. If admissions practices are perceived as unfair or unprofessional, controls or other constraints on HEPs may be reintroduced.</p> <p>The demand is likely to grow from institutions new to offering HE, such as new private institutions but also potentially FE colleges.</p>
<p>Increased marketization</p> <p>Changes in tuition fees starting with the Browne Review have created new drivers in the HE</p>	<p>A lot of cross-sector organisations work is in uncontested areas, whereas SPA is working in an area where institutions compete against each other. Some confusion in sector over what fair admissions actually looks like in a marketised environment.</p>	<p>There are perceived to risks that changes in HE policy, or the increasingly competitive environment, could put pressure on institutions to cut corners or adopt admissions and recruitment practices that are potentially unfair</p> <p>Broadly there is a question as to whether the principles</p>

HE Trend	Comments	Implications for SPA
market place.	<p>Some belief in the sector (mainly from partners & stakeholders) that the principles of fair admissions are becoming less relevant.</p> <p>A number of people have speculated that demand for SPAs services would drop in the increasingly competitive environment, other respondents and the SPA team identified that admissions staff remain keen to network with colleagues at events and to exchange information under Chatham House rules. The take up of good practice materials appear to remain strong, especially as in many cases hard pressed admissions staff can use what SPA produce and adapt it for their use, saving them time and effort in some areas.</p> <p>Sharing of practices and collaboration between the sector is in the spot light because of competition law and this has potential to affect any organisation that operates in supporting good practice (or at least the sector perceive this to be a potential threat).</p>	<p>related to a marketised environment and the principles (and therefore the work of SPA) need to be about how to 'compete fairly'. It is suggested that work needs to take place to affirm or change the principles of fair admissions as SPA moves forward. However, this work would distract a small team from their core business and perhaps therefore there needs to be thought about who/how this could happen in practice.</p> <p>The competition between institutions has also led some respondents to note that they wish SPA to continue to provide face-to-face events. Such events are particularly conducive to informal or confidential networking and support. There was concern that online events would not be able to create the same atmosphere of trust and co-operation. 'Think Tank' style meetings under Chatham House style rules are welcomed to encourage a frank exchange of information.</p>
<p>HE Policy on students</p> <p>Key policy responses have included enhanced focus on 'students at that heart of the system' and a focus on progression to informed student choices.</p>	<p>The CMA/HEFCE interest in consumer (student/applicant) protection and the need to explain to prospective and current student what their consumer rights are, and changes to funding and finance, and the needs of the student consumer.</p> <p>Admissions processes are being more closely considered within a wider student experience (and therefore importance of high quality admissions service more important than ever).</p>	<p>Several respondents pointed out that separating out a student focus and a fair admissions focus was setting up a false dichotomy. The consensus view emerging was that by working to enhance admission students and applicants are better served (See also section 4.2)</p>
<p>Widening Participation (WP) and HE Access</p> <p>The Office for Fair Access</p>	<p>The SPA Steering Group has encouraged discussion of the overlap between SPAs work on fair admissions and OFFAs interest in fair access.</p>	<p>Sector bodies with a remit for WP and equality value SPA expertise (as well as HEPs).</p> <p>Funding Councils would welcome strengthening of the</p>

HE Trend	Comments	Implications for SPA
(OFFA) in England ³¹ requires HEPs wishing to charge maximum tuition fees to agree an Access Agreement to identify mechanisms to support fair access.	SPA joint projects with other organisations appear successful at adding value to the sector e.g. working with ECU on Equitable admissions for underrepresented groups and equity and diversity issues in Scottish Colleges from an admissions perspective; working with ButtleUK on supporting care leavers through admissions. It was suggested (although not tested in the research) that some institutions cite SPA and specifically adherence to SPA guidelines in their OFFA returns. OFFA cites SPA in guidance notes.	evidence base in relation to the benefits of admissions policies and practices to WP.
Contextual admissions	Related to WP and Access, SPA's role in developing the evidence-base and guidelines for the use of contextual data in admissions was welcomed by practitioners. The research suggests that SPA is the only organisation currently doing this type of work at a national level, and has built up important expertise in this area.	There remains a demand for sector-wide reviews of policy areas such as the use of contextual data in admissions.
Concern with PG access	SPA's main remit is undergraduate provision but has included references to postgraduate provision in recent documents. SPA has not had postgraduate provision as a main objective, however their objective 4: "to examine and develop good practice for the collection and use of applicant information via direct application" could encompass postgraduate (and part time) issues.	This would appear to be an increasing priority given the recent focus on fair access to postgraduate education (discussed further in section 5).
Resourcing in the HE sector	Funding of higher education has undergone changes, alongside the wider reforms of the sector, and there has been a shift in how HEPs obtain resources and the conditions on their funding through different funding streams. In general, there is a shifting from central	Potential payment for SPA programme comes at a time when budgets are being squeezed and other organisations such as the HEA and QAA are undergoing funding changes. The impact of resource constraints may be particularly (but

³¹ Under the Higher Education Act 2004

HE Trend	Comments	Implications for SPA
	<p>provisions from central funding to individual institutions paying for specific services.</p> <p>Several interviewees have commented on the specific issue of HEPs being expected to pay for services that were previously free or having subscription rates increased or having free 'core' services but having to pay for additional extras.</p>	<p>not exclusively) felt in the FE sector where it is becoming increasingly costly to deliver the HE aspect of provision.</p> <p>During the fieldwork, it was also noteworthy that the Welsh and Scottish institutions felt there were very small institutional budgets available that could possibly be used for resourcing SPA. The feeling was that English counterparts might have larger budgets because of the ring-fenced OFFA funds.</p> <p>Several respondents noted that UCAS had recently announced an increase in the capitation fee by £2. In this context some respondents questioned if the sum already included a levy for SPA, and said they would be concerned about any further increases.</p>
<p>External scrutiny</p> <p>Continued scrutiny of admissions processes and decision-making – by government, the public, and the media</p>	<p>The existence of SPA was identified as signalling that the HE sector is serious about fair admissions and about good practice.</p> <p>There is debate on the extent to which fairness of access to higher education and transparency remains highly relevant in the evolving context, and opportunities and challenges to its achievement through the provision of the SPA programme in the current HE context. Whilst some saw risks in that HEPs may be tempted to compromise fairness in favour of maximising the number of students, others saw this as an opportunity to champion the fairness agenda.</p>	<p>Accountability in the sector remains a strong theme.</p> <p>HE policies and practices need to be seen to be fair in the eyes of all stakeholders for the sector to continue to thrive.</p> <p>Scrutiny may intensify in the competitive environment.</p> <p>There is pressure on both sides of the debate: from a WP perspective and because some nervousness remains in the independent sector about the use of contextual data in admissions.</p>
<p>Other developments</p>	<p>Other issues identified as important considerations for future support needs included changes to the UCAS Tariff, new types of qualifications, on-going concern for league table positions, global markets for HE and increasing demands from the UK Border Agency.</p>	<p>Changes impacting on HE admissions are on-going and new areas of focus for support for admissions professionals are emerging over time (discussed further in section 5 below).</p> <p>Possible opportunity exists to review the inclusions of international admissions as part of the remit for SPA.</p>

ANNEX 4: FUNDING BREAKDOWN

Actual funding for the SPA programme (including staffing and other costs) in 2012-14, and the initial and revised budgets for 2014-15, is shown here by source:

Source	2012-13		2013-14		2014-15			
	£	%	£	%	£ (1st version)	% (1st version)	£ (actual)	% (actual)
UCAS*	152,000	36%	204,910	47%	265,290	63%	279,886	70%
HEFCE	250,000	60%	166,670	38%	83,000	20%	83,000	21%
SFC**	0		46,068	11%	40,000	10%	0	
HEFCW	0		5,500	1%	15,000	4%	20,000	5%
UUK	7,500	2%	7,500	2%	7,500	2%	7,500	2%
ECU	0						3,084	1%
DELNI	7,500	2%	7,500	2%	7,500	2%	7,500	2%
TOTAL	417,000	100%	438,148	100%	418,290	100%	400,970	100%

* UCAS contribution in 2014-15 to be confirmed

** to be confirmed for 2014-15

ANNEX 5: EXAMPLES OF HE-FUNDED PROVISION

Table of models of other bodies funded by HEPs

Organisation	Summary description	Services	Funding	Constitution	Governance	No of staff (approx.)
Higher Education Academy (HEA)	National body for enhancing learning and teaching in higher education and supporting HEPs with an emphasis on improving the student experience, helping HE staff lead, manage and teach more effectively and career development.	Resources Surveys Consultancy services HEA accreditation to programmes which operate in line with the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) ³² 'Change programmes' ³³ Executive Development Programme ³⁴	Subscription basis Funding body grants Investment income Bespoke commercial services	Registered company limited by guarantee and a registered charity owned by UUK and GuildHE.	Board of directors and trustees (appointments are made by UUK and GuildHE; the funding bodies; in consultation with the NUS and National Postgraduate Committee)	
Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE)	Set up to develop and improve the management and leadership skills of existing and future leaders of higher education	Conferences and events, programmes, Consulting services, research, development projects.	Established by UUK and GuildHE Significant funding from the four higher education funding bodies of the UK	Company limited by guarantee Registered charity	Board of trustees who are responsible for strategy, finance and employment.	C25
Association of University Administrators (AUA)	Professional association for higher education administration and management staff	Offers careers enhancement opportunities, networking opportunities Postgraduate Certificate in	Individual membership fee (monthly) ³⁵	Registered charity	Board of Trustees	

³² Professional standards and guidelines for HE providers and leaders. The UKPSF can be applied to personal development programmes at individual or institutional level (aims to improve quality and recognise excellence). <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/professional-recognition>

³³ Designed to bring together teams of staff and students from HE providers across the UK for a series of interconnected events, designed to help plan and implement effective and sustainable change alongside others.

³⁴ <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/about/news/10179>

³⁵ Cost of AUA subscription is based on annual salary. <http://www.aua.ac.uk/joining-14-Join-the-AUA-online.html>

Organisation	Summary description	Services	Funding	Constitution	Governance	No of staff (approx.)
		Professional Practice professional development programme of seminars, courses, and workshops, Development Conference International links, study tours and travel awards				
Academic Registrars Council (ARC)	Forum of senior managers responsible for the academic administration of student matters which seeks to: influence national debate and policy through engaging in debate with sector agencies, consultative exercises working groups; promote and share best practice in academic administration; support members and others to perform their roles in institutions, provide a focus for networking and development.	ARC facilitates the exchange of best practice and encourages debate through its member's discussion 'mailbase' and Council meetings. ARC Admissions Practitioners Group (ARC-APG) Scottish and Northern Ireland ARC practitioners group	Funds generated through membership subscription (annual charge) ³⁶	Membership organisation (institutions)	Executive group Finance work undertaken by the AUA.	
Office of the Independent Adjudicator	Independent body to run a student complaints scheme in England and Wales (required by the Higher Education Act 2004)	Role is to review individual complaints by students against universities (no regulatory powers). Produces guidance good practice and events, institutional visits	Members are Association of Heads of University Administration; Committee of University Chairs; GuildHE; Higher Education Wales;	Company Limited by Guarantee and Registered Charity	Board of Directors	C60

³⁶ ARC membership fees are dependent on the size of an institution as supplied by HESA. <http://www.arc.ac.uk/Membership.aspx>

Organisation	Summary description	Services	Funding	Constitution	Governance	No of staff (approx.)
			NUS and UUK			
Equality Challenge Unit (ECU)	Works to further and support equality and diversity for staff and students in higher education institutions across the UK and in colleges in Scotland.	Resource of advice and guidance for the sector. ATHENA Swan Charter (STEM project). Gender Equality Charter Mark, Race Equality Charter Mark (trial project) Newsletters	Funded through the UK HE funding bodies and representative organisations (GuildHE and UUK)	Company limited by Guarantee Registered Charity	Board of Directors	C20
WONKHE	Platform to share views and information	Website and associated social media channels, and consultancy services in policy, thought leadership and public affairs.	University partners and supporters (funding and other in-kind support)	Registered Ltd company	Board of Directors	2
UUK	Representative organisation/collective voice in support of the higher education sector.	Policy and analysis, campaigns, and parliamentary activities.	133 members (the executive heads of UK university institutions that have met the criteria for membership. Financed through subscriptions (72%), covenant income (12%) and donations, conferences/publications	Company limited by guarantee with charitable status	UK Board elected by the membership (24 members including the President, three Vice-Presidents, the Treasurer and the Chairs of the Policy Networks. The President nominates up to six members to serve on the Board)	c120
GuildHE	Representative body for Higher Education, working to make the case for institutional diversity and distinctiveness within the UK higher education sector.	Policy and influence work, Information and data, research and publications, Networks/ Associations, special projects		Company Limited by Guarantee and a Charity		8
Russell Group	Representative body for 24 research-intensive universities.		Funded through member organisations	Company Limited by Guarantee	Board made up of heads of the 24 Russell Group universities.	