Supporting Professionalism in Admissions

HEIs and centralised admissions decision making

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Admissions decision-making – institutional context

The process by which the HE provider institution makes decisions on the applicants that have applied to the institution for a place on a course

This is set in the bigger picture context of

- the institutions policy and strategy on admissions and the relationship of these, for example, with the institution's mission, strategic plan – including planned student numbers, widening access strategy, local and other partnership links, resources - both financial and time, the teaching and learning strategy, marketing and timeliness of information provision
- external factors such as market forces (subject popularity), competition between institutions, the different cohort of applicants each year varying in numbers, quality (qualifications) etc

Admissions decision-making – admissions policy

The overall institutional admissions policy

- covers everything from enquiries, recruitment and outreach, widening access, entry qualifications and Profiles, making admissions decisions, feedback, the interface with UCAS, relationship building and working with partners, complaints, transition support, registration and beyond with links to retention, as well as institution's commitment, compliance and arrangements in connection with its various legal and statutory obligations (equality and diversity, safeguarding vulnerable groups, data protection etc)
- must be transparent and helpful to a variety of audiences - to the applicant and their advisors, as well as to the institution's own staff
- admissions policy for the course/programme is set within this context

Admissions decision-making – admissions policy

The individual course/programme admissions policy could include :

- Entry criteria – range and standards required, widening access, additional or contextual data used/ required, the admissions process – interview, test, portfolio, audition etc
- How the application ‘form’ or electronic data is assessed – level 2 and level 3 qualifications, personal statement - skills/ experience, reference
- Professional body requirements - qualifications on entry, fitness to practice, criminal convictions etc
- How these criteria are assessed and or weighted in order to reach the decision to make an offer or not; feedback to unsuccessful applicants
- When the decision is made e.g. based on application and test result but before interview; when all applications received, etc

Admissions decision making – traditional practice

- The holistic assessment of applicants, looking at all the information available about an applicant in a gathered field, often including an interview, and which the applicant's skills, experience and potential assessed by an academic admissions tutor teaching in the subject to which the applicant is seeking admission
- This still happens for some courses in some institutions
- HOWEVER with the challenges of the move towards mass higher education, the situation has been changing over the last few years
- There maybe conflicting priorities; the expertise/skills required, the knowledge base and complexity of admissions has increased for admissions decision-makers

Admissions decision making – challenges

- Logistics and speed of information – on line applications and applicants desire for quick decisions
- Volume of applications has increased nearly every year for a number of years, for 2008 entry the total number of people applying via UCAS was 582,657. This is compared to 531,898 and 504,748 in 2007 and 2006 respectively. And each of these people make a number of applications/choices
- Emphasis on admission rather than the admissions cycle – multiple starts dates and a variety of study modes – not just via UCAS
- Consistent decisions on evidence-based criteria required for good practice and fairness
- Training and professional development underpins everything

Admissions decision making – who makes the decision?

- Shift in many institutions from decentralised admissions by academic admissions tutors to centralised decision-making by administrators over the last few years, and to many variations in between
- This happening increasingly since the Schwartz Report (2004) and the QAA Code of practice on admissions to HE (2001 revised 2006)
- One of the most asked questions to SPA is ‘We are reviewing our admissions policy, practice and procedures and are thinking of centralising, who else has done this, what is the good practice?’
- Evidence base from our HEI visits and by talking with colleagues

Admissions decision making – how is the decision made?

Centralised decision-making - variations:

- Administrators make decisions centrally in admissions office, one or two staff may make decisions for a subject or group of subjects on set criteria
- Criteria and competencies – academic and non-academic (skills, experience, potential) set by academics via admissions committee or department
- Academics may review applicants for advanced standing, borderline, mature, ‘unusual’ qualifications and may interview – or they may not
- Central administrative staff build up expertise and are full-time – academic staff are part-time admissions staff as they teach and undertake research

Admissions decision making – how is the decision made?

- Academic admissions tutors may make the decisions but the decision processing, relationship building/ queries handling is centralised
- Academic admissions tutors may be decentralised but are also committed and professional, and undergo professional development and training on qualification developments, interviewing applicants etc
- Academics may review applicants for advanced standing, borderline, mature, 'unusual' qualifications – if they only assess the small numbers out of the total do they have a skewed or incomplete view of the applicants to their subject?
- Do academic staff really need to see all the applications to their course or programme? Individual relationship building from an early stage may not be practical with large numbers?

Centralised admissions decision making

Split in to small groups of 2 or 3 to discuss:

- Should academics or administrators make the decisions? What are the pros and cons?
- Does it matter who makes the decision as long as it is consistent and made on evidence-based criteria by trained and professional staff?
- Do you think the increased expertise gained by dealing with admissions decision-making on a full time basis centrally should be more widespread in the best interest of professionalism and fairness for the applicants?

Nominate a spokesperson to feedback to the whole group

Thank you

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