



Delivery Partnership: Improving the higher education applications process

Background and context

The recent DfES-led consultation *Improving the Higher Education Applications Process*, DfES, (September 2005) was the latest in a series of reviews of the admissions system which have taken place over the last decade or so. These have included 3 HE sector-led reviews and 2 DfES-led investigations.

In May 2006, the Government issued its UK-wide response to the latest consultation. It is important to note that although the initial consultation in 2005 was DfES-led, the Government response was supported and endorsed by Ministers in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The response recommended:

- A number of changes to the current applications system for implementation by 2008/09
- A further review in 2010/11 to evaluate the impact of the reforms, and in light of the experience of them, and an evaluation of other changes within higher education, to commit to a consideration of further progress towards PQA by 2012. (A copy of the full Government response can be downloaded at: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/conResults.cfm?consultationId=1346>.)

The Government response recommended that the HE sector should establish a Delivery Partnership to lead progress on incremental reforms that would:

- *make it easier for students to understand the entry requirements of the courses available;*
- *provide more and better information on which HEIs can base their admissions decisions;*
- *involve students submitting, and HEIs considering, fewer initial applications, thereby reducing administrative burdens;*
- *ensure applications are considered on the basis of a gathered field, creating a more equal chance for all students and reducing the temptation for them to place early, ill-researched applications;*
- *give students better feedback on their applications, allowing them to make better informed decisions about their HE options;*
- *give those who have been unsuccessful in gaining an offer with their initial applications better opportunities to continue applying in search of a place;*
- *result in fewer students needing to enter Clearing; and*
- *offer those students who have achieved higher grades than required by their firm conditional offer the chance to seek an alternative place that best matches their aspirations and circumstances.*

Delivery Structures

Given that HEIs are autonomous in admissions matters, Universities UK and Guild HE endorsed the establishment of a UK-wide sector-led Delivery Partnership; although the importance of engaging a broad partnership of interests across schools, colleges, FE and awarding bodies was recognised as critical in terms of ensuring the successful implementation of the reforms.

The structures for delivering the reforms are as follows:

- **A UK-wide Delivery Partnership Steering Group (DPSG)**

This would offer strategic leadership and guidance to the project as a whole, liaising with relevant organisations as necessary. The Group consists of a number of admissions practitioners recognising the focus on delivery (including key admission groups within the HE sector), vice-chancellors, and representatives from UCAS, Supporting Professionalism in Admissions [SPA], AHUA, NUS, FE, schools, 6th form colleges, awarding bodies, DfES, Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly and DELNI.
- **An Advisory Board**

This would operate as a 'virtual group' and incorporate a much broader-based membership, including practitioners, which could further advise and support the work of the DPSG where appropriate.
- **A Standing Conference of Stakeholders**

This would provide a facility for a wide range of bodies/ organisations interested in developments to come together and comment on the progress/ outcomes of the Delivery Partnership. This would be vital in ensuring that the changes were workable at an operational level from both an applicant and institutional perspective.
- **Secretariat**

The Secretariat would consist of Universities UK (including Universities Scotland and Higher Education Wales) and Guild HE, and work closely with UCAS and SPA. The Secretariat would be responsible for ensuring that any changes to the applications process are UK-wide and appropriate to each country.

Proposal for research into the student perspective regarding the proposed reforms

The DPSG agreed that the student perspective would be key to the proposed reforms. In addition, as consumers of the admissions process, the attitudes of students to the admissions process will need to be tested; the outcomes will be important in informing the detail of the operation of the proposals. The DPSG agreed to liaise with UCAS, SPA, NUS and other relevant bodies to discuss possible next steps. This project would depend on external funding.

Working Groups

Three small working groups have been set up to implement a number of specific recommendations.

- **Entry Profiles Working Group**

This Group will work with UCAS to encourage the provision of clear, comparable entry requirement information, with a view to moving toward 100% provision of information for students wishing to enter HE in 2009. The Group will also consider developments with Entry Profiles relating to vocational pathways and the provision of quality advice and guidance for both adults and young learners.
- **Timings / Adjustment Period Working Group:**

T This Group will look at a number of interrelated recommendations including how to provide students with the facility to make fresh applications if they achieve higher grades than predicted; and the implementation of a new confirmation and application round to be run ahead of clearing. Attention will also be drawn to bringing forward the results of AS, A-levels exam dates at least one week earlier and ensuring that the needs of those taking alternative qualifications (i.e. entering via non A-level qualifications) are understood and to investigate the publication of non A-level portfolio qualifications earlier than they are at present.)

- **Art and Design Working Group:**

This Group will advise the Delivery Partnership on matters relating to applications in the area of Art and Design, particularly in terms of how to implement the proposal to replace the current two-route application process for Art and Design with a single, sequential applications process from September to late March.

Reduction of number of choices from 6 to 5 from 2008 entry

It was confirmed that UCAS was making the necessary technical adjustments to enable the reduction in the number of choices to 5 from the 2008 entry. The maximum number of applications for Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science will remain at 4.

Feedback to applicants

A scoping study is underway by UCAS/SPA for JISC on applicant feedback: The study focuses on IT support used for giving feedback in HE. A statement on good practice relating to feedback will be drawn up.

Improvement of information to applicants

HEFCE has now set out proposals from their Quality Assurance Framework Review Group on improvements to the information about quality and the Teaching Quality Information website. UCAS is working on the new website, after winning the contract to re-launch the site in July.

Communications strategy

Delivery Partnership Website

Information and updates on the work of the Delivery Partnership can be found at the web address: <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/activities/admissions.asp>

Frequently asked questions

A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) is being produced and will be available on the Universities UK website. Colleagues are asked to distribute this widely amongst admissions colleagues within their institutions.

Gathered field

The Government in its response to recommendations to improve the current HE applications reported that the introduction of the concept of a gathered field would bring benefits to those applicants who preferred to wait until later in the application period to applying. As such the DPSG has been tasked with considering how this concept can be introduced. At the meeting, the group requested that some detailed work is undertaken to ensure that all the associated issues are drawn out and that the final solution is as widely owned as possible.

Research project on applicant attitudes

It was agreed that a study of the attitudes of applicants to the applications process would be desirable. Universities UK has agreed to underwrite a scoping study which will be submitted to the DPSG for the February Meeting. It is anticipated that the full survey will take place in April/May and again in September. Funding for a full-scale project would be sought from elsewhere.