

## **1994 Group**

### **Response to the Delivery Partnership Consultation: Implementing a ‘Gathered Field’**

**23 April 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.**

The 1994 Group is concerned about the potential impact of the proposed changes to the admissions system set out in the consultation document. However, as the Delivery Partnership clearly feels that a change to the system is necessary, the 1994 Group wishes to engage fully with the reform process. Before answering the questions set out in the consultation document, we would like to make the following key points of principle:

1. The 1994 Group believes that the fundamental consideration for any admissions system is that it is as clear, simple and transparent as possible. We are concerned that any rushed and ill-considered changes to the system may result in heightened confusion and anxiety amongst students and a range of practical difficulties amongst admissions staff.
2. We are concerned that the evidence base suggesting that the current system is flawed has not been made available. It would have been very useful if the current proposals for altering the system had been accompanied by sufficient evidence to demonstrate why the system needs to be altered. Without this supporting evidence it has been extremely difficult for the Group to fully engage with the proposals.
3. It is clear that the Gathered Field proposals are born from the Delivery Partnership's commitment to Widening Participation (WP). The 1994 Group is strongly committed to WP, and feels strongly that any changes that are made to the admissions system should only work to protect and enhance our ability to widen participation and deliver the highest quality of student experience. There is a real danger that some of the proposals detailed in the consultation might have a negative impact on the range of activities and procedures we already have in place.

We feel it is our duty to raise these issues. Therefore, we present the following as a compromise position, which we believe will protect existing WP work and the student experience.

**A. Given that the admissions review concluded that fairness rests in considering applications as part of a gathered field, please indicate which of the following options would be preferable for an HEI to operate a fair and transparent process while allowing applicants sufficient time to gather information about the course/HEI prior to making a commitment to offers:**

Question A gives six options for the application deadline and the publication of decisions. We believe that the Delivery Partnership have raised these proposals to address the perception that students from lower socio-economic groups generally submit their applications later in the year, and that this is putting their applications at a disadvantage to students from more privileged groups, who generally make their applications earlier. We are not certain that we support the Delivery Partnership's view of the applications process and would welcome the chance to see detailed evidence of this problem. Despite the absence of this evidence, if such a problem exists we are fully committed to addressing it.

The 1994 Group feels that the best way to rectify the problem, and to ensure that the admission system is as clear and simple as possible, is to push the applications deadline forward, rather than back, and similarly to push the date for publication of offers forward, thus making the first period of considering applications shorter. The application period is an essential time to build relationships with students and impacts directly on the wider student experience. To enable us to build an early relationship with the applicant it is hugely important to receive applications as early as possible. This enables HEIs sufficient time to identify WP candidates and get answers to applicants quickly.

A major problem that we identify with the proposed 'gathered field' system is the danger that institutions will make 'informal' replies to applicants, hinting that they would be receiving an acceptance come the publication date. We can see no way that this practice could be prevented, but believe that moving the publication date forward would significantly reduce the likelihood of institutions giving these informal offers to students, but while still allowing institutions time to consider applications properly.

In light of the above, the 1994 Group initially believed that the application deadline should be brought forward so it was earlier than any of the options given within the consultation document. The dates initially proposed by 1994 Group members were for the applications deadline to be 15 December, and the publication of decisions to begin on 15 January. Moving the application deadline forward to 15 December would provide the maximum time for universities to get offers out and start to build relationships with candidates.

However, it was realised that certain practical problems would be caused by this set of dates: (a) it is subject to a problem that applies to all options that involve a relatively short processing hiatus, which applies strong pressure on HEIs to maximise the proportion of offers that they can make by the advertised release date and creates the temptation to cut corners in order to achieve this; and (b) it combines this in a particularly unfortunate way with the significant operational discontinuity around Christmas holidays and closures.

In light of this, the preference of the 1994 Group would therefore incline towards Option 1, as detailed in the consultation document, which is:

**Application deadline: 15 January**

**Publication of decisions: from 15 January**

The Group believes that of all the options given in the consultation document, this has the most strength, and is the only one that addresses the issues of principle and practicality in a workable way.

Firstly, this option allows for HEIs that have genuine issues with highly competitive programmes to collect all applications by 15 January and consider them together before deciding how exactly to draw the offer-making line. Offers would be made as soon as possible after 15 January, as local volumes and circumstances allowed. Also, most HEIs would be likely to sign up to a formalised understanding that they will apply the same offer-making criteria to applications received at any point up to 15 January, but would actually process applications steadily, offers beginning to be released from 15 January.

This option would also reduce the tendency for this discussion to drift towards creating stakeholder expectations of a 'big bang' of offers on a particular date. By doing so it reduces the likely pressure on HEIs to process applications in a cursory, mechanistic way that would not be in keeping with principles of WP. It would also allow for important early engagement between applicants and HEIs.

We note and welcome the recommendation that international students will be excluded from the gathered field, the principal rationale for their exception being that students would come from education systems with very different exit timings to the UK. We would also like to stress the importance for this exception to apply to EU as well as non-EU students, for the same reasons.

- B. For each option, please indicate what you feel the most appropriate decision publication date for Cambridge, Oxford, Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science would be, bearing in mind that currently most institutions will need to interview applicants before an admissions decision is made and that the Government recommendation is that the application deadline for these programmes should remain at 15<sup>th</sup> October. Please select from:**

We are happy that the applications deadline for Cambridge, Oxford, Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science remains earlier than the rest of the sector, as these are clearly special cases due to the interviewing system which is unique to these institutions and subjects. We are happy for their application date to be **15 October**, but in line with the above, they should not be allowed to publish decisions until **15 January**, like the rest of the sector.

- C. Assuming that an earlier application timetable is retained for applications to Oxbridge and to Medicine/Dentistry/Veterinary Science continues, should other HE institutions or programmes should be permitted to opt into this earlier timetable?**

We **strongly disagree** that other institutions or courses should be permitted to opt into this earlier timetable. We can see no example of other 'special cases', and believe that opening this earlier timetable to others would go against the clarity and simplicity of the system, and would only result in heightened confusion and uncertainty amongst students, and thus impact on the student experience. This would also add confusion to the HE marketplace, as institutions would see it as a way of improving their 'brand' and reputation.

We believe that the most essential aspects of the applications and admissions system are clarity, simplicity and that it allows institutions to build early relationships with applicants. This is why we want the most simple and early gathered field as possible.

**D. Assuming that a system based on the principle of a 'gathered field' is adopted, would you wish this to be based on:**

We think it extremely important, for whichever system based on the principle of a 'gathered field' that may be adopted, that any rejections could be made known to unsuccessful applicants **immediately**, in the interests of fairness, and to reduce the risk of uncertainty and anxiety amongst applicants.

**G. Any further comments**

To reiterate the point made in A, we note and welcome the recommendation that international students will be excluded from the gathered field, the principal rationale for their exception being that students would come from education systems with very different exit timings to the UK. Again, we would also like to stress the importance for this exception to apply to EU as well as non-EU students, for the same reasons.