Supporting Professionalism in Admissions

Enhancing transparency in admissions policies and procedures

NSA 6th Annual Admissions to HE Conference - 6 November 2008

Janet Graham, Director of SPA

SPA overview of issues in admissions

- Expectation of increasing professionalism within all aspects of admissions – moves towards centralised admissions
- Increasing pressures on admissions, student recruitment and widening access staff in HE provider institutions – conflicting priorities and complex issues
- Responsible and professional use of admissions tests, additional or contextual data and individual holistic assessment etc
- Transparency and clarity for applicants, their advisors and HE staff is part of a fair admissions system
- SPA Programme contributes to national debates and issues

What is SPA and why does it exist?

- UK's independent and objective voice on HE admissions
- SPA leads on the continuing development of fair admissions, providing an evidence base and guidelines for good practice and helping higher education providers maintain and enhance excellence in admissions, student recruitment and widening access/ participation.
- Set up in 2006 following the Schwartz Report *Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice* 2004 to provide expertise and advice to the HE sector and other stakeholders
- The SPA Steering Group oversees the Programme and reports go to all the UK HE funding bodies
- Main focus to date full-time 'home' undergraduates

What the SPA team have achieved so far

- Over 100 universities and colleges visited in UK to date – evidence base of good practice and fair admissions
- Review of admissions tests, validity, how used, transparency
- Working with the Delivery Partnership – more and better quality Entry Profiles and good practice in feedback to unsuccessful applicants
- Data and statistics to support admissions decision making and policy
- Creation and development of the SPA website, SPA conferences/seminars and presentations at many others
- SPA inputs topics into UCAS Professional Development programme
- Encourage HEIs to adopt the QAA code of practice on admissions
- Schwartz Report Review

Transparent and Fair HE admissions

- Schwartz Report 2004: Admissions processes ‘generally fair’
- Autonomy of institutions over admissions, student recruitment and widening participation policies and decisions – HE Act 2004

Schwartz recommended 5 principles for fair admissions:

1. Be transparent, and provide consistent and efficient information
2. Admit students who are able to complete the course as judged by their achievements and potential
3. Use assessment methods in admissions that are reliable and valid
4. Minimise barriers to applicants
5. Be professional in every respect and underpinned by institutional structures and processes.

What did transparency mean in the Schwartz Report?

- HEIs should provide, consistently and efficiently through appropriate mechanisms, the information applicants need to make an informed choice. Including:
- the institution's admissions policy and detailed criteria for admission to courses, along with an explanation of admissions processes
- a general indication of the weight given to prior academic achievement and potential demonstrated by other means
- latest available information about the entry qualifications of applicants accepted on each course
- procedures for complaints and appeals
- conduct and publish a periodic analysis of admissions data, and
- provide feedback on request to unsuccessful applicants

Transparency – challenges and changes since Schwartz

- Strength of traditional practice: holistic assessment
- Academics and administrators
- Emphasis on admission rather than the admissions cycle
- Logistics and speed of information – on line applications
- ‘SEM’ / ‘CRM’ approach
- Admissions, widening access and student recruitment staff to work together – a good applicant experience and transition into HE underpins good retention
- Consistent decisions on evidence-based criteria
- Training and professional development

Transparency: Feedback

- Feedback part of the evolving and increasingly complex area of admissions decision making and is part of ‘customer care/service’ and good practice
- Feedback is a national issue and if developed in conjunction with good Entry Profiles etc is a positive way to overcome any perceptions of unfairness
- The SPA statement of good practice on feedback is on SPA website
- Feedback **on request**
- DP agreed each HEI will need to review policies and procedures in light of the good practice by December 2008
- Electronic feedback mechanisms now available via UCAS processing

What are Entry Profiles (EPs) and why have them?

- EPs give applicants more information about entry qualifications and levels, criteria such as personal skills and qualities, relevant work experience, motivation, audition, interview or admissions tests etc for a course in one place
- EPs are web-based, written by universities and colleges, located in UCAS Course Search
- EPs help match applicants pre-HE study with the HE courses, and help applicants to tailor post-16 study more precisely to HE needs
- EPs should help give a better applicant experience and with retention, as the applicant has a some idea of what to expect at the HEI
- Key benefits of Entry Profiles paper produced by SPA November 2007

Transparency: Entry Profiles

- Currently over 80% of university and college courses in UCAS have EPs, aiming for 100% by September 2009
- Evidence from UCAS (August 2008) shows prospective applicants are more likely to apply for a course with an EP
- EPs need to be transparent with accurate, up to date, quality information, more on:
  - Vocational qualifications and 14-19 changes
  - Admissions decision-making criteria and process

"The Entry Profiles allowed me to judge the level of care and interest that a university had in students of a particular subject. Those universities that had taken the time to complete their Entry Profiles were more interesting to me as a result"
Source: SPA Applicant Survey, June 2007

Transparency: Admissions Policies

- At the highest level the policies should demonstrate how they support the achievement of the institution's mission and strategic plans, shows commitment to applicants and how they inform the operational aims.
- They should provide a source of good quality information and detail on all aspects of an institution's admissions policy and procedures, be transparent and helpful to a variety of audiences but mainly to the applicant and their advisors, as well as to the institution's own staff.
- When reviewing admissions policies HE providers should consider the QAA Code of Practice, Section 10, on admissions to higher education (September 2006) to ensure policies comply with its precepts.
- SPA working on good practice in admissions policies

Transparency: IAG

- Period of rapid change (again!): 14-19 curriculum, role of vocational qualifications, skills agenda, employer engagement, tuition fees and bursaries, school/HEI links and partnerships, transparency and fairness, changes via the Delivery Partnership
- Increasing complexity of admissions - age and equality legislation, non-academic requirements (fitness to practice, criminal conviction checks etc)
- Need time and resources to keep up to date - teachers/HE advisors, careers staff and HEI staff
- Schools and colleges need effective engagement with HEIs as much as HEIs need to work with schools and colleges - important in efforts to widen access and in admissions

Transparency: current admissions issues

- Transparency in admissions policies - John Denham's (DIUS) speech, HEFCE Conference, April 2008:

  "We have to look for … measures that will reassure the public… based on the fundamental principle that universities decide whom they should admit. The answer lies… in openness, transparency and accountability. It lies in each university having a published admissions policy; being able to show that it has measures in hand to equip all those involved in admissions to implement the policy accurately and fairly; and in each university being able to assure itself that this is being done."

- HEFCE and OFFA asked to look at the issues raised and liaise with stakeholders including SPA - more details expected before Christmas
- Backed up by National Council for Educational Excellence recommendations for HE, published October 2008

Transparency: current admissions issues

NCEE seven recommendations from/for HE

- 1 and 4: Need for more and better IAG in schools and colleges, benchmarks established and quality to be reviewed by Ofsted
- 2: Every pupil - primary or secondary - especially from a low participation background have the opportunity to visit an HEI
- 3: Better STEM and modern language skills development from primary onwards and links to HEIs for these
- 5: HEIs to produce comprehensive strategies for their widening participation work
- 6: Use more information to select applicants, publish admissions policies for applicants equip all in admissions to implement policy consistently.
- 7: Government to collect data on A* at A level but HEIs not use it for entry yet

Transparency: current admissions issues

National Student Forum Report 2008 published by DIUS October 2008.

Key recommendations for IAG include:

- Develop a first port of call portal to gather in one place the routes to different kinds of online information;
- Define and introduce best practice guidelines for pre-entry information provided by universities and colleges;
- Introduce an entitlement for all students in receipt of an Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) to receive a grant to visit at least two universities or colleges; and
- Ensure high-quality careers advice by professionalising and raising the profile of school and college advisors.

Transparency: How far have we come and where next?

Many changes have been introduced since the Schwartz Report to address the five principles, Schwartz Report Review out soon:

- QAA Code of Practice on Admissions 2006
- Establishment and impact of SPA
- Delivery Partnership improving the HE application process
- Feedback to applicants progress being made
- Increasing ‘electronification’, UCAS on-line Apply and website; Entry Profiles and HEI websites, Unistats
- HEIs increasing role in information, advice and guidance and through widening participation/ access initiatives
- BUT still more to do

SPA and transparency - the next three years

- The applicant experience, a key precursor to a good student journey: an integrated approach across an institution to pre-application, application, post-application/offer and transition – increased transparency
- Need to get ‘buy-in’ from senior staff in HE provider institutions and via HEA, UUK GuildHE, AoC and others
- Part-time applicants, establishing an evidence base of current practice
- 14-19 curriculum, vocational, skills and work based learning progression to HE – encouraging transparency on these by HEIs
- Transparency relating to widening participation and linking schools and colleges to HE providers
- Equality and diversity issues

Thank you

More information from: enquiries@spa.ac.uk or 01242 544891
www.spa.ac.uk