

## **1994 Group**

# **Response to the Delivery Partnership Consultations: 'Improving the higher education applications process'**

**18 June 2007**

**The following is a response from the 1994 Group to this consultation, endorsed by the Student Experience Policy Group and the 1994 Group Board. In addition to this response individual 1994 Group members will present their own responses elaborating on the issues raised below.**

**Consultation 1:** A draft statement of good practice on feedback to applicants who have been unsuccessful in gaining a place at an HEI (*Recommendation 4*)

1.1 The 1994 Group is in general agreement with this draft statement.

1.2 Comments and concerns:

*Point 1:* There is concern that introducing a system of weighting to the contextual data would prove very problematic, especially if it was to apply to individual degree programmes. It is important to remember that the admissions process is competitive, and due to the fluctuation in demand and the context of the pool, boundaries naturally tend to broaden as the cycle progresses. Also, selecting HEIs, like those in the 1994 Group, are bound to be making fine judgements about the potential of applicants with very high qualifications to succeed on a particular course and in a particular environment. Most of these applicants will be well qualified to pursue the course, but it's a subjective assessment as to who will do so best. This makes it extremely difficult to set exact criteria, as this would make it difficult to adapt to market trends, and may result in too mechanised a system. It is vital that HEI's continue to consider applicants on an individual basis. Setting too specific criteria would potentially be very problematic, and would be made even more difficult to manage if a detailed weighting element was added. There is also the danger that this would be misleading to students, and may even reduce aspiration and dissuade them from applying.

*Point 2:* We are in agreement that all HEIs should have explicit policies regarding criteria for applications, and that the process should be made as fair and transparent as possible. However, decisions are ultimately down to the individual institution, and reasons for admissions will vary widely across the sector. If possible, the sector

should avoid attempts to standardise this process, while maintaining high levels of fairness and transparency.

*Point 11:* We are concerned about the definitions of 'feedback', 'complaints' and 'appeals' contained in this point, and dispute whether it is necessary to make this distinction to applicants. There is a fine line between a 'complaint' and an 'appeal', and clearly distinguishing one from the other is unconstructive. Requests for further feedback should be considered on an individual basis, and there is no need to categorise them under these descriptions. Also, it would be more constructive, following the issue of a generic but well-supported notification of non-acceptance, to treat requests for further feedback as a request to 'review' the decision, rather than as an 'appeal' against it.

*Point 13:* We strongly agree that appropriate training should be given to admissions staff with regard to feedback and in documenting reasons for admissions decisions.

## **Consultation 2: Revision of the admissions process for entry to Art & Design courses.**

- 2.1 We do not feel that the proposed process simplifies arrangements. To be forced into placing a course in one route or another would severely affect application numbers. A course that is only advertised in the Spring Interview route would be missed by those seeking admission through the normal route and vice versa. 1994 Group institutions with Art & Design courses rely on both routes for applications in order to get a well balanced mix of students, and believe that a course being included in both routes allows an applicant more choice and flexibility.
- 2.2 The 1994 Group does not agree with changing the decision to 'accept by default' rather than 'reject by default'. If a student does not want to go to an institution but fails to respond (for whatever reason), they will suddenly find themselves committed to that institution. This could then cause them to withdraw altogether. It is much easier, and we think psychologically more positive, for an applicant to phone and confirm their acceptance rather than ask to be released.

## **Consultation 3: Models to implement an adjustment period** *(Recommendations 14 and 15)*

- 3.1 We agree in principle with the reasons for an adjustment period, i.e. that students who have done better than their CF offer, and who might wish to change institution at this stage, should be allowed to seek a place elsewhere without jeopardising their original choice.
- 3.2 However, we do not agree with either of the proposed models for remedying this issue, and we set out our reasons for this below, under the headings **Model A** and **Model B**.
- 3.3 We believe that there is a simpler way to address this issue, which would not require significant upheaval of the current system and would minimise any subsequent strain on resources and administration. This proposal is included below as **Model C**.

## **Model A:**

3.4 We do not believe that this model would work. The reasons for this are as follows:

- (i) The 'risks' that are listed within the consultation document are all of high concern to the 1994 Group. We agree that each of these adverse effects would be in danger of occurring if Model A were implemented.
- (ii) We feel that the level of risk concerning applicants who have 'just missed' the terms of their offer (referred to on page 19) is underplayed within the consultation document. These applicants, which constitute a much larger group than the 'over-achieving' applicants in question, would be placed at high risk whilst their places were 'held' during the adjustment period, causing them much uncertainty and anxiety. Implementing Model A would be addressing the interests of the minority, to the disadvantage of this much larger group of applicants.
- (iii) There is the danger that this Model would cause much administrative disruption, in particular affecting accommodation guarantees, bursary allocation and Student Loan Company administration. Advice and guidance channels would also be put under higher strain, and effective guidance would become harder to deliver. All of this would have adverse effects on efforts relating to Widening Participation.
- (iv) Definition of 'exceeded' expectation is more complex than stated in the document. Also, there are many other reasons why students might be 'released' from their CF institution other than due to 'higher grades'.
- (v) There is no evidence that this Model will remedy the problem of applicants making ill-researched decisions. Such decisions would continue to be made, only later in the cycle.
- (vi) This proposal applies only to applicants with A-levels, and does not take into account students progressing through other educational routes.
- (vii) There is also a danger that introducing such a completely new element to the system, in order to address the issue of 'over-achievers', may draw an applicant's attention to it as an option from the outset. Some applicants may then lower the aspirations of their initial applications, in the knowledge that this adjustment period would be an option should they over-achieve on these lowered aspirations.

## **Model B:**

3.5 We do not believe that this model would work. The reasons for this are as follows:

- (i) This appears to be a dressed-down version of Model A, but the same basic problems and risks would apply (see above).
- (ii) The 'risks' detailed in the consultation document are all of concern to the 1994 Group. We agree that each of these adverse effects would be in danger of occurring if Model B were implemented. We believe the issue of 'over-

achievers' could be addressed while minimising these risks (see proposed 'Model C' below).

## **Model C:**

- 3.6 The issue of applicants who 'over-achieve' in relation to their CF offer could be solved relatively easily by integrating them as an extra category in the Clearing process, and coupling this with a complete re-branding of Clearing that would break down negative attitudes towards it. Re-branding the whole process so it is known as 'Adjustment', and using it as a period in which applicants could alter their preference for whatever reason, including 'over-achievement', would allow for this issue to be addressed without an upheaval of the present system, and avoiding the subsequent strain on administration and resources. This would also mean the issue could be addressed soon, and perhaps even in time for the 2008 entry.
- 3.7 Below is a proposal for how Model C may be implemented, and the advantages that it would bring:

### **Key features of Model C:**

- 1) Clearing to be rebranded as 'Adjustment' period (or another title);
- 2) Applicant receives results and logs onto Track to see if he/she has been moved from CF to UF (Unconditional Firm);
- 3) Applicant accepts UF, becoming (say), UFF;  
OR  
Unlocks record to enable other HEI's to see application through web-link;
- 4) Approaches one or more other HEI who considers application through web-link and accepts by making an 'Adjustment' offer in web-link, or rejects, depending on strength of application and recruiting position at receiving course;
- 5) Applicant chooses one acceptance and where relevant goes back to original HEI and asks formally to be released;
- 6) Original HEI releases applicant who becomes UF at second HEI;
- 7) Applicant accepts 2nd HEI by becoming UFF.

### **Advantages of Model C:**

- allows for adjustment without adding a layer of complexity;
- makes transparent what happens informally and covertly at present;
- can be extended to all offers in the 'Clearing' period so applicants from non A level routes or with Insurance status are not disadvantaged;
- makes full use of electronic communication (Web-link and Track).

- Confirming UF status on Track would conveniently and effectively replace the AS12;
- allows HEI's to track number of committed applicants (those who are UFF);
- could probably be implemented for 2008, and would require very little change to current system (although advice from UCAS would be needed on this);
- will not involve extra support and guidance, therefore does not disadvantage WP students, or involve extra resources in schools in August;
- would involve all HEIs. There would be no 'opt out', because no 'opt in' list would be required;
- does not disadvantage 'near misses' because those decisions can be made alongside this adjustment process.

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