The UK Quality Code for Higher Education - Advice and Guidance

Sector-Agreed **Principle 9** - Recruiting, admitting and selecting students

September 2026

Contents

About this Guidance

Context

This Advice and Guidance supports the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) and is designed to unpack **Sector-Agreed Principle 9 - Recruiting, admitting and selecting students** and the Key Practices that sit under it. It has been produced by QAA in partnership with a writing group of sector experts and peer-reviewed by colleagues across UK higher education. This is in accordance with the ethos that the Quality Code remains a sector-agreed reference point, built on a shared understanding of what providers can expect of themselves and each other in the assurance and enhancement of quality and the maintenance of standards across post-secondary education throughout the UK. QAA would like to thank the writing group and peer readers for their invaluable contribution in developing this guidance. Details of the writing and reading groups can be found on page 39 of this guidance.

An important contextual note relates to the diversity of higher education providers in the UK. Providers can be large universities, operating with significant infrastructure, or small specialist providers, operating on a significantly smaller scale, or any number of other different operating models. The Advice and Guidance is designed to be useful for all providers (and representatives from a range of providers formed the writing and peer review groups), but we recognise that, on occasion, the nomenclature used could suggest a larger provider's context. It is important that each reader interprets the Advice and Guidance in the context of their own operating environment and that all readers recognise that quality and homogeneity are not synonymous.

Scope

This Advice and Guidance encourages providers to reflect on their practice and processes in relation to the Sector-Agreed Principle. Following the Advice and Guidance is not mandatory, but illustrative of approaches that can help providers meet the relevant Principle. National regulators and QAA do not view the information in the Advice and Guidance as compliance indicators. This guidance does not interpret statutory requirements.

The language we use

Where the word 'should' (or any other similarly directive language) appears in the Advice and Guidance this represents a shared understanding within the UK higher education community. On some occasions an institution can align with the Sector-Agreed Principle in a range of different ways, and in such cases an institution may have a different approach to that set out here. Ultimately, to be aligned with the Quality Code, an institution must be able to demonstrate how it meets the Sector-Agreed Principles in practice. No provider or individual should feel that the Advice and Guidance is prescriptive or impinges their autonomy or freedoms.

Structure

In response to sector demand, the Advice and Guidance aligns directly with the overarching Sector-Agreed Principles to provide clear navigation between the different elements. The guidance begins by unpacking the Principle in an operational context. It is then divided into subsections focusing on each Key Practice outlining practical considerations and approaches for providers to benchmark their own way of working. This features practical tips and experience shared by providers on operational practice. Finally, in each subsection there are tools to enable reflection on the guidance. These tools offer the opportunity to explore what 'good' might look like through reflective questions and practical scenarios that enable interrogation of current practice with a view to enhancing quality.

Commonly used terms

The following terms are used throughout this advice. Other terms which benefit from a precise definition are listed at the end of this document.

- **Students**: refers to all individuals studying towards a higher-level award regardless of demographic, mode of delivery, level of study, subject area, or geographic location.
- **Provider**: describes all types of organisations that provide higher level learning, including universities, colleges, institutes of learning, and employers. We also use 'institution' in some instances where 'provider' might not suit the context.
- **Student representative body**: a formal body or mechanism that represents and promotes the interests of students. This may be known as a students' union, a students' association, or guild, or by another bespoke name where these specific organisations do not exist.

Sector-Agreed Principle 9 and its Key Practices

Providers operate recruitment, selection and admissions processes that are transparent, fair and inclusive. Providers maintain and publish accurate, relevant and accessible information about their provision, enabling students to make informed choices about their studies and future aspirations.

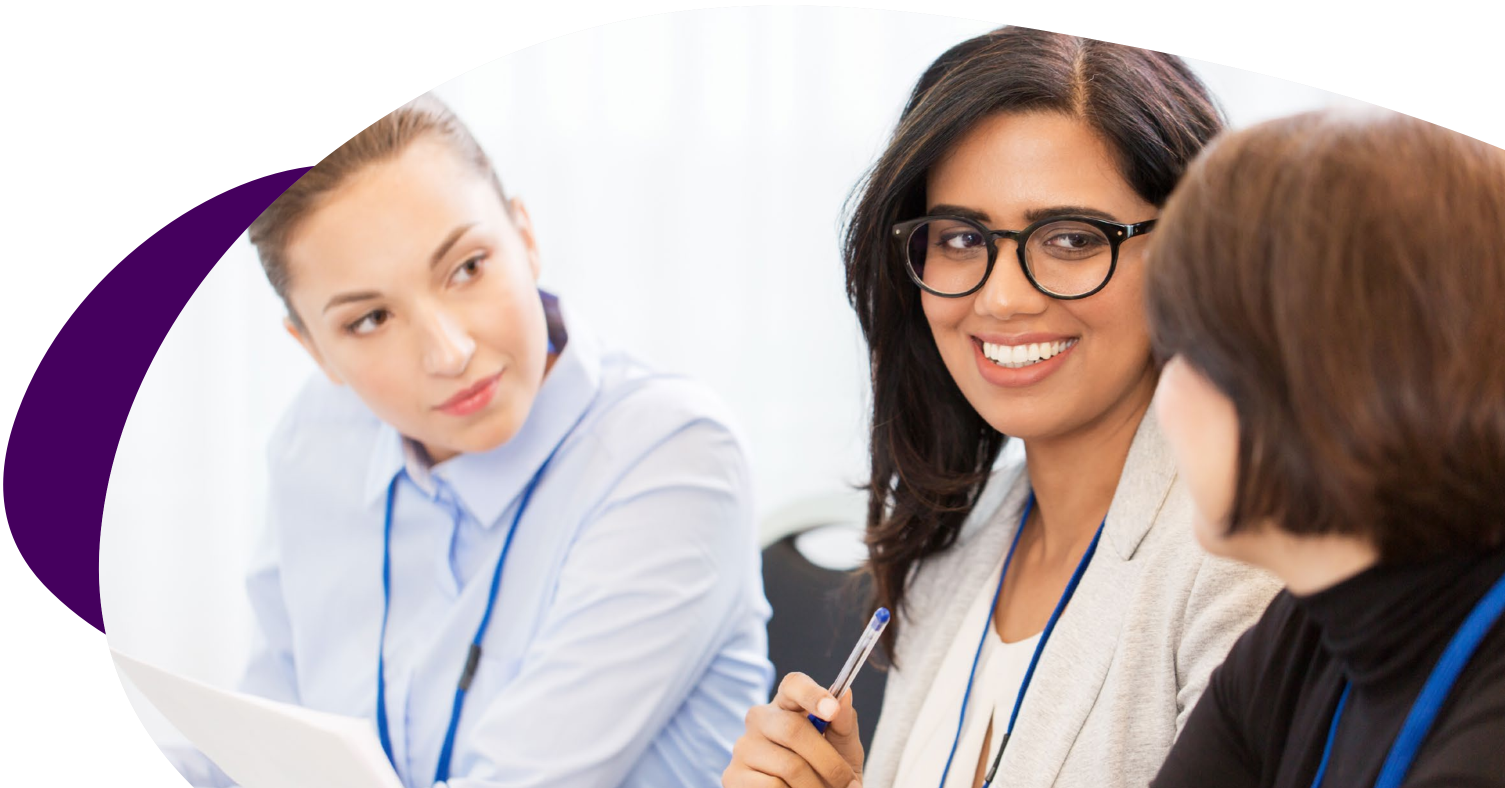
Key Practices

a. Policies and procedures for application, recruitment, selection and admission to programmes are reliable, fair, transparent and accessible, including processes for the recognition of prior learning. Similar and proportionate arrangements are in place for modules and other units of study.

b. Providers offer information that supports prospective students, and their advisers for recruitment and widening access purposes, in making informed decisions. Providers meet their legal and regulatory obligations in relation to the information presented about themselves and their provision or any changes they make to programmes and modules.

c. Staff, student representatives and external partners engaged in the delivery of recruitment, selection, admissions and widening access processes are appropriately trained and resourced.

d. All teams involved in the application, selection and admissions processes ensure information about the applicant journey is consistent and clear. Specific elements of the selection process are clearly defined and any programme or module changes that can impact decision making are communicated swiftly and consistently to enable all parties to exercise informed choice.



Principle 9 - Recruiting, selecting and admitting students

Providers operate recruitment, selection and admissions processes that are transparent, fair and inclusive. Providers maintain and publish accurate, relevant and accessible information about their provision, enabling students to make informed choices about their studies and future aspirations.

The recruitment, selection and admission of students should be based on the principle of effectively matching a course with its appropriate audience. Admissions processes should empower providers to identify and find students with the potential to succeed but retain the capacity to adapt to changing markets and audiences as needed. These processes should be evidence-led and be informed by curriculum development, professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) requirements and evolving student support systems.

Providers have a responsibility to manage the expectations of applicants, from researching prospective programmes of study through to admissions and enrolment. Places should only be offered to students for whom there is a reasonable expectation that they are capable of satisfactory completion of the programme. This may require consideration of wider criteria than prior qualifications and attainment and, where possible, they should apply evidence-based justification of selection markers or prerequisites.

Recruitment, admissions, and selection set the tone of engagement for a prospective student with their provider and the wider sector. Therefore, the support a prospective student receives from first point of contact to enrolment will be instrumental in laying the foundations for a successful educational experience. From admission through to completion, all students should be provided with appropriate support to maximise their chance of succeeding in their chosen programme of study.

Providers should operate a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system, instilling these principles into staff and embedding them in all admissions and recruitment processes, from outreach activities and first point of contact to enrolment. This should extend to maintaining fair and transparent procedures for handling complaints and appeals which are clearly articulated and accessible to all students. Outcomes from appeals and complaints should be monitored and reviewed to mitigate against issues reoccurring and to drive continuing improvement. For further advice and guidance please refer to Principle 12 - Operating concerns, complaints and appeals.

Providers should actively engage students, individually and collectively, in reflecting on the quality of their experience of the admissions process. This should include those who did not take up a place, and any feedback should inform continuous improvement activity.

Providers are encouraged to collaborate closely with PSRBs, external regulators, employers and other higher education institutions to best match intake numbers with current local and national workforce requirements and future demand. Consideration should be given to how these partnerships can inform and contribute to managing applicant expectation and opportunity along the entire admissions journey.

Key Practice a - Fair and transparent admissions policies for student success

Key Practice a

Fair and transparent admissions policies for student success

Policies and procedures for application, recruitment, selection and admission to programmes are reliable, fair, transparent and accessible, including processes for the recognition of prior learning. Similar and proportionate arrangements are in place for modules and other units of study.

Policies and procedures for application, recruitment, selection and admission to higher education should be fair, reliable and capable of selecting students based on their potential to succeed and benefit from their chosen programme of study. They should be readily accessible by prospective students and their advisers and clearly articulate how the application and selection process operates.

This information normally includes:

- entry requirements for admission to the programme, including any specific subjects or qualifications required and any language requirements
- the basis for recognising qualifications awarded in other jurisdictions, for example the Lisbon Recognition Convention
- indicative timescales and key milestones
- details of any additional selection processes or assessments undertaken as part of the admissions process
- details of any communications applicants will receive, and the channels used to send them
- any actions and requirements applicants will need to complete during the admissions process and the associated deadlines
- how applicants can request feedback or submit a complaint or appeal.

Evidence-based selection of applicants

All policies and procedures should be consistently and transparently applied. Tools that are used to assess, and, where necessary, differentiate, the suitability of applicants to a specified programme should be developed, with appropriate independent governance processes to assure standards and safeguard against bias. By using such tools providers can consider a range of evidence, including any prior learning, when determining the potential of prospective students to succeed on a programme and when discriminating between applicants considered able to succeed where capacity is limited.

Programme specific selection criteria

Procedures for selection and admission should be aligned with the expectations or requirements of any relevant PSRBs. This may include non-academic selection criteria, for example occupational health requirements. All selection criteria for a specified programme should be a direct reflection of the requirements necessary to succeed on that programme or within the provider. Programme-specific selection criteria should be strictly limited and identified by the provider as necessary for successful completion.

Reasonable selection criteria might include:

- subject-specific knowledge
- competence standards as defined by the relevant equality legislation
- prior attainment in previous relevant qualifications
- genuine occupational requirements
- visa restrictions and application deadline dates
- the number of places available on a programme.

Consideration should be given to removing or amending any requirement that does not clearly help the provider assess potential to succeed on a programme and is not otherwise required to study the course or acquire a relevant professional registration at the end of the course. Providers are encouraged to ensure that, where exceptions are made, these are applied in a fair and equitable manner. Assessments of potential to succeed may extend beyond academic preparation. Encouraging reflection and self-assessment by applicants throughout the admissions process can give them agency over these questions and provide an equitable basis for applicants of different backgrounds to demonstrate success.

Individual context of applications

The application process should identify the most suitable prospective students mindful of individual context and backgrounds such that all applicants receive a fair outcome. Providers may choose to consider academic and non-academic achievements within the context in which they were attained, as well as future support needs or positive action required. The use of contextual data should be aligned with core admissions principles: evidence-based, consistent in application and outcome and transparent to prospective students. Further information can be found in guidance by UUK, UCAS and The Sutton Trust.

Removing barriers to access

Recruitment and selection procedures should be considered as part of the whole student lifecycle. When considering more flexible admissions requirements to remove barriers for certain groups, providers should consider any specific support that needs to be in place during their period of study. Effective governance should ensure that changes to programme design or delivery and student support includes reviewing entry requirements and selection criteria to ensure they remain aligned with the future running of the programme. Providers should aim to reduce or remove any barriers not necessary to the appropriate selection and assessment of applicants.

Unnecessary barriers to selection might include:

- prior attainment in previous qualifications that do not form part of the published requirements for the course in question
- fixed interview dates that do not consider individual circumstance or religious beliefs
- interviews, external tests and other assessments that do not affect the outcome of the application
- over reliance on predicted grades, as opposed to considering the application more holistically, considering all evidence that indicates student potential
- arbitrary restrictions that prevent students from transferring between providers, which are not proportionate or based on irreconcilable concerns regarding prior course content or academic performance.

Counterproductive admissions practices

In keeping with an evidence-led approach, providers are encouraged to evaluate their admissions, recruitment and outreach activities to identify and mitigate any unintended consequences, including for specific individuals or demographic groups. Providers should also evaluate student outcomes by entry pathway, ensuring an evidence-led approach to entry requirements and selection processes that support future student success. They should be mindful of actions that are likely to have a negative impact on prospective students, particularly their academic performance before and during higher education, their financial well-being, or their future employability. For example, practices such as making an unconditional offer to an applicant before the completion of their current studies needs careful consideration as they might impact the applicant's motivation and attainment preparedness for higher education.

Providers are encouraged to consider their own evidence bases and not just follow accepted sector practice which may open opportunities for under-served groups that benefit both students and the provider. Mechanisms should be in place to ensure sufficient internal challenge to any biases or counterproductive practice, particularly at a course or discipline level.

Responding to change

Principles underpinning robust and effective assessment methods should be maintained regardless of shifts in applicant demand within or across admission cycles. Proactive planning of assessment practice for different scenarios can support agile decision-making while ensuring assessment remains fair for decisions across an admissions cycle.

Reflective questions

1. How do we plan selection across an admission cycle to make sure that it is responsive to market changes with clear delegated authority?
2. How do we ensure that individual applications falling outside the scope of standard selection criteria are fairly assessed in a proportionate way?
3. How do we demonstrate to prospective applicants that we offer programmes that are informed by current employment markets and career opportunities?
4. How do we monitor consistency in decision-making? What actions, interventions or other changes could be approved in-cycle, rather than merely as part of an end-of-cycle review?
5. Where automated processes are used in selection, what quality assurance mechanisms do we have in place to ensure outcomes are consistent with intended practice?
6. How do graduate outcomes feed into entry criteria, to ensure that we recruit and attract students based on the skills, attributes and achievements of successful graduates?
7. What governance processes determine whether our policies need to vary according to type, level or location of study, including for transnational education (TNE)?
8. How do our admissions processes verify evidence used in decisions, including appropriate mechanisms for detecting fraud?
9. Do appropriate policies and processes exist to ensure that we consider applicants' prior learning fairly and consistently?
10. How does our committee or other consultative management structures consider marketing and recruitment, alongside admissions processes, to ensure fairness?
11. How do we assure ourselves that all courses are selecting based on potential? What evidence and which policies are subject to periodic internal review to ensure this?
12. How do we proactively promote our provision and entry routes to harder-to-reach audiences, such as low participation communities or under established international markets for all programmes at all levels?
13. What counts as an unnecessary barrier? How do we identify and evaluate these for different programmes, especially those that may have different learning methods, approaches and outcomes?
14. What mechanisms do we have in place to ensure entry requirements remain aligned with changes to course curricula? When changes are made to the curriculum, how are entry requirements reviewed to ensure they remain appropriate and necessary?

Scenarios

Scenario 1: A key feeder college changes the curriculum of a RQF Level 3/SCQF Level 6 programme

Context

By removing elements of a RQF Level 3/SCQF Level 6 programme, applicants from a key feeder college are no longer able to meet the entry requirements for a provider's programmes. The provider is keen to find a solution to this problem and works with the college to identify and bridge learning gaps. This collaborative approach reassures the college that their students can progress and study at their chosen provider. The provider is confident that these applicants will have undertaken the necessary prior learning to ensure they are not disadvantaged during their studies. The provider and college agree to evaluate the success of this approach and the impact of an agreed package of wraparound support.

Considerations

- How important is the feeder college for the sustainability of the programmes impacted? How are academic and admissions considerations balanced with marketing and recruitment goals?
- What changes would be required to the provider's programme to allow continued acceptance of the RQF Level 3/SCQF Level 6 programme? Would those changes be proportionate and what impact would they have on students entering with other forms of preparation?
- Are there students entering the programme from any other schools or colleges who could benefit from the package of wraparound support?
- Should the provider treat this more favourably because it is a key feeder college than if it only affected one applicant from a school with no prior relationship?
- Would the removal of this entry route disproportionately impact learners from widening access backgrounds?
- How should the provider engage with key schools, colleges and partners to ensure any proposed curriculum changes are discussed at the earliest opportunity?
- How could any learning gaps be bridged, either pre-entry or in-sessional?

Scenario 2: Following a vigorous marketing campaign, applications to a programme have increased significantly

Context

Historically, after an initial triage of applicants based on academic tariff, this programme has used face-to-face interviews to determine which applicants will be made a conditional offer of a place. The central admissions team raise concerns about the level of resources needed to manage the increased number of interviews required and propose outsourcing them to a third-party provider. The academic staff who deliver the programme would prefer the interviews to be kept in house with questions asked by subject experts.

Considerations

- What is the evidence that the interviews need to be face-to-face, could they be moved online? If so, how can risks of fraud, for example the misuse of artificial intelligence technologies, be mitigated?
- What are the risks to the integrity of the interview process if available resources do not scale with the number of applicants?
- What arrangements are in place to provide additional resources in the event of an unexpected increase in the number of applications that are received?
- What additional filters could be used before making the offer of an interview? How are these filters designed to avoid arbitrary or ill-evidenced criteria?
- How will the provider manage the sharing of data and the transparency of selection procedures if a commercial third party is involved?
- How and when will changes be implemented within the admissions cycle?
- How might your complaints and appeals policy be affected if interview decisions are made by a third party that may not be counted under 'academic judgement'?

Key Practice b - Clear, accurate information that supports prospective students and their advisers in making informed decisions

Key Practice b

Clear, accurate information that supports prospective students and their advisers in making informed decisions

Providers offer information that supports prospective students, and their advisers for recruitment and widening access purposes, in making informed decisions. Providers meet their legal and regulatory obligations in relation to the information presented about themselves and their provision or any changes they make to programmes and modules.

Prospective students should have confidence that information supplied to them during recruitment and widening access activities is accurate, contextualised, and reliable and enables them to make informed decisions about higher education. They should be directed to sources of further information to enable them to make informed decisions at the point of application for higher education courses.

Sources of information

Opportunities to gather further information about a course or provider can be offered through a wide range of outreach events and activities, including (but not limited to) higher education exhibitions, visits to schools, open days and/or applicant visit days, virtual experiences and web chats, summer schools, social media and peer-to-peer contact with current students or alumni.

Promotional material, verbal information and events should give a fair and accurate reflection of the courses offered, the provider and the student experience it offers. Providers are also advised to be aware of the legislative requirements around the provision of information about their courses; for example, UK consumer protection legislation. This should take into consideration the needs of the applicants and needs of the employer when thinking about partnership courses such as apprenticeships.

The role(s) of staff

Staff should be aware of the clear and explicit statements about academic and non-academic requirements for admission and success in a course. They should be able to communicate them effectively and signpost to the information where necessary.

Such requirements may include:

- those made by PSRBs or other sponsoring bodies
- immigration and English/Welsh language requirements for international students
- occupational health, criminal records and other statutory requirements
- work-based learning requirements made by employers
- subject-specific requirements and their justification.

Providers should offer relevant additional information to help prospective students make an informed decision. Admissions, recruitment and widening access professionals should know where this information can be found and be able to signpost prospective students to it.

Transparency in assessment methods

Assessment methods should fall within reasonable expectations of prospective students, and to support this higher education providers should articulate them through open days, recruitment and outreach programmes and events and through online content. Providers should ensure that there is consistency between the published admissions criteria and selection criteria used to make decisions. Where exceptions or future alterations may apply, this should be made clear in advance from the start of the admissions cycle. Published criteria would also include entry requirements included in partnership agreements with other providers.

Pre-enrolment information

Providers should determine what information and activities will best enable prospective students to begin their studies with an understanding of the environment in which they will be working. They need to ensure that the timing and nature of any information or activities provided is appropriate and relevant to the diverse needs of prospective students, for all modes and levels of study regardless of location. This extends to provider's having a legal duty to publish information about all fees, charges and other costs (for example travel to placements or equipment students need to self-fund for the course) in advance of any contractual agreements and in clear, accessible language. Failure to do so may make the provider subject to consumer rights, trading standards or other legal challenges within the UK, or within other countries they are deemed to be trading.

Financial support

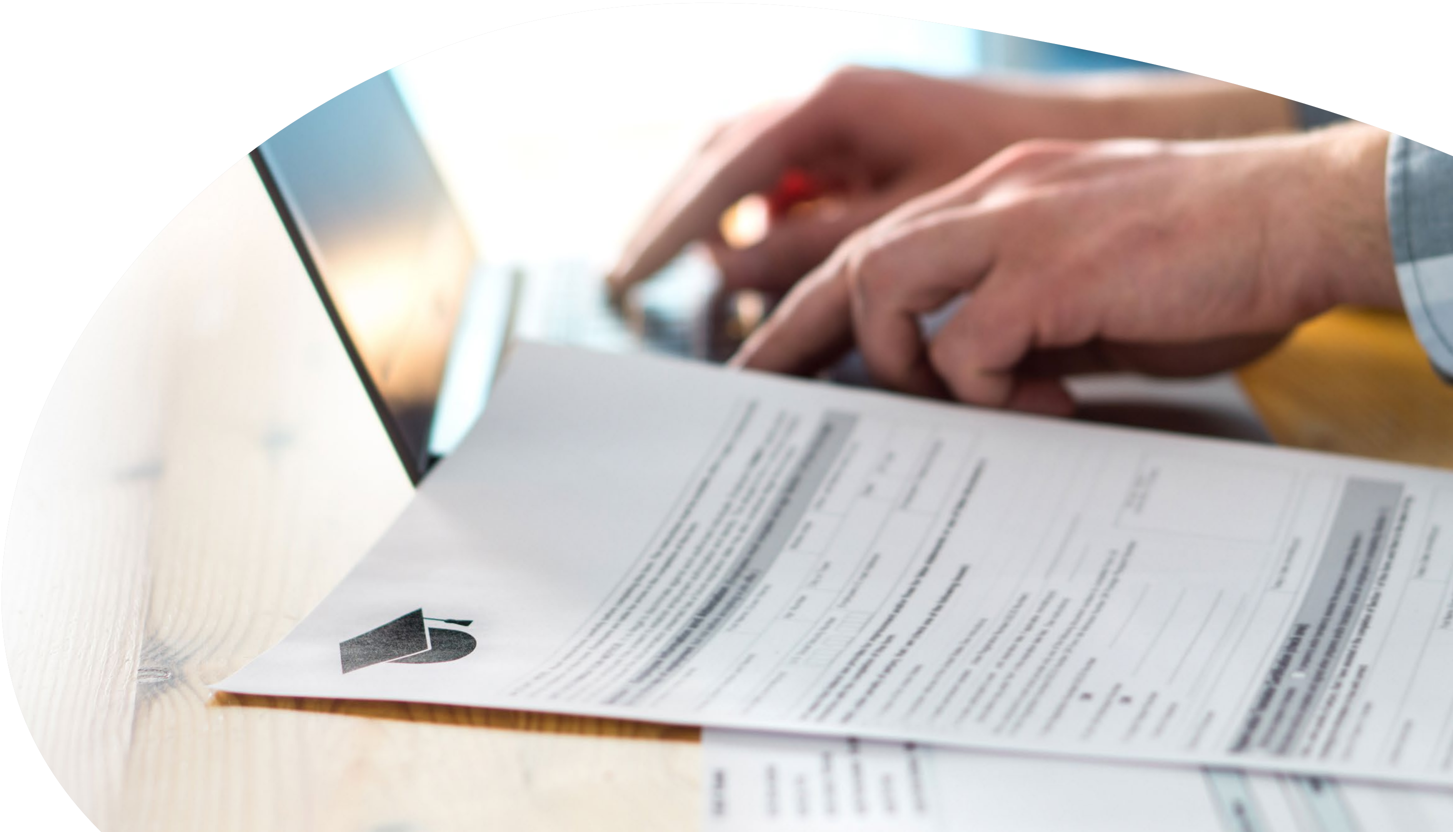
Providers should also publish accessible and transparent information about financial support available for students (for example, scholarships, bursaries, loans) to enable prospective students to make comparisons and informed decisions about the cost of higher education at different providers and for different courses of study. They should also ensure that published information about financial support available for students is consistent with that published in widening access plans.

Changes to programmes of study

From time to time providers may find it necessary to make changes to a course between the point at which prospectuses are published or offers are made to prospective students and the time when enrolment/registration is completed and they become current students. In such circumstances, providers must inform those who have made an application at the earliest opportunity and update their information as soon as possible. Communication would detail any significant changes and ensure that there is advice of the options available, which may include applying to a different course at the same provider or applying to a different provider altogether. When making changes to published courses, providers should consider the requirements of the relevant legislative body and consumer protection legislation and ensure that changes are made in line with the provider's published information (for example, in line with Student Protection Plans in England).

Widening access

Procedures and policies governing the purpose and scope of widening access activities and initiatives are determined by a range of local and national bodies. There are different and evolving practices reflected across UK nations and providers should respond in line with stated expectations and develop their strategies in context with relevant frameworks. Policies and procedures for admissions for TNE provision should also reflect national contexts.



Reflective questions

1. How easy is it for an applicant to find whether a course that we offer is or is not accredited?
2. How often do we upskill our partners to whom we have outsourced recruitment, admissions and selection services to on behalf of our institution?
3. How do we ensure that external and internal applicants get the same level of service and access to quality information?
4. How often do we provide training to academic, technical and student staff involved in widening participation, recruitment and admissions?
5. How do we ensure there is an authoritative internal process for deciding what information should or should not be published? What processes are in place to guarantee a timely flow between governance and operational teams to ensure accuracy is maintained?
6. What processes do we have in place to ensure applicants seeking to enrol on a programme by stacking micro-credentials are treated equitably?
7. How do we ensure any partners involved in either recruitment or admissions provide the necessary level of information and support for potential students?
8. How do we highlight any changes or updates to fees and regulations to students who are reapplying, either after a break in study or onto a new course?
9. Do our internal deadlines allow any incoming student cohort sufficient time to make informed choices?
10. How frequently do we check and review legal rulings against other providers, to assure ourselves that we are operating within the legal and regulatory obligations which govern UK higher education? Would any admissions decisions that we make stand up if challenged in court?
11. What alternative modes of delivering information, including in-person delivery, do we offer to potential applicants who are less able to access our standard offer (for example, speeches, tours and demonstrations at an open day)?
12. What evaluation of evidence takes place before enrolment as to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds to highlight any variations to our standard terms and conditions, or other expectations, that may need to be put in place?

Scenarios

Scenario 1: Following a systematic review of its portfolio, a provider wants to reduce the number of undergraduate programmes it offers

Context

In response to market demand and internal reallocation of resource, the senior leadership of a provider decides to withdraw undergraduate provision in a significant number of subject areas. However, this information is disseminated late, after the start of the admissions cycle and even after the UCAS deadline for on-time applicants. As a result, applicant choice is curtailed, and recruitment and admissions staff are overwhelmed by applicant complaints over late notification and the subsequent lack of options. There is a negative effect on institutional reputation.

Considerations

- Should portfolio review, which is an important and necessary function for any provider, be mapped against admissions cycles to ensure applicants have as much time and information as possible to exercise their choice?
- Should decisions to withdraw a programme normally be made before the start of an admissions cycle?
- When late decisions are made to suspend recruitment should there still be a hard cut-off date that enables some degree of choice and the possibility to switch providers or programmes in such a way that applicants are not materially disadvantaged? Will any mitigations be communicated in accordance with a defined communication plan?

Scenario 2: Recruiting the first cohort to a new programme that will be eligible for PSRB accreditation through clearing

Context

A course team develops a new programme that it is confident can obtain PSRB accreditation. Course approval is given by the provider very late in the academic cycle and the decision is made to recruit the first cohort through clearing. Consequently, the programme will need to be advertised as being set up in line with PSRB requirements with a view to obtaining accreditation prior to graduation of the first cohort. Those PSRB requirements include interviewing applicants, taking up references and getting criminal records clearance which will create several logistical issues that will need to be overcome.

Considerations

- Can the PSRB requirements be written into the programme as a progression requirement to allow initial access to the course without them and reduce the pressure during the clearing period?
- Are the PSRB requirements clear enough on the provider's website to allow applicants to make an informed decision regarding their own circumstances and fulfilling the PSRB requirements?
- Is there an opportunity to maintain the confirmation tariff and is there a ready pool of applicants from those who are unsuccessful at confirmation?
- Does advertising this new programme so late in the year create a risk to recruitment to other programmes?
- Is there a PSRB protocol to guide staff in the options available?
- Have the PSRB requirements been challenged to determine whether they are all necessary?
- Are there ways that the provider can help applicants ensure they will meet the PSRB requirements prior to graduation?

Key Practice c - Training and resources for the delivery of recruitment, selection, admissions and widening access

Key Practice c

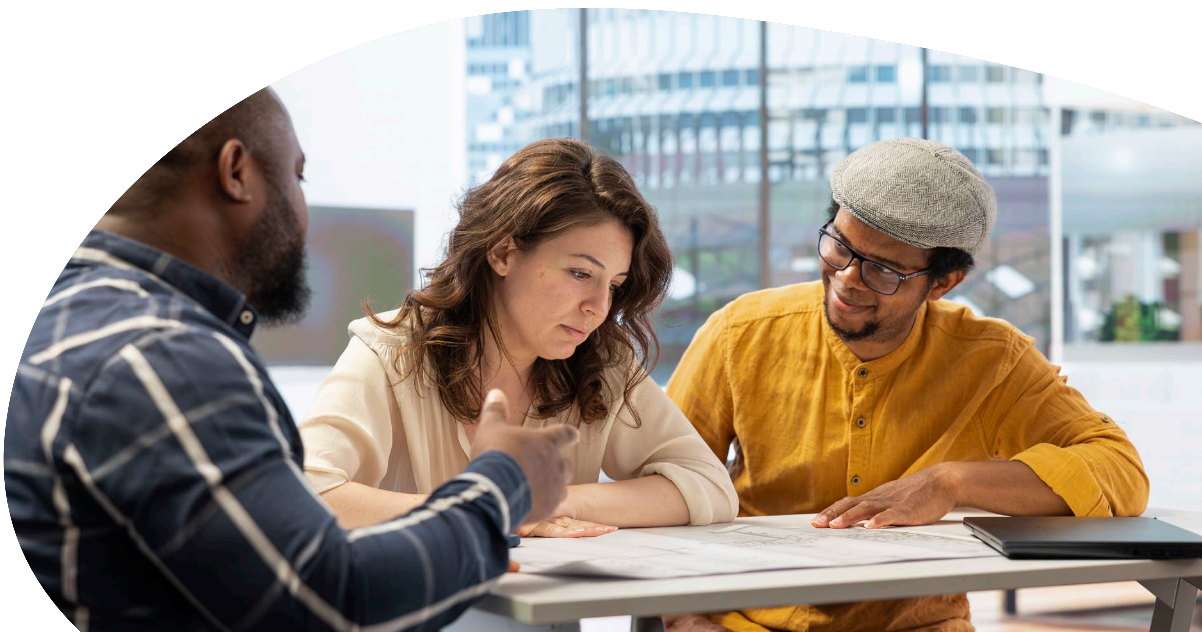
Training and resources for the delivery of recruitment, selection, admissions and widening access

Staff, student representatives and external partners engaged in the delivery of recruitment, selection, admissions and widening access processes are appropriately trained and resourced.

Providers should ensure that all staff involved in admissions, selection, recruitment and widening access are appropriately resourced to deliver a fair and transparent service that minimises barriers from point of contact to point of enrolment. Insufficient resourcing may risk compromising the integrity of the core principles of fairness and transparency. Any move to spare resource by fully or partially automating selection should be for the sole purpose of enhancing efficiency. Staff with suitable admissions expertise should be involved in the design and implementation of such automated processes to maintain fairness, consistency and relevance.

Resourcing

It is helpful if providers recognise that the different forms of assessment used in admissions processes have different resource needs. Resourcing and training may need to grow when processes become more complex. On the other hand, the risk of errors may increase with complexity and require mitigation by resourcing additional staff time for assurance and checking processes. When making policy decisions around admissions processes, providers should consider the implications of complexity and if simpler processes may be possible or desirable. The same considerations about complexity may apply to the use of technology to support processes. Full or partial automation may allow the handling of greater complexity more efficiently and reliably for operational teams but can increase the resources needed for maintenance.

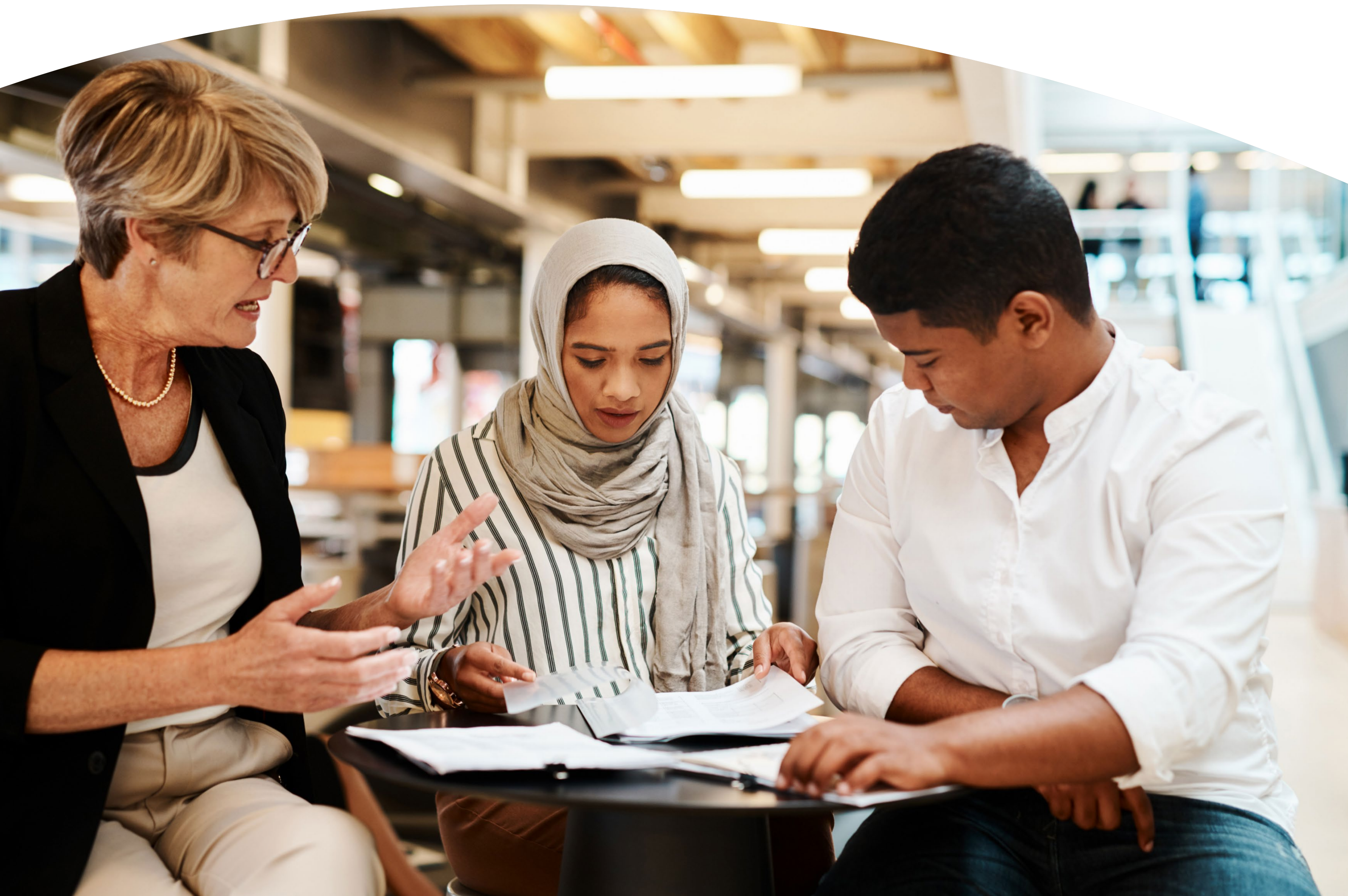


Roles and responsibilities

All staff involved in recruitment, admissions and widening access activities have a responsibility to engage with these processes at a level appropriate for their role. They should be provided with clear resources, be able to identify the limits of their own expertise and be aware of appropriate escalation points.

Roles and the limits of responsibilities for individuals and teams should be made clear on appointment. Given the complexity of the admissions process, a pragmatic approach may be to provide training and resourcing appropriate to everyone's role. However, providers should ensure that foundational training for all staff involved in the admissions journey includes the core tenets found in this Advice and Guidance, for example widening access, admissions processes for international audiences and the basics of an institution's responsibilities under consumer law. Any member of staff with a role in the admissions journey should ensure that colleagues have access to clear, reliable resources on the process they have responsibility for.

Staff representing a provider to external audiences should be prepared to engage with them on the basics of the admissions process. In these circumstances staff may encounter prospective students for any level of study or subject discipline and will need to be able to provide a basic level of response to a range of questions. Providers are encouraged to reflect carefully on the balance of knowledge staff are expected to maintain and the reasonable expectations of external audiences. Core resources including basic details of application processes and entry requirements should be internally available.



Training and development

Given the highly cyclical nature of admissions functions, introductory training should be tailored for new starters based on when they join; for example, start of cycle, post-offer phase and confirmation and clearing. Buddy support or mentoring systems can help new starters navigate their first year.

To support admission staff in a fluid professional landscape, training and development should be ongoing. For example, annual update sessions covering equal consideration, inclusive recruitment, anti-bias practices and legislative and regulatory requirements including consumer protection and GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation).

Providers should consider career development opportunities and how to grow pipelines of expert staff. Training needs should be informed by the applicant experience, using systematic approaches to gather and evaluate feedback from applicants and their supporters on clarity and fairness of processes.

Depending on specific responsibilities, admissions staff should also have access to the following specialist training:

- fraud prevention covering areas of high risk, international qualification fraud, compliance, data protection, GDPR and PSRB requirements
- safeguarding for under-18s or adults at risk
- handling difficult conversations, including de-escalation techniques
- qualification frameworks
- digital admissions tools (virtual open days, automated screening, online platforms)
- the use of AI platforms: automation, piloting training, tuition fee assessment, student statistics and eligibility, chatbots.

Employing current students

Students employed in recruitment/admissions roles (for example student ambassador or call handling during clearing) should receive appropriate training with clear guidance on fair admissions principles and entry requirements.

Working with partners

Providers should work with schools and FE providers to ensure applicants receive accurate advice at the right stage of their journey. Where external partners are delivering admissions activities, providers should ensure that they receive robust training and are subject to auditing against institutional standards.

Reflective questions

1. To what extent are our current admissions processes adequately resourced, and where might insufficient staffing or technology be creating risks to fairness or accuracy?
2. To what extent have we documented key processes to assist in training new staff and retaining existing knowledge and expertise?
3. How do we approach succession planning, especially for highly skilled, experienced and/or complex roles?
4. In what ways do our current training and development opportunities around legislation, anti-bias practice, prevention and detection of fraud, and digital tools enable staff to maintain competencies in an evolving admissions landscape?
5. How do we ensure information given by external providers to applicants is consistent with your own processes?
6. How do we ensure that our external partners, such as agents, are operating to the same high standards we set for ourselves?
7. How frequently do we review compulsory training for those in information and guidance roles?
8. What is the mechanism for reviewing recent admissions appeals and complaints to identify any changes that may need to be put in place?
9. How does the applicant experience inform the refinement/development of training for staff involved in our recruitment, selection, admissions and widening access processes?
10. How would we know if applicants find our admissions processes transparent, accessible and equitable?
11. How often do we benchmark staffing levels against sector norms to help inform resourcing decisions and to improve staff retention?
12. How do we use feedback from applicants, stakeholders and staff to improve both internal and publicly available admissions information?
13. How effectively do we support and train staff both to communicate academic and non-academic entry requirements and signpost applicants to accurate and up-to-date information?

Scenarios

Scenario 1: Expansion of interview-based selection for high-demand programmes

Context

A provider expands interview-based selection for high-demand postgraduate and undergraduate programmes (for example, creative arts, and PSRB-accredited health and education programmes). This change was driven by external requirements, including PSRB expectations, concerns about academic preparedness, and a strategic shift towards more holistic admissions decisions. The admissions process now includes multiple assessment stages (shortlisting, interviews, scoring, moderation, and compliance checks), with significant involvement from academic staff alongside central admissions teams. The volume of applicants varies throughout the admissions cycle, increasing pressure during peak periods.

Considerations

- How much does interview-based selection increase resourcing demands, for example the need for trained academic assessors, coordination support, and assurance mechanisms?
- To what extent does sufficient staff capacity or inconsistent training introduce risks to fairness, consistency, equal consideration, or compliance with consumer law?
- Do academic staff involved in admissions have sufficient familiarity with admissions principles, widening participation objectives, and interview standardisation?
- How can clear ownership between admissions teams and academic departments for decision making, communications, and record keeping be established?

Scenario 2: Introduction of automated screening and AI-supported admission tools

Context

A provider adopts a suite of new digital admissions tools to manage increased application volumes, including automated eligibility screening, AI-supported fee assessment and chatbot-based applicant inquiries. These tools are introduced to improve efficiency, reduce processing times, and support staff during peak admissions periods such as pre-offer review or confirmation and clearing.

Automation is integrated into existing admissions workflows and used across multiple applicant groups, including international applicants and those applying through widening participation routes.

Considerations

- Does increased system complexity create new risks related to bias, transparency, data protection, and applicant understanding?
- Do staff have the technical or admissions-specific expertise to challenge automated decisions or identify system errors?
- How much ongoing resourcing does automation require for system maintenance, data quality management, and human oversight?
- Will applicants be able to understand how decisions are made and how their data is used, in line with regulatory and consumer expectations?

Key Practice d - Clear, consistent communication enables all parties to exercise informed choice

Key Practice d

Clear, consistent communication enables all parties to exercise informed choice

All teams involved in the application, selection and admissions processes ensure information about the applicant journey is consistent and clear. Specific elements of the selection process are clearly defined and any programme or module changes that can impact decision making are communicated swiftly and consistently to enable all parties to exercise informed choice.

Providers should maintain up-to-date policies and frameworks for the various teams involved in the application, selection and admissions processes. Policies and processes should be clear, transparent, and accessible, and provide for the equitable treatment of a diverse body of prospective students.

Processes should enable a provider to maintain and publish accurate information about a programme of study that would normally include:

- entry requirements, including any language requirements
- recognition of prior learning at higher education level or beyond
- the application process
- programme characteristics and current accreditations
- tuition fees and funding, placement information
- programme recruitment status.

Provision of information

To allow any applicant to make a fully informed decision, providers should also publish accurate information about the student experience they offer. Providers should maintain a central source of truth for these key details which allow timely updates to published information. Through this mechanism providers can easily trace version histories and clearly identify the nature and timing of any changes.

Promotional materials, verbal information, and events should give a fair and accurate reflection of the programmes offered by the provider and the associated student experience. Providers should maintain up-to-date and accessible web pages that prioritise the applicant experience by being easy to navigate and using clear and straightforward language. Admissions policies and processes should be presented clearly and transparently to meet a provider's legal and regulatory obligations (for example, consumer protection compliance and, in England, OfS guidance and requirements).

The applicant journey

Key milestones in the application process should be highlighted at the point of first contact. A process should exist that allows providers to produce and issue pre-contract information on a durable medium that can be transmitted to applicants prior to the conclusion of a contract. The ownership of, and lines of responsibility within, this process should be clearly established by the provider.

This approach makes it easy for an applicant to understand how a decision will be made on their application and offers reassurance that a provider will make a fair decision. All relevant staff should be able to communicate academic and non-academic requirements for admission and success in a course, and signpost to the information where necessary. Training to empower staff in how to deliver this should be available as appropriate.

Use of applicant data

Providers must explain how applicant data is collected and used in admissions decisions through easily accessible privacy notices and policies and explain how bias is avoided. For example, contextual admissions, equity monitoring, and any use of AI algorithms in admissions. These decisions must be clearly and transparently explained to applicants. Admissions policies and procedures should include any practices that are determined by the type of course applied to, fee status, widening participation indicators, level of course, and how this information is used.

Additional selection criteria

Providers should clearly define and communicate additional selection measures, such as interviews or portfolio reviews, to applicants at the earliest possible opportunity. This information should include their weighting and if they are the sole measure of eligibility. It should always be clear to an applicant what they are required to do and when, and why the additional selection measure is important to evaluate their potential to succeed on a specific programme(s) of study.

Changes to a provider's portfolio of programmes

Providers should adopt a clear, structured approach to programme approval, modification, review, suspension, and withdrawal. These processes should consider the impact of any changes to individual programmes or the provider's portfolio on published information, applicant options and applicant timelines to ensure compliance with key legal and regulatory requirements. In addition, providers should establish clear processes for how changes are agreed by all stakeholders and tested for accuracy prior to publication. It should also be clear which team within the provider is responsible for updates to website content, external listings, and enquiry platforms and who signs off communications to applicants and enquirers. When communicating changes to applicants, providers should operate a communications process that supports informed decision making, minimise anxiety and empowers applicants who wish to access alternatives within the timeframe of the admissions cycle. For further information, see Key Practice b above.

Figure 1: Three key steps to ensure clear, supportive and informative provision for applicants

1 → 2 → 3

Agree

Agree material changes in good time, via a robust process. The wider curriculum ecosystem (e.g Admissions, Marketing) outworking changes have been mapped.

Publish

Update publications such as the website and prospectus. For larger changes consider an FAQ pages to ensure changes are easy to identify.

Inform

Clearly communicate the changes to applicants and prospects.

Providers should have frameworks in place to support partner institutions to deliver published information on their websites and printed material to the same high standard, including when there is a need to communicate changes to published course information. Consideration is given to cultural communication differences with international applicants.

Reflective questions

1. Do we have systems in place to ensure applicants are promptly informed of changes that affect their choices, including international applicants whose visa status may be impacted?
2. Do our communication channels effectively support applicants seeking clarification, reporting inconsistencies, and receiving timely responses?
3. Across platforms, is our published information clear, accurate and timely throughout the applicant journey?
4. How clearly do we communicate additional selection measures to applicants in terms of purpose, weighting, timing, and their role in assessing potential to succeed on the programme?
5. What assurance do we have that promotional materials, events and verbal communications provide a fair, accurate and consistent representation of our courses, provider identity, and student experience?
6. Does the information we provide to applicants cover all legal requirements and what they reasonably need to know to research choices and make decisions?
7. Are admissions policies and procedures available on our website and are they easy to understand?
8. Do we communicate to all applicants, via a durable medium, all relevant pre-contract information along with their right to cancel within 14 days (as applicable)?
9. What confidence do we have that a central 'source of truth' with appropriate controls exists for key course information, and that versioning and change tracking enable timely, accurate updates across all platforms and teams to minimise the negative impacts on applicants?
10. To what extent do our recruitment and admissions practices promote applicant well-being and a sense of belonging from first contact through to enrolment?
11. What evidence can we offer to show that applicants to our programmes can clearly understand how admissions decisions are made and be assured of a fair, transparent, and compliant decision-making process?
12. Have we conducted a 'mystery shopping' exercise to verify clarity and transparency for applicants?
13. What evidence do complaint and appeal rates, and student movement between courses, provide about the effectiveness of our policies, procedures, and management of student expectations?

Scenarios

Scenario 1: A mature applicant with extensive professional experience, but lacking an undergraduate degree, applies for a Postgraduate taught programme in public health

Context

A mature applicant with extensive professional experience, but lacking an undergraduate degree, applies for a PGT programme in public health. The provider's admissions process does not clearly outline how APL/RPL can be assessed or recognised.

The admissions team feel it has limited options, such as:

- passing the application to the programme director for a decision
- using their database to find the closest equivalent entry requirement
- rejecting the application as a non-traditional route is not normally considered.

None of which might be considered either transparent or fair.

Considerations

- Does the provider have a clear policy about APL/RPL that can be applied consistently across faculties?
- Does the provider have a transparent framework for assessing prior learning, including professional experience, with clear expectations of the admissions and academic teams in how to apply it?
- Can applicants submit digital portfolios of experiential learning via an accessible platform?
- Do admissions staff receive training in evaluating non-traditional qualifications and experiences?

Scenario 2: Use of unconditional offers following an applicant 'interview'

Context

To improve recruitment, a provider holds informal discussions with prospective applicants who attend an open day. Those prospective students who subsequently apply receive an unconditional offer based on their performance at 'interview'. At no point is it made clear on the provider's website or in published materials that any informal discussions with prospective students attending an open day will be used in selection. Complaints are submitted to the provider, and school advisers struggle to know how best to support their learners.

Specifically, school advisers have the following questions:

- Will learners who receive an unconditional offer stay fully engaged with their current studies?
- Have we communicated to learners any potential consequences of disengaging, for example their ability to succeed on the programme to which they are being admitted?
- What advice should they give to other students who received a conditional offer, but who feel they did not have equal access to the provider because of the lack of transparency surrounding the use of an open day discussion to inform selection?

Considerations

- Are applicant interviews necessary? If interviews are used, are clear process flows published on websites with frequently asked questions?
- Are unambiguous statements regarding the role and status of interviews made to prospective applicants and applicants in all communications?
- Should providers only issue unconditional offers after interviewing applicants if they are satisfied that admission on that basis is in the applicants' best interest?
- Is it always clear that an interview will demonstrate that an applicant has the potential to succeed on the course without any need for further evidence?
- Are schools outreach teams equipped to ensure feeder schools/colleges understand how applicant interviews are used by the provider?

Terminology

Term	Definition
Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) / Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)	The identification, assessment and formal acknowledgment of prior learning and achievement. While accreditation of prior learning (APL) focuses on awarding credit for prior learning, recognition of prior learning (RPL), in addition, recognises prior learning that has occurred in a range of educational and training contexts and/or where learning is achieved outside education or training systems and is recognised for academic purposes. These terms may be used differently in specific regulated disciplines, such as nursing and other healthcare professions.
Admissions	The practices and processes developed and delivered by providers that relate to admitting a prospective student up to the point of enrolment on a course through an application and selection process.
Assessment	In the context of admissions assessment, refers to the holistic process of evaluation providers use to determine an applicant's academic readiness, potential, and fit for a specific programme of study.
Competence standards	Competence standards are used in admissions to determine whether an applicant has the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in a programme of study. In keeping with the equality legislation that applies to the jurisdiction in which the provider operates, any competence standard must be objectively justifiable. This means that they must be a proportionate means to a legitimate aim and be genuinely relevant to the programme to which the application is being made.
Contextual data and information	Data and information that enable providers to put attainment in the context of the circumstances in which it was obtained, for example, educational, geo-demographic and socio-economic background data.
Current student	Students who are registered/enrolled on any course at undergraduate or postgraduate level, with a higher education provider. An individual becomes a 'current student' at the point of registration/enrolment.
Enhancement	The deliberate and systematic improvement in the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported, involving the active engagement of students and staff. Enhancement has different interpretations across the UK with some UK nations having an enhancement-led regulatory framework.

Term	Definition
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation. Laws governing how organisations collect, store and process personal data.
Inclusive admissions	An admissions system which seeks to minimise any unnecessary barriers in the process which may prevent some groups of applicants from making a successful application.
Professional statutory and regulatory body (PSRB)	PSRBs are a varied group of bodies, regulators and those with statutory authority over a profession or group of professionals. PSRBs may provide membership services and accreditor-approve courses as confirmation that the courses meet their standards and expectations. PSRBs are recognised by employers; achievement of a PSRB-recognised course can be an essential requirement for entry to a particular role/occupation or to be professionally registered with them.
Prospective student	Refers to all those who are applying or considering applying for any course, at any level and employing any mode of study, with a higher education provider.
Recruitment	Generally refers to a broad range of activities and initiatives undertaken by providers or their representatives prior to the point of admission. This includes outreach, events and various marketing activities, which ultimately encourage prospective students to either apply to, or start a course with, that provider. Within the scope of this Advice and Guidance, recruitment specifically refers to the process by which providers share information and advice with prospective students.
Selection	The process providers use to evaluate applicants for a limited number of places on a programme of study. It usually goes beyond meeting minimum entry requirements and may use a combination of some or all of the following to differentiate between highly qualified candidates: academic scoring; standardised test results; personal statements; interviews; and contextual information.
Transnational education (TNE):	All types of higher education study programmes, or sets of programmes of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the students are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based. Such programmes may belong to the education system of a state different from the state in which it operates or may operate independently of any national education system.

Term	Definition
Widening access	A term which has multiple meanings depending on the context in which it is used. It can refer to issues relating to social justice and social mobility, or to activities and initiatives designed to enable different groups of people to gain entry to different aspects of society, such as job opportunities and professions, or involvement in higher education. Within the scope of this Advice and Guidance, widening access refers to the process by which providers may (or may not) vary their admission or selection processes according to local or national policy guidelines and expectations.

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Continue exploring the Advice and Guidance

This publication is part of a suite of Advice and Guidance that accompanies the UK Quality Code for Higher Education 2024.

Select the Principles below to access additional guidance, practical considerations and resources that support the enhancement of quality and the maintenance of academic standards.

Principle 1
Taking a strategic approach to managing quality and standards

Principle 2
Engaging students as partners

Principle 3
Resourcing delivery of a high-quality learning experience

Principle 4
Using data to inform and evaluate quality

Principle 5
Monitoring, evaluating, and enhancing provision

Principle 6
Engaging in external quality and standards review and accreditation

Principle 7
Designing, developing, approving, and modifying programmes

Principle 8
Operating partnerships with other organisations

Principle 9
Recruiting, selecting and admitting students

Principle 10
Supporting students to achieve their potential

Principle 11
Teaching, learning and assessment

Principle 12
Operating concerns, complaints and appeals processes

Published – September 2026

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