
DELIVERY PARTNERSHIP CONSULTATION 1: DRAFT STATEMENT OF GOOD PRACTICE ON FEEDBACK

Introduction

This Consultation is being conducted for the Delivery Partnership by Janet Graham, member of the Delivery Partnership Steering Group and Director of Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA).

Purpose

Comments are invited on the draft statement of good practice on feedback to applicants who have been unsuccessful in gaining a place at an HEI to inform the discussions of the Delivery Partnership Steering Group on this matter.

Format

This document includes the **draft** statement of good practice on feedback followed by a **Response Form** for your details, one question and a free text box.

The consultation runs from 29 May to 18 June 2007.

How to respond

Where possible please respond using the Response Form and return electronically. An electronic version is available from Sheila Hayler: **S.Hayler@SPA.AC.UK**:

Please return to:

Sheila Hayler
SPA (DP Feedback Consultation)
Rosehill
New Barn Lane
Cheltenham
Glos
GL52 3LZ

Further information or queries

Please e-mail: **enquiries@spa.ac.uk** with the subject line: **DP Feedback Consultation**

Background

The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme¹ is working with both the Delivery Partnership Steering Group (DPSG) and UCAS on feedback to applicants. The draft statement on feedback was considered at the Delivery Partnership on 1 May and it was agreed that HEIs and other stakeholders should have the opportunity to comment on the draft statement.

Further background details to this consultation on feedback can be found on SPA's website at www.spa.ac.uk

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, normally 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.

Draft Statement of Good Practice on Feedback

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. The Government response to the consultation on Improving the HE Applications Process recommended that the Delivery Partnership implement the proposal for developing a consistent level of feedback by all institutions that would be available, on request, to applicants. 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 and details of the processes of considering applicants and reaching admissions decisions, are transparent, clear and easy to understand. It is suggested that the number of applications received in the previous year, or

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.

averaged over a number of years, together with the number of accepted applicants to the course/ programme could be included in the Entry Profile.

An objective and justifiable holistic assessment based on the application and other factors may include for example:

- the number of GCSEs, or equivalent, 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
- admissions test results
- a submitted 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 a declaration in Apply when they submit their application. In agreeing to this declaration the applicant confirms the information given is complete and accurate and that under the Data Protection Act they agree to the processing of their personal data by UCAS and the HEIs included in the application.

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 from the HEI to those advising applicants (teachers, careers advisers, etc.) may also be of value, not only for the individual applicant but also to assist staff in advising future applicants applying to that HEI for a particular course/programme. Staff may wish to consult their HEI's Data Protection Officer if they are in any doubt about admissions information, including feedback, and who it can be shared with.

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 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. The QAA Code of Practice recommends 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. The QAA Code of Practice recommends 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 **if any**, 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.²
 - **Feedback** is defined on page three.
 - 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

² This is a complex area that HEI admissions practitioners may wish to discuss with staff in their quality assurance, registry, policy or governance offices. Reference should also be made to the QAA Code of Practice Section 5: *'Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters'*, which is currently under review with a formal consultation to take place in Spring 2007. See: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/default.asp>

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.

- An **Appeal** is more formal and would be a request for a formal review of the outcome of an admissions decision. Grounds for appeal, **if any**, need to be clearly framed by the HEI. 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.

RESPONSE FORM: THE DRAFT STATEMENT OF GOOD PRACTICE ON FEEDBACK

If you would like to complete this consultation **on-line** please contact Sheila Hayler
S.Hayler@SPA.ac.uk and the paper will be emailed to you.

Please complete your response below and send/ email it to SPA by **Monday 18 June**:

Sheila Hayler
 SPA (DP Feedback Consultation)
 Rosehill
 New Barn Lane
 Cheltenham, Glos GL52 3LZ.

Or e-mail: **enquiries@spa.ac.uk** with the subject: DP Feedback Consultation

Are you responding on behalf of your institution?	YES
If NO , please state on whose behalf you are responding e.g. Department/section within institution (admissions, international office, WP or widening access office, Medical School, etc) or as an individual:	
Name of institution:	University of Cambridge

Type of institution	Please tick
University	✓
Other HEI	
State/maintained school	
Independent School	
Sixth form College	
FE College with HE	
FE College without HE	
Students' Union	
Trades' Union	
Connexions	
Aimhigher or other widening access body (such as LLN)	
Other (please specify)	

Location of institution	Please tick
England	✓
Northern Ireland	
Scotland	
Wales	

RESPONSE FORM: THE DRAFT STATEMENT OF GOOD PRACTICE ON FEEDBACK

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS:

1. Are you in general agreement with the draft statement?

YES

2. Please outline your comments on the draft statement, highlighting the number(s) and the specific issue linked to the relevant point(s) (1-15) in the statement. Please continue on a separate sheet if needed.

While being in general agreement with the draft statement, we are concerned that, as drafted, it is much more than a “Draft Statement of Good Practice on Feedback” – it seems to have been subject to ‘remit creep’.

It is, of course, essential that such a statement be consistent with and, indeed, refer to policies on the processing of admissions, on complaints, appeals etc., but in its current form this draft statement, in several places, is in effect a “Draft Statement of Good Practice in Admissions Processing” or a “Draft Statement of Good Practice in Admissions Complaints and Appeals”.

While we have no particular concerns about any of the principles articulated, the scope of the statement that HEIs are being invited to endorse should be clearly defined.

With respect to §5, the standard practice among Cambridge Colleges at present is to provide feedback to the writer of the UCAS reference, usually therefore a member of staff at the applicant’s school/college. There are two advantages to this practice. First, the referee is well placed to judge the best way to convey the feedback to the individual concerned so that it is received as a beneficial learning experience. Second, the provision of feedback to the applicant’s institution informs advisers of future applicants about the standards and requirements for the relevant Cambridge course and thus is of wider benefit to the admissions process. We believe that this practice is widely appreciated and should continue to be facilitated. In this context, it would be very helpful if a standard checkbox item could be included on the UCAS application asking the applicant whether they give permission for the provider of their reference to initiate a request for feedback on their behalf.