



March 2007

Feedback to applicants who have been unsuccessful in gaining a place at an HEI

Statement of Good Practice - drawn up by the SPA programme.

1. Background

The debate at national and institutional level has been going for many years with regard to whether or not applicants should be given details as to why they were not successful in gaining an offer of a place on a course/programme in Higher Education. The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme¹ is working with both the Delivery Partnership Steering Group (DPSG) and UCAS on feedback to applicants.

SPA's work on feedback includes developing a draft statement of good practice to inform the

- JISC Scoping Study: Good practice in the provision of feedback to applicants, and in the use of technology to support this,
- Delivery Partnership's discussion of the recommendation by the Government in its response to the consultation *Improving the HE Applications Process* that HEIs should develop more informative letters to feed back to students, detailing particularly why their applications have been rejected. The DPSG has also established a working group to encourage the provision of clear, comparable entry requirement information, with a view to moving toward 100% provision of Entry Profile information for students on the UCAS website for 2009 entry.

SPA has undertaken a literature review on the web of information in this area, has considered the QAA Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education Section 10: Admissions to higher education, Precept 9 on Feedback to Applicants, September 2006, and has reviewed the most recent material on feedback which was obtained from the DfES which comprised the anonymised responses to the question on feedback in the consultation on *Improving the HE Applications Process*.

The consultation document produced by the Alan Wilson Group highlighted the concerns about the resource implications for HEIs, and worries about the possibility of litigation against them. They noted that the Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group [*Schwartz report*] recommended that HEIs should provide feedback on request to unsuccessful applicants and included an example feedback letter. The consultation document suggested that HEIs could develop feedback letters perhaps offering a detailed profile of students who had been successful in achieving places in recent years. It was noted that HEIs might anyway need to be prepared to explain their reasons

¹ The UK wide funding body supported SPA Programme leads on the continuing development of fair admissions, is identifying good practice in the HE sector and organises dissemination of effective practice through its website, conferences etc, with the aim of being a resource for institutions which wish to maintain and enhance excellence in admissions strategy and practice.

for rejecting applicants in response to requests under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 *[and the Data Protection Act]*.

There were 190 responses to the consultation which took place between September and December 2005. Of these responses 98 were from HEIs, and 13 from HE representative bodies. The consultation question, Proposal 4, was **‘HEIs to develop more informative letters to feed back to students, detailing particularly why their applications have been rejected. Do you agree?’**

There were 159 responses to this proposal, 78 (49%) said yes, 47 (30%) responded no and 34 (21%) were not sure. The Government response to the consultation recommended that the proposal should be implemented by the Delivery Partnership, with a view to developing a consistent level of feedback, more tailored to the individual applicant and would be used by all institutions and that the QAA Code level of feedback that would be available on demand to students and student advisers, would be of Practice on Admissions to HE, section 9 which refers to feedback, should be taken into consideration.

The Government summary of the responses to the question of feedback showed that opinion on the proposal was divided. There was no argument against providing better feedback to students in principle; in fact many respondents felt that this was vital. However, concerns were raised that the more feedback that was expected, the volume of the increased feedback would mean it was unrealistic for HEIs to be able to provide meaningful feedback to applicants and, of even greater concern, the higher the risk of litigation. There is a fine balance that needs to be achieved: there is a widely held belief that over-simplified responses would be of limited value for the student and student advisers; there is also great concern that the requirement to provide detailed feedback would be administratively unworkable for those institutions that had courses that were largely over-subscribed.

Many respondents firmly believed that improved pre-entry information was vital here, as it would help students target applications more effectively, particularly those applying through non-traditional routes, and may therefore reduce the demand for individual feedback. A number of helpful suggestions were made that warrant further investigation by the Delivery Partnership:

- a) HEIs to provide feedback, but on request only;
- b) the development of generic codes or tick boxes from a range of options *[NB The Schwartz report suggested that some sort of electronic scoring should be examined for feedback]*;
- c) a number of carefully graduated standard letters;
- d) online feedback through UCAS based on tick boxes.

2. What is feedback?

Feedback is the communication from the HEI to the applicant, on request from the applicant, where that individual has normally been unsuccessful in gaining an offer of a place on the course/ programme in Higher Education to which they have applied. This communication, in writing, should cover the details as to why the applicant was not successful in gaining an offer. This could be in the form of ‘standardised feedback’, which is not created for the individual, but could provide information from a range of possible reasons for rejection, for example, or could be generic text referring to a particular reason in the context of all applications received in that admissions cohort. ‘Personalised feedback’ would mean a response that is written to meet the specific circumstances of an individual applicant. HEIs should consider the extent to which they include information and/or advice about alternatives or other options for study in their feedback.

3. Feedback to applicants who have been unsuccessful in gaining a place at an HEI – Draft Statement of Good Practice

All HEIs throughout the UK would agree that they should have policies, procedures and criteria for the recruitment and admission of students to higher education that are fair, clear and explicit and are implemented consistently. When drawing up their policy or code of practice and procedures on feedback to applicants, institutions should consider the following good practice:

1. Effective and efficient feedback is easier to provide, if entry criteria, details of the processes of considering applicants and reaching admissions decisions, are transparent, clear and easy to understand. An objective and justifiable holistic assessment based on the application and other factors may include for example:
 - the number of GCSEs at a particular grade,
 - scoring or weighting used to assess sections of the application form and other criteria,
 - level 3 qualifications, grades and subjects required,
 - interview,
 - audition,
 - portfolio,
 - test results,
 - a submitted marked piece of coursework,
 - a questionnaire,
 - contextual data

Other elements might include the relative importance of each criteria in the overall decision, and any overall weighting or scoring system used.

The timeframe and order in which these are considered should be clear, for example if the information on the application form, certain contextual data and test results are used to determine whether or not an applicant is asked for interview, this should be made explicit.

2. The criteria and process should be transparent, readily available and found quickly for each course/programme and should be explicit to applicants via printed or electronic /web information, for example through Entry Profiles. Some requests for feedback may take the form of queries about the processes and criteria involved. If an HEI's processes and criteria are clearly laid out it should reduce or avoid such queries becoming complaints.

In addition information for applicants about an HEI's policy and procedures on feedback should be explicit, for example via the HEI's admissions web pages, so that they are available for prospective students, applicants and advisers to read at any stage before or during the application process.

3. HEIs should consider their procedures and methods for recording the decision-making process and reasons why an applicant was unsuccessful; this could involve one or more factors. An audit trail documenting reasons for admissions decisions will provide the basis for feedback. The developments in electronic record keeping and retrieval should assist in this. In many cases feedback is likely to be straightforward (as when an applicant does not have the appropriate level of achievement).
4. Information about the circumstances under which feedback will be provided to unsuccessful applicants should be given; for example whether it is provided routinely or on request only. Applicants should be able to request feedback at any time after a decision has been made throughout the application cycle in which they have applied. HEIs should reply to such requests in a timely fashion. HEIs may wish to acknowledge receipt of a request for feedback and include a date by which a response will be made. If a time limit is set by an HEI within which

applicants may make a request for feedback on an unsuccessful application, this should be specified in the HEI's policy or statement on feedback. Good practice would be for the HEI to determine and state in their policy or statement the number of days within which the HEI will respond to the request, for example within 28 days. If HEIs vary the number of days they choose during certain points in the year they should state this in their policy or statement.

5. Clarity is needed as to how requests for feedback should be made. For example applicants should be made aware as to whether the request should be in writing **either** from the applicant (by e-mail or letter) **or** from someone that the applicant designates, in writing, to act on their behalf (such as a school adviser or parent) bearing in mind the requirements of the Data Protection Act.

HEIs should be aware that UCAS Apply asks the applicant to confirm acceptance of the declaration in Apply when they submit their application that they agree to the processing of the applicants personal data by UCAS and the HEIs in the application. Information relating to the individual's application will normally be confidential between appropriate staff at the HEIs, schools and colleges staff providing the reference and, where appropriate, parents or carers. However, this does not imply that any decisions or judgements made on that application, or on interviews, offers, rejections, etc. can be shared with anyone other than the applicant or from someone that the applicant designates in writing to act on their behalf (such as a school adviser or parent). It is a principle that a request for feedback should come from the applicant or from someone that the applicant designates in writing to act on their behalf. Feedback to those advising applicants (teachers, careers advisers, etc.) may also be of value for not only the individual applicant but for assisting in advising future applicants.

6. HEIs should give information on how the response to the applicant will be made. Feedback should normally be in writing (by e-mail or letter). However HEIs may specify in their policy that they are willing to consider other forms of feedback, such as by telephone. Such feedback may be dealt with more flexibly and quickly by designated, trained staff who have been involved in the decision-making process or who have access to the audit trail /records about an application. Whatever methods HEIs use, they should be clear to applicants. The nature and extent of feedback available to unsuccessful applicants (or their advisers) should be transparent. For example HEIs might wish to consider if the following would be useful
 - generic codes or tick boxes from a range of options; or
 - a number of carefully graduated standard letters; or
 - individual feedback by the person making the admissions decision or informed nominee.

If practices vary depending on the course or programme at an HEI, details should be made readily available and explicit, for example, via admissions or course/programme web pages or Entry Profiles. Electronic developments in HEIs admissions systems and on line or at UCAS may help take a number of these forward in the near future.

7. The way in which the HEI would deal with any further correspondence from an applicant following the provision of feedback should be considered in any policy. For example how and under what circumstances the HEI would review any admissions decision made, following the provision of feedback, if requested to do so by an applicant who has been unsuccessful in securing an offer.
8. The QAA Code of Practice suggests HEIs may also wish to consider to what extent the staff in the HEI are able to offer advice to unsuccessful applicants about alternatives and future options for study. Staff in HEIs may not be the most appropriate people to provide information, advice and guidance to applicants, other than that pertaining to their own institution or subject. The

suggestion to applicants to seek further guidance from advisers at the school, college, careers or Connexions service may be more helpful.

However, for some applicants, staff at an HEI may have already discussed with the applicant the options open to them following their application. For example, avoiding a formal rejection by outlining alternative courses/programmes at the HEI, for which the applicant could be considered and agreeing with the applicant to make them a changed course offer, or suggest options that can be followed up in UCAS Extra or Clearing.

The HEI may also consider suggesting alternative entry routes, for example, via local or other colleges which have progression agreements or widening participation links with the HEI.

Feedback should not include statements implying a specific or likely course of action at another HEI or college.

Information from the HEI should outline the procedures an applicant should follow, if they are able to provide any additional information pertinent to their application, and in these circumstances, if they are able to undertake to review any admissions decision made.

9. HEIs should have policies and procedures in place for responding to applicants' complaints about the operation of their admissions process (which may include how feedback is provided or dealt with) and ensure that all staff involved with admissions are familiar with the policies and procedures. If a decision to reject an application was based on the applicant
 - not making themselves aware of readily available information about the entry requirements and conditions at the time of application, or
 - applying when they had not or would not during that application cycle, meet the conditions for entry,then they should not have grounds to complain, if their application was rejected on that basis .
10. HEIs should have policies in place for responding to applicants' appeals. These policies should make it clear to all staff involved with admissions **and** the applicants whether, and if so, on what grounds, any such appeals may be considered.
11. HEIs should find it helpful if they define and explain to applicants the difference between feedback, complaints and appeals. These are all different, and this should be made clear by HEIs in their policies. **Feedback** is defined in point 2 above. A **complaint** is normally a specific concern related to a procedural error, irregularity or maladministration in the admissions procedures or policies. Complaints can cover a wide range of issues and need to be dealt with flexibly; they can often be resolved at the point at which they arise, where they can be dealt with by trained designated staff. **Appeals** are more formal and would be a request for a formal review of the outcome of an admissions decision, and any grounds for appeal need to be clearly framed. HEIs may wish to use or adapt, if appropriate, the existing complaints and appeals procedures for students at their HEI or may develop policies and procedures specifically related to admissions.
12. No applicant should be discriminated against for either requesting feedback or making a complaint or appeal under the HEIs policies and procedures.
13. HEIs should consider the provision of appropriate training or briefing for admissions staff with regard to feedback and in documenting reasons for admissions decisions.
14. An HEI's documentation or web pages should state the date when it was produced, published or approved, and where it originated, for example produced by the Admissions Office, and approved by the Admissions and Student Recruitment Committee, 3 June 2007.

15. HEIs should consider the quality assurance mechanisms they have in place, which can monitor and evaluate the operation and success of their feedback policies and procedures on an annual basis, and report on them through the HEI's internal committee structure.

4. Comments and issues for further consideration

With good communication of clearly defined entry criteria, details of the process for consideration of applicants, transparency in how admissions decisions are reached, including the relative importance of each criterion in making the overall decision, together with the professional judgement of well trained decision makers, good record keeping and an audit trail, HEIs should overcome many of the issues that have been raised with regard to feedback. Even for the most selecting courses, a 'standardised feedback' letter commenting on the applications received in the particular admissions cohort, provided on request, may alleviate the applicants concerns. Applicants taking the feedback request further with a request for a 'personalised feedback' letter may be few in number in any given year in comparison with the total number applying to the course.

These 17 points, when finalised, will be distilled into a check list for HEIs and circulated to them.

It was agreed with the admissions practitioners at the UCAS Change User Group that sample feedback letters would not be circulated, but would be made available to HEIs on request to SPA.

The UCAS/SPA JISC research will inform the further development of the good practice statement, as the research aims to identify good practice for feedback in HR recruitment and selection, which could be used in models for the provision of feedback in the higher education admissions process. It also aims to identify mechanisms to support the generation of high quality feedback to applicants which are practicable in terms of cost including:

- Computer generated feedback
- Support systems for human generated feedback
- Automatically generated feedback from Entry Profile processing.

It will look for mechanisms to assure the quality of feedback, centred on the needs of the applicant and identify web services and tools which can be used to support the provision of feedback to applicants, and the data which needs to be available to these.

One suggestion has been that HEIs could develop on an annual basis some standard sentences or paragraphs with regard to feedback for courses/programmes for online transfer to UCAS, in a similar way to the current facility to generate and send to UCAS institution specific elements within offers. This would be optional and would need further research and analysis with regard to costs, benefits and likely take up.

Input from the Change User Group on this preliminary statement was made on 5 March 2007, and feedback from that group and other practitioner comments forwarded from UCAS Continuing Professional Development workshop on applicant feedback, have been incorporated in the statement.

Janet Graham, Director of SPA, March 2007

References:

1. **QAA Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education. Section 10: Admissions to higher education**, QAA, September 2006. Page 17, Precept 9: Institutions consider the most effective and efficient arrangements for providing feedback to applicants who have not been offered a place.
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3. **Improving the Higher Education Applications Process - A Consultation Paper, September 2005 DfES (The 'Alan Wilson Group')**
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/conResults.cfm?consultationId=1346>
4. Responses to the consultation *Improving the Higher Education Applications Process* Sept –Dec 2005, DfES. Anonymised hard copies of replies provided by DfES from HEIs, Schools and other stakeholders to the proposal on feedback to students.
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5. **Improving the Higher Education Applications Process: Government Response to the Consultation**, DfES, May 2006
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6. **Fair admissions to higher education: recommendations for good practice** ('The Schwartz report') Admissions to Higher Education Review, September 2004
<http://www.admissions-review.org.uk/>
7. **Fair admissions to higher education: draft recommendations for consultation** (April - May 2004) Admissions to Higher Education Review, April 2004
<http://www.admissions-review.org.uk/>
8. **Admissions to Higher Education: Draft recommendations Analysis of responses to the consultation document**, Admissions to Higher Education Review, 16 June 2004
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Samples of HEIs websites were consulted and a number have published policies and procedures for dealing with feedback.