

Progress Report No 9 – Delivery Partnership: Improving the higher education applications process

Purpose

This report provides an update on developments arising from the Delivery Partnership. Specific reference is made to:

- (1) Provision of feedback to applications;
- (2) Entry via non A level qualifications;
- (3) The Adjustment Period;
- (4) Simplification of the art and design process;
- (5) A summary of an impact assessment of the key changes to the application process, kindly prepared by UCAS.

Background

The Delivery Partnership has been tasked with implementing a number of changes to the current higher education applications process. These changes form part of a phased approach to reform of the applications process following the recommendations from Government to the outcomes of the former DfES-led consultation *Improving the Higher Education Applications Process*, (September 2005).

The Government response was supported and endorsed by Ministers in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and recommended:

- i. Implementing a number of changes to the current system.
- ii. An impact assessment of the reforms in 2010/11 with a view to considering further the implementation of a Post Qualification Application (PQA) process (i.e. no offers until after results are published) from 2012.

A copy of the full Government response can be downloaded at:

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/conResults.cfm?consultationId=1346>.)

Background information on the work of the DPSG and the progress of its action plan, can be found at website address:

<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/AboutUs/AssociatedOrganisations/Partnerships/Pages/AdmissionsDeliveryPartnership.aspx>).

Update on progress

Feedback: Statement of Good Practice (*Recommendation 4*)

This recommendation requested that higher education institutions (HEIs) enhance feedback to unsuccessful applicants. To support this recommendation, the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme, has produced a statement of good practice on feedback. All HEIs have been invited to review their policies and procedures on feedback to applicants in light of this guidance and to implement any changes to their policies and procedures by December 2008. Work has taken place on the provision of

electronic feedback on-line to UCAS from HEIs which can include the generation of text from a code and an area for free text. Applicants will be able to view feedback provided electronically in a letter through Track.

The DPSG, working with SPA and UCAS, is currently exploring the ways in which institutions are providing feedback and how the UCAS electronic feedback options are being used. A report will be provided to the DPSG meeting in March.

Qualifications other than A levels (*Recommendations 19 and 20*)

Many non-A level qualifications are undertaken routinely as a route into HE and this is likely to increase with the advent of Diplomas in England. In light of this, the DPSG was tasked with considering what might be done to inform those taking non-A level qualifications of the requirements of the applications cycle. This would help ensure that the needs OF applicants taking these qualifications were properly understood and safeguarded and that they would not be disadvantaged by a lack of information about the HE timetable or through receiving results at a later date than A level students.

Professor Noel Lloyd, Vice Chancellor University of Aberystwyth, was invited to take this work forward working closely with the Awarding Bodies, UCAS, SPA and representatives from across schools, colleges and universities. The Group has met three times in 2008 and has considered the following issues,

- *Timing of results and availability of results;*
- *Extent of awareness and understanding of non-A level qualifications across all HEIs;*
- *Limited availability of information for those applicants wishing to enter HE via a non-A level qualification /route;*
- *Different grading structures/ assessments used for non-A level qualifications.*

In December 2008, Professor Lloyd, presented a number of proposals for consideration by the DPSG to respond to this agenda. These were accepted by the Group and will be taken forward by the DPSG Secretariat , in Partnership with UCAS and SPA, in Spring 2009.

- *Articulation of the reforms for applicants with qualifications other than A levels.*
- *Provision of appropriate advice and full entry requirements to applicants entering HE via generic level 3 qualification routes.*
- *Provision of information for HEIs on the most used qualifications for entry to HE outside A Levels;*

For information, the top 10 most used qualifications are stated below:

Qualification	Total	
A Levels - 2 or more (confirmed result)	53.5%	231,348
BTEC/OCR Nationals	11.9%	51,285
A Levels - (other pre 2006 unconfirmed result)	6.0%	25,882
Access to Higher Education	4.9%	21,069
Other Qualifications	4.7%	20,207
SQA Highers - 3 or more (confirmed result)	3.8%	16,495
Degree	3.8%	16,310
No Known Level 3 qualification passes	3.4%	14,552
Foundation courses	2.4%	10,330

HND/HNC	1.7%	7,473
A levels - 1 only (confirmed result)	1.1%	4,801
SQA Advanced Highers - 2 or more (confirmed result)	1.0%	4,441
SQA - Other passes (confirmed result)	0.7%	2,978
Other Baccalaureate	0.4%	1,610
International Baccalaureate (confirmed result)	0.3%	1,244
Partial Degree Credits / Cert. of Ed.	0.2%	938
Welsh Baccalaureate Core (confirmed result)	0.2%	889
Advanced GNVQ	0.2%	869

Grand Total **100.0%** **432,721**

Data supplied by UCAS, 2008.

Facility to make fresh applications if an applicant has achieved higher grades than required by their conditional offer by 2009 entry (known as the 'Adjustment period') (*Recommendation 14*)

The majority of the technical development for the Adjustment period has now been carried out at UCAS with detailed workshops taking place to finalise the details of screens to be seen by applicants, HEIs and internal staff. Two meetings of the HEI Working Group have taken place to support UCAS in clarifying the information needed by HEIs to implement the new process and to clarify how the process will be operated. In February 2009 the technical manuals were distributed to institutions and test data is now available. In addition to this, UCAS have carried out internal information sessions, detailed training and forums for UCAS staff to ensure they are capable of relaying information. Presentations on the adjustment period have also been given at conferences for example *Routes for Success* and HE Events as well as school meetings at UCAS. Discussion groups will also be held at the UCAS Admissions Conference to enable HE delegates to discuss the processes being put in place at their institutions to implement the adjustment period.

The content of screens to be seen by applicants and HEIs will shortly be put into presentations on the UCAS website for use by institutions and schools/colleges.

Simplifying the applications process for art and design (*Recommendation 16*)

Progress Report No 7 outlined the main changes arising as a result from a consultation on the options for simplifying the art and design applications process. The key decision being that Route B would be set aside and new facilities would be made available for all institutions and applicants in relation to interviewing, and the consideration of material evidence as part of admissions decision-making. These changes were agreed by the UCAS Board in June 2008 and UCAS is working to put this in place for the admissions cycle operating from September 2009, for 2010 entry.

To facilitate the transition, the DPSG and UCAS Board have agreed that all institutions previously offering courses under Route B will need to confirm that they wish to accept applications by a deadline date for equal consideration of **either 15 January OR 24 March** for applicants applying for admission in 2009 for entry in 2010. Institutions should now have received information from UCAS requesting their choice of date for their courses on an individual basis using the Weblink Net Update facility. All dates should be set by 31 March.

The Delivery Partnership is aware that there is a divergence of views in relation to the deadline dates for submission of applications, particularly from the Foundation Course Community. The DPSG has noted the

concerns and draw these to the attention of HE providers to consider when making decisions on course deadline dates.

The DPSG is currently working with relevant groups/organisations to ensure there is the necessary advice and support for those providers where programmes have recruited significantly through Route B. Specifically, the DPSG will engage with those institutions working on the Foundations Studies course as an entry route to higher education, given the risks and consequences arising from this decision.

An impact assessment of the changes to the application process

In order to monitor the impact of the reforms the DPSG invited UCAS to provide an impact assessment on the changes so far. Key points are outlined below:

The development of Entry Profiles

- As at 11 December, 83.8% of 2009 courses had an Entry Profile and 85.5% of applicant choices were for courses with Entry Profiles. Realistically 100% is difficult to achieve at any one time because of the constant churn in institutions and courses as changes and mergers take place, new courses come on stream, and Entry Profiles need updating. The reality will be an ongoing process of development and updating which should be as close to 100% as possible on any given date.

The effects of the reduction in choices from 6 to 5 based on the 2008 entry to HE cycle;

- In a predictive study carried out by UCAS in September 2007, it was suggested that this should result in an overall decline of 12.8% in the number of choices made, whilst acknowledging that this would be less pronounced at the beginning of the cycle because of the restriction to four courses in Medicine, Dentistry, and Veterinary Science. Figures for the 2008 entry illustrate that 64.7% used five choices and the average number of choices made declined from 4.8 for 2007 entry to 4.1 to 2008. The overall reduction in the number of choices made was only 6.8%, lower than the 12.8% predicted. It is not possible at this stage to comment on the quality and effectiveness of applicant choices but it is hoped that the reduction in choices will reduce nugatory applications and encourage applicants to make up to 5 well researched and carefully considered choices using Entry Profiles.
- Analysis by subject indicated that the largest increase in choices was for Nursing (75%). However, this was attributable to the assimilation of NMAS courses into UCAS. Increases were also recorded in Veterinary Science and related courses, Information Services, Creative Arts and Design. Major percentage decreases (of over 20%) were recorded for: Anatomy, Physiology, and Pathology, Aural and oral sciences, Genetics, Microbiology and Statistics. There also appeared to be a marked reduction in choices for subjects that traditionally would have been the sixth choice for applicants to medicine/ dentistry/veterinary science.
- Overall acceptances were up by 9.7% for 2008 entry, although a major contributory factor for this being the increase in Nursing. There were a number of subjects which encountered increases above 10%. Overall, this demonstrated a healthy position across a wide range of course types, and while it is difficult to project how the outcomes might have differed had there been six choices, it seems likely that overall the reduction in choices has not significantly affected the majority of courses.

UCAS Extra;

- The number of applicants using Extra increased by 41.1% (from 7,297 for 2007 entry to 10,296) for 2008 entry. This increase may potentially reflect a greater applicant and adviser awareness of the existence and utility of Extra. However, in absolute terms the numbers are still small. The greater usage could in part be a consequence of the reduction in the number of initial choices in the main scheme, but there is no firm evidence for this.
- In both years, the majority of Extra applicants used either one or two rounds, although multiple rounds are possible, and one applicant for 2007 entry managed to achieve 17!
- The courses with the largest number of acceptances through Extra for 2008 entry included in descending order Nursing (352), Psychology (190), Law (185), Sports Science (171), Management Studies (160) and others in subjects allied to Medicine (160). By far the largest increase was in Nursing (324.1%). These acceptances suggest that there are still a limited number of places for high-demand courses in Extra and that Extra is playing an increasing role, albeit still a relatively small one, across all HEIs.

Further information

The DPSG has further meetings in March and June 2009. Enquiries regarding the work of the Delivery Partnership, or feedback on planned or future activities should be directed to your organisation representative; or the DPSG secretariat:

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