



SPA National Expert Think Tank (NETT)

Managing mistakes in admissions decision-making



Information, Communication and Review
Guide for HE Providers

July 2014

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About SPA and NETT

Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme (SPA)

SPA is an independent and objective voice on UK higher education (HE) admissions. It leads on the development of fair admissions, providing an evidence base and recommendations for good practice and in helping universities and colleges maintain and enhance excellence and professionalism in admissions, student recruitment and widening participation/access. SPA works closely with HE providers and other stakeholders to give outputs as a resource for institutions which wish to develop and update their admissions practice and policy to enhance quality, transparency, reputation and fairness. Full information on SPA and its work can be found at www.spa.ac.uk.

National Expert Think Tank (NETT)

The National Expert Think Tank (NETT) is an expert group convened by SPA to inform and influence topical national debates on fairness and good practice in HE admissions. The second policy topic covered has been on HE providers' approaches to making decisions on entry to HE, subsequent offers made to applicants and their implications.

Members of the group investigated the topic and conducted research in preparation for a three day residential. Based on those findings it was agreed that individual providers would most benefit from further information on three key topics in decision-making. The below guide forms the culmination of the NETT group's intensive collaboration over the period of the residential. However, all the points raised are designed merely to initiate further consideration; their true value will lie in the additional reflection and intelligence that can be applied from an institution-specific perspective and from additional knowledge of developments in the future. We would therefore be very interested in your [comments and feedback](#) to help maintain and further improve this guide.

The members involved in contributing to this work were:

- Gareth Carey-Jones, Home & EU Admissions Manager, University of Exeter
- Simon Chatterton, Director of Admissions, University College Birmingham
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- Jessica Granger, Admissions Policy and Enquiries Manager, King's College London
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- Lynsey Hopkins, Admissions Manager (Undergraduate), University of Sheffield
- Ian McGarry, Admissions Officer (Widening Participation and Qualifications), University of Sheffield
- Alison Mullan, Director of Admissions, Lancaster University
- Dan Shaffer, Head of Professionalism in Admissions, SPA (NETT convener)
- Amy Smith, Admissions Co-ordinator, Nottingham Trent University

Ben Jordan, Policy Executive at UCAS, attended as an associate member.

Further information about NETT terms, remit and structure can be found at www.spa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Terms-of-reference-NETT-2014.pdf

Disclaimer

This information is for general guidance only, and should not be taken as a list of obligations or a legal document. SPA emphasises that it does not offer legal advice and cannot take any responsibility for actions taken based on this information. Institutions must always take their own legal advice as they see appropriate.

SPA good practice statements and information are kept under review and updated as appropriate. Your comments or updates are invited and appreciated, please contact enquiries@spa.ac.uk.

Introduction

Mistakes in admissions decision-making can have a severe impact on applicants and the institutions they have applied to. The threat to an institution's reputation and financial position and other strategic objectives can be severe where a mistake affects large numbers of applicants. These threats can be particularly acute during the Confirmation and Clearing period where the time available to respond and mitigate the impact of mistakes before the start of programmes is limited.

The growing centralisation of admissions within Higher Education providers, and the increasing use of IT-assisted tools to send communications in bulk, also means that initial mistakes can affect larger numbers of applicants.

Mistakes in admissions decision-making include a range of common errors such as: communicating rejections or offers in error; confirming conditions have been met when they have not; making offers for the wrong programme/variant/level/year of entry.

The NETT investigation into mistakes in admissions decision-making has drawn on the experiences of admissions professionals in the sector to develop guidance and resources to try and help institutions:

- **Reduce the chances of mistakes occurring**
- **Respond effectively when mistakes do occur**

Definition

For the purposes of NETT's considerations we have defined mistakes as:

“Decisions communicated to applicants that are significantly different to intended (or if intended had an unexpected impact) that breaches/threatens the professional relationship between HE provider and applicant.

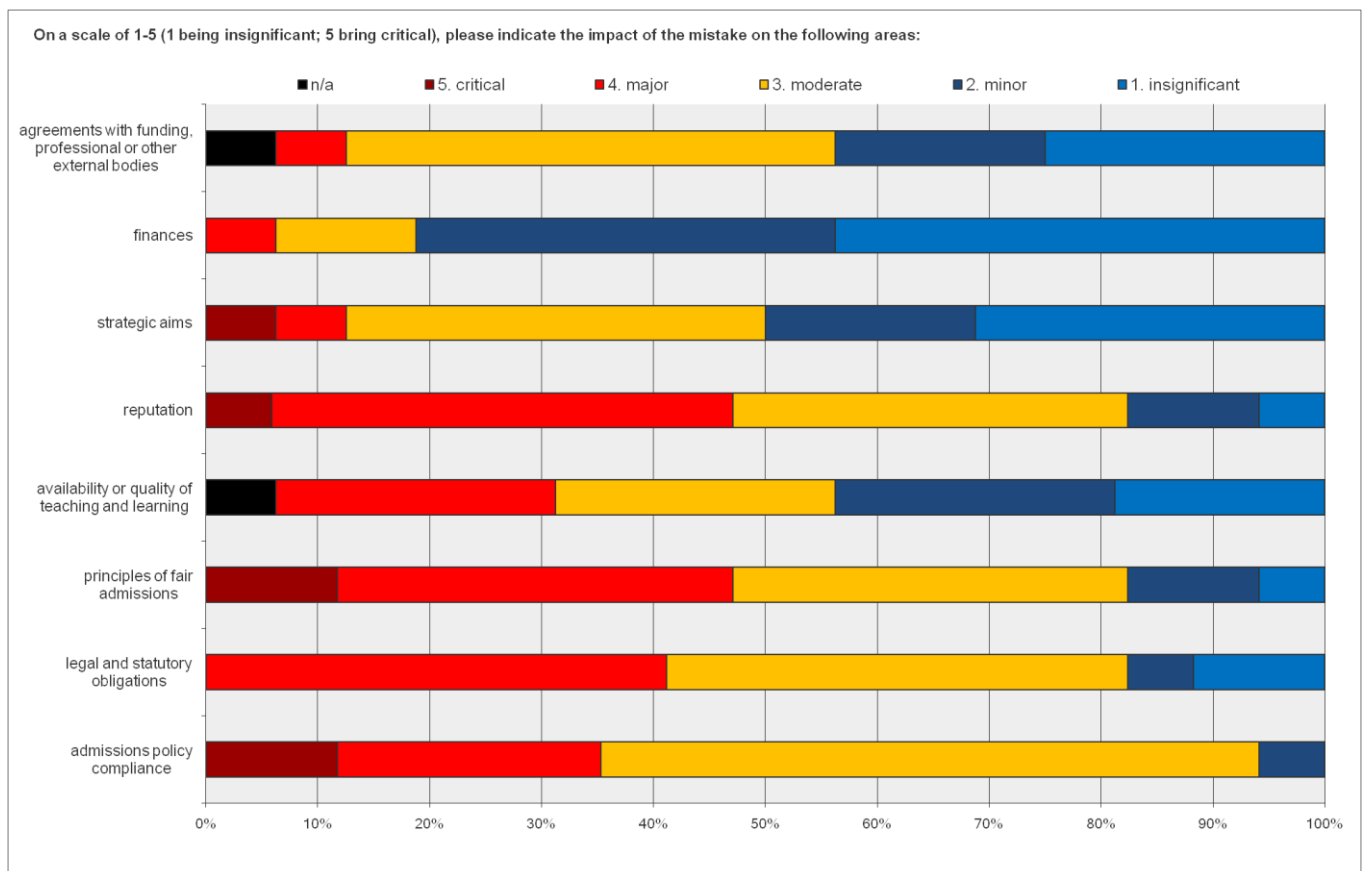
This may include, but is not limited to: policy; legal and statutory obligations; principles of fair admissions; availability or quality of teaching and learning; reputation; strategic aims; finances; agreements with funding, professional or other external bodies.”

NETT evidence

NETT conducted a survey of Higher Education providers to consider the impact of, and responses made to, mistakes in admissions decision-making. We found examples ranged from the small, relatively easily corrected errors affecting single or very few applicants, to instances where hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of applicants were affected. In some instances we found the reputational and financial impact on those institutions has been severe, and the applicant and student experiences significantly compromised.

Key findings from the survey include:

- 89% of respondents had experience of a mistake.
- 24% did not have codified procedures for managing mistakes should they ever happen, and a further 24% did not know if there were codified procedures.
- The impact of the mistakes provided appeared to be greater in relation to the Higher Education provider's reputation, principles of fair admissions, legal and statutory obligations and admissions policy compliance.
- The impact of the mistakes appeared to be least significant in relation to the Higher Education provider's finances.



These findings, along with other information gained from the survey, including respondents' comments, have been collated and added to NETT members' considerations in developing general principles. With the exception of information volunteered as a case study, individual responses have not been included in this guide.

Reduce the chances of mistakes occurring

The best solution for managing mistakes is to strive to ensure they do not happen in the first place. This benefits both the Higher Education provider and its applicants. The below considerations, built around four key themes, will help in the development of consistent and proactive policies, procedures and practices to support staff efforts to deliver a professional admissions service.

Ensure processes leading to a decision are clear consistent and auditable

Mistakes can happen at any stage of the selection process, ultimately leading to an incorrect decision. Evaluate the different stages of your application processes for clarity, training and competence of staff in those processes, any checking or monitoring steps, and record keeping.

Considerations

Is there a process in place to check that all applications received at your HEP are being actively considered?

- Mistakes can occur when the 'full picture' of the applications received is not available – equally individuals can be unfairly disadvantaged if their application is 'missed' or delayed in the selection process.
- Consider what processes are in place for checking that the number of applications submitted (whether through UCAS or a direct application route) are all transmitted into any relevant record systems, and included in all appropriate stages. This might involve manual or automatic checking of unique identifiers, UCAS batch records, or other means of electronically transferring records between systems.
- Is there a clear process in place to alert staff to any errors, and rectify them?

Do all staff involved in selection have a clear written process clarifying the decision-making process?

- Consider at what point in the cycle, and with what information, are staff able to decide if an applicant is eligible for the programme, meets entry requirements, can be offered an interview, can be offered a place, etc. This may vary for different programmes, level of qualification and the competitive nature of the programme, so consider an agreed and written procedure at the start of the cycle. This could include common questions such as: where are there 'gaps' in information?; what is the process for 'chasing' that information from applicants, tutors, schools, referees etc.?; are there any standardised deadlines for receiving this information?

Are the results of the different stages recorded in a standardised and accessible manner?

- Whether using a paper based system or a database based system (or combination of the two), how are staff recording decisions at key stages of the application process?
- Would a new or inexperienced member of staff be able to 'pick up' an application, and clearly understand what processes have been completed, and what still needs to be done?
- In particular, think about the most 'high risk' stages of an application for any particular group of programmes, e.g. initial assessment of eligibility/fee status, assessment of qualifications and grades achieved or predicted, results of an interview or aptitude test.

Is the authority to make decisions - or authority to contribute to the selection process – clearly assigned and communicated to staff?

- Some institutions may restrict certain key decisions – such as 'cut off points' of interview scores and

aptitude test scores, or decisions to offer to applicants with non-standard qualifications or mature students – to specific experienced individuals or management levels. Equally some institutions may assign certain selection stages solely to admissions tutors for a purely academic decision, or assign selection of international students to a dedicated international office.

- However selection responsibilities are divided in your institution, ensure that any points of referral are clearly identified and agreed amongst all staff, and based on a clear evidence base of expertise and training.

Is there a consistent and understood 'flagging' system for key factors which would affect a decision or eligibility criteria?

- Many HEPs will have either a manual or automated process for 'flagging' items of note in an application, either for further investigation, as a prompt for referral to another member of staff, or to ensure specific actions or decisions are taken (or 'blocked' from occurring e.g. offer/rejection). This can help to eliminate mistakes which might otherwise occur, particularly at busy times or with staff turnover, and can give clarity to information which might otherwise be stored in notes, emails or other documents.
- Ensure a clear process is understood for the reasons and uses of any such system. For example, some flags may be used as a 'block' for further action (either decision or reject). Consider auditing points for ensuring this is done accurately. Examples of features worth 'flagging' could include:
 - Non-standard point of Entry (e.g. year 2)
 - Factors making an applicant ineligible for programme applied to e.g. overseas fee status assessment for an NHS course, Tier 4 visa for a part-time course
 - Grades or qualifications which do/do not meet entry requirements
 - Missing fields requiring 'chasing' e.g. reference, predicted grades, personal statement
 - New messages/document uploads/other contact from an applicant

Caution: As with any admissions process in a fair system, consider carefully how the use of any flagging system might affect different applicants. For example, if related to predicted grades or qualifications, how might preventing further progression affect applicants with non-traditional applications, mature students, students with mitigating circumstances addressed in text format/additional letters? What process is in place to make sure these aren't 'auto-filtered' without full consideration?

What checking systems or monitoring is in place to assess the accuracy of each stage of the decision-making process? Is there a clear 'audit trail'?

- It is important to be able to check and identify who has made decisions in all cases, not so that blame can be attached if anything goes wrong, but so that there is transparency, capacity to measure the effectiveness of any training or procedural changes, and so that any remedial action can be targeted if necessary. Consider your record-keeping process(es) carefully: many admissions software systems will log actions automatically against user IDs, but if yours doesn't, or if aspects are conveyed separately (e.g. in interview; verbally; by email), decide a proportionate way to record them.
- If any aspect of the process cannot be checked, or if it is agreed that it would be too resource intensive to do so, then scrutinise it closely: if it can't be done more efficiently then it may be better to discontinue the practice (e.g. if a range of different staff make verbal offers at open days, fairs, etc. but there's no definitive record of what the offers were or who made them).
- Refer to the section 'accurately record decisions' on [page 10](#) for more considerations.

Case study

University of X interviewed several hundred applicants for a course. On each of the interview score sheets there is a score for four skills out of 5, and then a box stating 'overall score'. Most of the interviewers who had interviewed previously placed a 'total score' in this box, adding all four skills scores together as per previous practice, for a total out of 20. However, a small number decided that they were being asked for an 'average' score across the four skills.

An administrator created a summary sheet of all applicants and their interview score as indicated in the 'overall score' box.

The admissions office referred to this summary sheet and decided to make offers to all applicants with a score of over 16.

An applicant who scored 5/5 in all four skills was rejected, and requested feedback. It was discovered that 10 of the top applicants were not made offers as their scores were averaged rather than totalled. That meant 10 of the offers made to other applicants should not have been sent.

The number of places on the course is restricted.

Consider:

- How might interview score sheets and interviewer training have been improved to prevent the variation in scoring?
- Would 'sense checking' of the interview scoring papers after interview have been feasible in your institution?
- How can you work to reduce risks of errors in the 'information flow' to decision?
- Would your feedback processes have led to this mistake coming to light?

Case study

In 2011 the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) investigated a number of concerns from a complainant (Ms C). One of the complaints upheld was directed at admissions, namely that the University had, “Failed to consider Ms C for a place in second year in 2005.” (see SPSO case [201003198](#), in particular section a, para 7-12)

Ms C believed she had been eligible for an advanced entry place directly into the second year, but the individual responsible (Lecturer 1) had forgotten Ms C was interested in being considered for advanced entry. However, the Programme Leader (Lecturer 2) informed Ms C that ‘all standard selection procedures were followed’. In response to her complaint, the University confirmed that a mistake had been made, but that at the time (2005/6) there was no formal policy for selecting advanced entry students and no formal procedure for recording the details of applicants seeking advanced entry.

The SPSO concluded that, “Given the lack of a formal process for dealing with advanced entry to the degree programme at the time of Ms C’s application, which appeared to result in ad hoc and arbitrary practice, and given that Lecturer 1 did forget about Ms C’s interest in advanced entry, I uphold this complaint.” He recommended that the University, “Ensure there is formal administration and record-keeping for dealing with advanced entry applications across the institution, to prevent this situation happening again.”

Consider:

- Do you have documented procedures covering all entry routes and types of entry?
- Are all staff aware of them?
- Are all relevant admission-related requests formally recorded and accessible by those responsible for selection?
- If you received a complaint like this from one of your students concerning a historic admissions mistake, how would you handle it?

Accurately record decisions... and double-check



Keeping clear records and an audit trail is vital to ensuring accuracy and consistency of decision-making, but particular care should be taken regarding the input and storage of decisions to any systems.



When thinking of 'mistakes' in offer-making, we often think of offers made when a rejection should have been recorded, or incorrect offer text entered. The latter is particularly high risk as offer text may vary from programme to programme, year to year, applicant to applicant. HEPs should strive for good practice that offer text should be clear and unambiguous, and this includes checking that the offer is appropriate to the qualifications (completed and still pending) of the individual applicant. The greater the variety of offer texts used by any system or individual however, the greater the risk of mistakes.

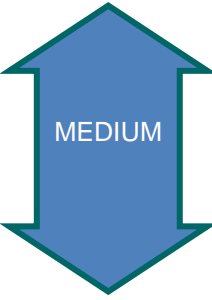
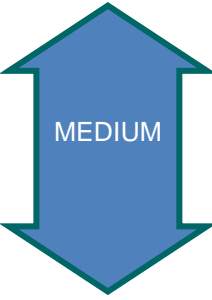
Consider your record-keeping process carefully – the input procedures, the method and systems used, and the level of 'checking' at each stage.

Inputting decisions – right first time or in need of checking?

NETT have identified three main approaches to processing admissions decisions, and the inherent safeguards each provides. No one approach will be entirely foolproof, so it is important to identify and embed ways to mitigate any weaknesses. It may be that a combination of the below approaches could be mutually supportive, each compensating for an identified weakness in another. Consider mapping your staff activity against these approaches, including: how they record and input decisions to offer or reject; how the content of an offer is expressed; and what additional programme, regulatory, accommodation and student support information, advice and guidance is given.

Inputting approach	Risk	Resource
<p><u>Manual (self-inputting)</u> Individual members of staff assess applications and input decisions. Ultimately, one individual is responsible for the decision.</p> <p>STRENGTHS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There should be unambiguous ownership. Motivated, well-trained staff will be committed to the quality and consistency of their work. • There should also be a high likelihood applicants will be viewed as individuals and the member of staff responsible will be more aware of previous contact between the applicant and institution. <p>WEAKNESSES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workloads, particularly at certain times of the year, may threaten performance. • 'Routines' (e.g. inputting offers based on A Levels) may lead to non-routine applicants to be overlooked (e.g. an A Level offer being made to a non-A Level applicant). • High reliance on an individual, so greater risk of errors if that individual is unavailable. <p>MITIGATION:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider if your systems could assign specific data validation to specific fields (to restrict the type of value which can be inputted and/or saved). • Ensure at least annual training and refreshers for staff. • Perform checks. 	 <p>HIGH</p>	 <p>LOW</p>

Inputting approach	Risk	Resource
<p><u>Manual (peer-inputting)</u> As with self-inputting, but with additional staff involved at some stage of the process. Examples include: one person makes the decision and then another, matches it to the applicant record and inputs it; at Confirmation, one staff reads out results from a list, whilst the other compares them to the offer made to input a confirmation decision (this could even be split across three staff).</p> <p>STRENGTHS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared responsibility should embed checking as part of the inputting process – far less likely a mistake will pass through all involved unnoticed. • Some staff may be able to develop specialisms within admissions, or existing specialists (e.g. academic; student support) can be involved solely at relevant points. <p>WEAKNESSES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a risk of over-compartmentalising the decision-making process and reducing a sense of ownership or expertise. • One individual may be less likely to be aware of the ‘whole picture’ of an application and fail to link pertinent information. <p>MITIGATION:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instil best practice for ensuring accurate identification of an applicant record: for example, always use unique applicant identifiers (such as UCAS PID) and course code rather than simply student name and course title (particularly important where an applicant may have multiple applications). • Ensure at least annual training and refreshers for staff. • Perform checks. 		

Inputting approach	Risk	Resource
<p><u>Automated</u> Increasingly HEPs for efficiency purposes may be using an element of automated input of decisions (e.g. automated confirmation of offers based on qualification results received; automated rejects for applicants failing certain criteria).</p> <p>STRENGTHS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An automated system will apply criteria consistently. • Assuming adequate processing and storage resource, there should be no variation in performance due to workload. An automated system could run outside of normal working hours. <p>WEAKNESSES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any mistakes will also likely be applied consistently, meaning that any shortcoming in programming may lead to a high volume of mistakes in a short period of time. • It will be very difficult to include comprehensive protocols to cover the full range of decision makers' considerations, particularly the less standard an application is. This may lead to mistakes being made to some of the most disadvantaged applicants, or to delays in their processing which may have unintended consequences for those applicants (e.g. delayed confirmation rejection decisions delaying an applicant's entry into Clearing; delayed acceptance of an international applicant resulting in problems obtaining a visa in time). • Any internal or external changes that need to be factored into decision-making may take more time to codify into an automated system than briefing staff would. This may be particularly problematic at busy times, such as Clearing. <p>MITIGATION:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Run on 'test' systems and/or a smaller pilot programme before rolling out an extensive use of such systems. • Consider any potential adverse affect that 'auto-selection' may have on applicants with less familiar qualifications, mixed qualifications, mature students, or students with mitigating circumstances etc. • Perform checks. 	<div style="text-align: center;">  <p>MEDIUM</p> </div> <p>(may be LOW if set up well and comprehensive; but will be HIGH for 'non-standard' applications or processes)</p>	<div style="text-align: center;">  <p>MEDIUM</p> </div> <p>(initially HIGH for set-up; but LOW once in place)</p>

Checking decisions

The extent to which decisions can and should be checked should be considered carefully in terms of the potential impact of any errors to the institution and applicant(s), balanced against operational needs for efficiency and timely decisions. HEPs should consider that this balance may change according to the point in the admissions cycle, particularly during Confirmation and Clearing, or during a concentrated period of interviews. It may also vary between programmes e.g. an HEP may wish for a higher level of security on decisions relating to a course with Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) eligibility requirements as part of their responsibilities as provider, or may wish for a higher level of scrutiny where stricter number controls are in place for a programme.



Think about what you are checking:



- What values and format are being checked? There is a different skill-set as well as time and resources required for basic data entry checking (for example, that inputting of decision and offer conditions were for the right course for the right applicant record) as opposed to an in-depth re-checking of the actual

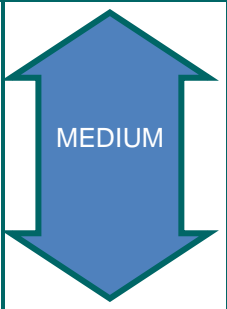
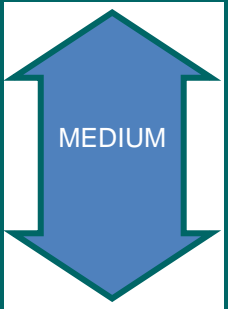
decision-making process (qualifications of the applicant against entry criteria, eligibility for the PSRB programme etc, interview score against decision to offer/waiting list/reject).

- Should you check every record, or samples? This will require a balance of risk against the resources available and the need for a timely decision for applicants. If samples are being checked, then there needs to be agreement on how that sample is gathered (e.g. random; identified high risk categories; representative) and then what wider checks are performed should a mistake be identified in the sample.

As with inputting decisions, there are three main approaches and again, a combination of them may be the best solution in some situations.

Checking approach	Risk	Resource
<p><u>Manual (self-checking)</u> Individual members of staff check the decisions they made.</p> <p>STRENGTHS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some level of ‘sense checking’ one’s own work (e.g. checking number of records updated tallies with expected, checking that all values saved correctly) should be a timely and efficient means of self-evaluation, as should ‘spot checking’ decisions before sending to applicants if any risk triggers are met (e.g. if there were interruptions whilst considering applications). Dedicated staff will take an interest in checking the quality of their own work and be committed to minimising the chance of a mistake reaching an applicant. <p>WEAKNESSES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-checking is high risk, as while an individual may be able to spot a ‘blatant’ error, they may lack the experience, objectiveness, or clarity to spot persistent errors of judgment, coding, etc. As with other forms of assessment checks (e.g. proof reading; second marking of examinations), it may be harder to spot one’s own mistakes. • Self-checking is more likely to be viewed as lower priority than inputting or other admissions functions, so is at greater risk of being dropped or not conducted as thoroughly during busy periods. • If not reported widely, any mistakes identified through self-checking may not be brought to the attention of others who could be replicating that mistake. <p>MITIGATION:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure there is clear management responsibility for checking that the member of staff is not making systemic or persistent errors. • Consider there is a recording and reporting line for ‘sense checking’ and ‘spot checking’. This would be useful for auditing purposes, to assist management responsibilities, as evidence in any complaint case and to aid flagging up any mistakes to other staff to support their own checks. • Ensure at least annual training and refreshers for staff on the correct checking process. 		

Checking approach	Risk	Resource
<p><u>Manual (peer-checking)</u> Individual members of staff check the decisions made by others.</p> <p>STRENGTHS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared responsibility should add objectivity and increase the likelihood of identifying mistakes. • It builds consistency by reviewing practice across different staff. • Knowing a colleague will be checking decisions may increase attention to detail. If checks are applied across all staff then there is no need to single anyone out, although targeting could be done in some instances (e.g. new staff; as part of an appraisal or training assessment). • Checking would allow staff to develop new skills and could be employed to add varied responsibilities and specialisms to roles (e.g. if checking is assigned to team leaders/managers). <p>WEAKNESSES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May still be more likely to be viewed as lower priority than other admissions functions, so is at greater risk of being dropped or not conducted as thoroughly during busy periods. • Other staff may be less familiar with an individual applicant's case, or with the nature of the programme and its requirements. <p>MITIGATION:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the experience and objectiveness of the second member of staff carefully: are they an experienced pair of 'fresh eyes' or 'too close' to the decisions? • Ensure the second checker has sufficient time and the correct tools (e.g. information/data presented on screen or as a print-out?) to complete their checks and that it is recognised as a valued part of their role. • Ensure there is a designated 'back up' if this person is not there, rather than allowing a decision to be delayed, or go out unchecked. • Ensure at least annual training and refreshers for staff on the correct checking process. 		

Checking approach	Risk	Resource
<p><u>Automated</u> Software systems check the decisions made by others.</p> <p>STRENGTHS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An automated system will apply checks consistently and can perform them in high volume without taking staff time away from other duties. • Assuming adequate processing and storage resource, there should be no variation in performance due to workload. An automated system could run outside of normal working hours or even alongside inputting, providing 'real time' checks on decisions. • It can compare and perform complicated data checks across multiple fields (e.g. for fee status considerations; matching offer to qualification types and grade/tariff calculations; checking applicant details against any funding eligibility requirements for a particular programme). <p>WEAKNESSES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It may only be able to check rudimentary, 'fixed-rule' tasks, relating to quantifiable elements of the process. More subjective, discretionary elements relating to judgement are unlikely to be included. • It is highly unlikely to have autonomy to overturn manually-inputted decisions, so will still require manual checks on items it flags up. • Any changes or updates may take time to codify, leaving the checking process vulnerable in the interim. <p>MITIGATION:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly identify what checks will be performed automatically and test the rules in advance. Ensure suitable reporting functionality is built in. • If the risk in a specific situation is deemed high, consider locking any transmission of data until the automated checking process takes place. If it is deemed low, consider whether or not it may be used as a periodic auditing tool, although be aware that this risks the transmission of mistakes to the applicant which may not be reversible and that there may not be the manual expertise in place if reliance on automation has grown. • Consider how to engender a shared responsibility for the automated system between admissions and IT staff. They will be reliant on each other if the system is to be functional and effective and if the coding is to remain up-to-date. 	<div data-bbox="1062 163 1289 470" style="text-align: center;">  <p>MEDIUM</p> </div> <p data-bbox="1062 470 1289 1527">(may be LOW if set up well and comprehensive; but may be limited in what it can check)</p>	<div data-bbox="1289 163 1522 470" style="text-align: center;">  <p>MEDIUM</p> </div> <p data-bbox="1289 470 1522 1527">(initially HIGH for set-up; but LOW once in place)</p>

Considerations

Do you have a clear understanding of any coded decisions or values?

Many aspects of an application and decision may be coded in record-keeping for consistency and clarity of data, for example: fee status; faculty codes; decisions (C/F/CF); interview or aptitude test codes; 'waiting list' codes; offer library (conditions) codes; widening participation 'flags' or summer school participation. You may also use some sort of coding to 'tier' or rank applicants. To reduce the risk of errors of **inputting incorrect codes** consider:

- Do you have clear written definitions of what your coding systems mean, available for all staff who may input or use the data?
- Try and reduce variation in these definitions or systems between faculties or programme types, or between different part of the admissions office. Where variation exists, provide clarification or consider updating your coding scheme to include all used variables.
- Have any of your coding systems been updated for the upcoming cycle? For example, have you updated 'SNC' flags to incorporate updates to an exemption list, or updated interview scoring systems? Have these been communicated to all relevant staff? Has this been compensated for in any year on year comparisons of the dataset, or any automated reports/communications linked to the previous coding system?
- Has all relevant paperwork (for example, interview scoring sheets) recorded all the information you need in order to accurately assign a specific code or value? If a user would be uncertain as to how to categorise the information before them, consider what guidelines are available to them, and who they should check with if unsure.
- Where data values are automatically transmitted across several systems (for example, UCAS, SITS, a bespoke application system) are the codings properly correlated with any updates? Has this been tested?

Do you permit use of 'Batch' decisions or updating?

Many application record systems may have the facility to input or update decisions or specific offer codes for multiple records at once.

- Consider the risks inherent with this: can user access rights be restricted for this function? If so, who should have access?
- Consider written guidance or procedures laying out the process and appropriateness of using this function: you may wish to include instructions on filtering or dropping records by status, course, fee status, year of entry etc.
- Should you have an agreed limit for the number of records which should be updated in one go?
- Is there a 'test' system or test records which can be used to check accuracy?

Access

Consider who has access to your systems and who is authorised to input decisions or records relating to a decision. Practically, many larger institutions would struggle to limit the number of staff with access to decision inputs, but in doing so the risk of inconsistent use, unclear audit trails, inexperience, or lack of training and supervision increases. Equally however, restricting decision-making functions to smaller members of staff creates a risk in terms of a lack of resource depth, skills and access in this area.

- Do you have an updated list of all users with access to your systems, and their level of access (if tiered or by function)?
- Do you have an audit process for ensuring the removal of access for any staff who have since left the institution, office, or changed job roles?
- Do you allow temporary user accounts? If so, what are the restrictions on the use of these?
- Do you have clear guidance on whether 'sharing' log-ins is permitted?

Exports to UCAS or other agents

Some HEPs will be inputting 'live' decisions into a system which might be immediately transmitted to an agent, applicant, or third party such as UCAS. Others will input decisions to their own systems and schedule timed exports or updates of data. The former has an increased risk of mistakes being transmitted without any checking, but may practically be more efficient for certain institutions or more advantageous for the applicant at certain times of year (e.g. Confirmation, Clearing and Adjustment). Consider the following in your evaluation:

- For 'live' decisions, what technical advice or support is available should any mistakes be made?
- For scheduled decisions, do you have a clear schedule of any transmission of decisions?
- Does this schedule work alongside timing of your processes?
- How are errors or delays in the transmission reported and rectified?
- Do you have policy and training in place regarding how to stop or 'reverse' those decisions prior to transmission? Who has access to this function?
- Where there may be a delay between decisions recorded on your central systems and decisions communicated to UCAS/agent/applicant, are there restrictions during this period as to who can access the data/run reports? E.g. Consider if there is a risk of applicants being included in 'offer holder' mailing lists before an offer is sent out and/or retracted.

Case studies

An admissions officer at University of W misreads AS Level qualifications and predicted grades on a number of applications as A Level and makes conditional offers to those applicants subject to achieving grades ABB at A Level. None of the applicants concerned were predicted those A Level grades and some weren't even taking three A Levels. The mistake was noticed by applicants calling into the University to query the offer, at which point checks were made to identify all affected applicants. They were contacted, informed of the mistake, and in cases where applicants were not taking enough A Levels to meet the conditions, agreement was sought to amend the offer.

An admissions tutor at X College writes down a BTEC offer on an application, but the administrator inputting it inadvertently picks the wrong offer from a drop-down list of standard offers in their admissions system, resulting in the applicant receiving a conditional offer subject to A Levels. A later report on offers made is queried and the mistake identified. The applicant was notified and the offer was reissued, citing the originally intended offer based on BTEC.

A member of temporary staff on University Y's Clearing hotline takes a call from an applicant declaring Distinctions in her BTEC results. The member of staff interprets this as DDD in the Extended Diploma and records it as such, which meets the course's entry criteria, but she actually only has DD in the Diploma, which does not meet the entry criteria. A verbal offer was made over the telephone. Another member of admissions staff was responsible for checking all Clearing offers prior to any written confirmation or transmission to UCAS and spotted the mistake. Based on this case, the University has built additional functionality into the Clearing system to support identification of BTECs and other vocational qualifications, included on-screen prompts for call handlers, added elements covering mistakes into Clearing training and ensured their terms and conditions covering accurate information are visible to applicants.

University Z adopted paperless processing for admissions and used UCAS weblink for viewing applications. However, owing to unfamiliarity with the layout, a member of admissions staff mistakenly viewed the section showing predicted grades in Scottish Highers as qualifications already obtained and made two applicants unconditional offers. Neither applicant already held any Highers or equivalent qualifications. When the mistakes were spotted later, both applicants were contacted to explain the mistake and recommend changing the offer to conditional, based on the Highers they were taking. However, both applicants refused to agree to the change, so the unconditional offers had to stand.

Consider:

- What is the risk of these types of mistake occurring in your institution?
- How would you have approached each of these situations?
- What inputting and checking approaches (or combination of approaches) would have been most helpful?
- What measures do you have in place already and what more might you consider?

Know who in your institution is discussing decisions and when

In the changing market HEPs face pressure for greater efficiency and will seek to use technologies for increased speed of decision-making, and/or for 'keep warm' activities and communications. Many of the high profile mistakes included in the survey responses related to communicating incorrect information to applicants or offer-holders, or in relation to mistimed communications (e.g. during the UCAS ABL results embargo).

HEPs should have clear processes for controlling the transmission of communications relating to decisions, and be aware of the risks of automated systems being linked to decision statuses in records systems which may be under an embargo, or subject to final checks. In particular, HEPs should note that admissions data can be used by a wider variety of departments and users within an institution, and communication and coordination with all related departments is key in this area:

Considerations

Do you have a list of all potential processes or communications linked to decision records?

- Identify who 'owns' and uses these.

Is there a time delay or periodic point at which these processes are used after a decision?

Are appropriate 'filters' for the communication agreed and applied?

- Application status – Active or Withdrawn?
- Decision status – No decision, invited to interview, attended interview, Conditional offer, Unconditional offer, Reject - and for which programmes?
- Applicant category: Home/Overseas/EU/Islands/ELQ, Country of Domicile, Age, Nationality, Tier 4 needed, Care flag, Disability flag, DBS flag, WP scheme flag, WP performance indicator flag?
- Programme – able to distinguish different status for multiple applications?
- Qualification level – able to distinguish different status for multiple applications (e.g. CertHE, Foundation, BSc?)
- Year of entry – Deferred from last year, deferred to next year, year of entry this year?

Is there a 'do not contact' flag or alert on the application?

- Consider e.g. applicants in the middle of an appeal, pending investigation for plagiarism/fraud, deceased applicants.

All staff sending communications which are reliant on identifying one of these values should fully understand them, and how they are recorded in your records system. NETT have developed an exercise ([p32](#)) to help you explore these areas and develop a more integrated applicant communication plan in your institution.

Considerations: method of contacting

Mailing lists

- Many concerns rely on incorrect use of bulk messaging and mailing lists. Sometimes the intention may be to directly contact an applicant concerning their offer status – at other times however this may be incidental to the main purpose. For example, confirmation of accommodation details may only be sent out after confirmation, or an invitation to select modules might be intended only for new starters, but timing may mean that these could be incorrectly sent prior to official notification of an offer or confirmation.
- What messaging tools is each department using? Compare each with the following:
 - **Accuracy:** If based on an extracted spreadsheet from your applicant records system, how have you ensured that the data is as current as possible at the time of mailing?
 - **Timing:** How have you ensured that messages are sent at an appropriate time, and are not sent during an embargo period, or before official transmission via UCAS?
 - **Data handling:** What written guidance and training do the staff using the mailing system have regarding filtering or sorting of data to ensure the correct message is sent to the correct applicant?
 - **Checking:** What checking mechanism is in place to ensure messages were sent to the correct number of people? Is there a limit as to how many people can be contacted at any one time?

Talking about selection, offer and admission

- Admissions offer letters, where used, are often formal and carefully worded to ensure the applicant is fully aware of any relevant conditions. 'Keep warm' or other material or face to face discussions are by nature usually welcoming, enthusiastic and may be less formal.
- Care should be taken that any content which could directly or indirectly be seen to refer to a decision or offer status is checked carefully to ensure offer status is not misrepresented or misunderstood.
- Review your standard templates for messages across your institution and consider if the language used is clear and unambiguous. For example:
 - Is it clear where an offer is conditional or unconditional?
 - Is it clear where the applicant can go for detailed information?
 - If sending enrolment or freshers' week related information prior to confirmation or enrolment, is it still clear that this is 'subject to meeting conditions' or could CF offer holders be misled by "we look forward to seeing you in September...?"

Individual enquiries

- HEPs should consider policy and guidelines for all staff – including academic staff – regarding communication of offers and decisions to prevent inaccurate information being provided, or provided in such a way as to be misconstrued or relied upon by the applicant.
- Are admissions tutors, course leaders, departments, or interviewers authorised or likely to discuss an offer or the conditions of an offer with an applicant?
- If so, have they been provided with guidelines on terminology, timelines, accurately accessing and retrieving information, data protection, and are they keeping clear written or recorded records of what has been said?
- Are any staff permitted to discuss a decision or offer conditions or confirmation status over the telephone or face to face? If so, when might this be appropriate, and how are they recording the conversation they have had? Consider the risks versus the benefits of this, perhaps in relation to the different needs of particular applicants, or the timing within the application cycle (e.g. Confirmation and Clearing).

Clearing call centres

- Clearing & Adjustment should be considered a high risk area for potential mistakes or misunderstandings due to the need to make speedy decisions, pressures on staff and resources, and the high stakes involved for individual applicants, many of whom are in a vulnerable position.
- Do you have a clear process for recording verbal offers?
- Do you have a standard follow-up letter confirming the offer and what that offer was based on (qualifications named and graded, fee status, etc)?
- Do you have a clear training programme for all temporary staff explaining their obligations as an

agent of the institution?

- Is there clear written policy and guidance concerning eligibility for a Clearing place (grades required, any fee status eligibility, PSRB eligibility, status in the UCAS system – offers or not)?
- Is there clear written guidance and training for all staff as to what advice they can give regarding 'release into Clearing' and withdrawing from offers?
- Will you require written requests for release into Clearing? Do you have a publicly-accessible procedure or service level agreement for actioning these?
- Do you have an agreed and consistent deadline for applicants to refer themselves in Clearing /Adjustment? Is it clear to them the consequence of not doing so?
- Will you be operating a 'waiting list' for Clearing/Adjustment places? If so, how is this monitored and updated, and who has authorisation to decide who receives offers from this list? How is the status confirmed to the applicant – for example, are they told they are '3rd' in the list'?
- In Clearing 'interviews' do you have a checklist of items to go through with the caller, e.g.:
 - Their grades, qualifications and subjects
 - Any other eligibility requirements
 - Clearly confirm the subject, qualification, year of entry, and university they are being interviewed for, and check that this is correct
 - Check that they are not holding offers elsewhere
 - Confirm clearly any further steps or conditions required for them to take up an offer

Case study

The Accommodation team plans this year to send a message to all offer-holders congratulating them on their offer, and directing them to further guidance on the accommodation application process, to reduce the number of queries they get regarding this process.

The team has access to the central student records system and so retrieved all records for this year of entry. They asked a colleague in admissions where they could find the decision information and the colleague got back to them the following day to say 'you need to make sure you aren't sending to anyone who was rejected'.

The Accommodation team manipulated its spreadsheet of data, filtering in a category called 'DEC1' (first/initial decision) for all applicants classed 'NOT R' (all decisions that are not reject) and emailed the congratulations email to all those applicants.

Amongst the applicants emailed were:

- Conditional offer-holders who had already declined the offer (CD)
- Conditional offer-holders who had already failed to meet their offer conditions and been rejected this year (CFR and CIR)
- Conditional offer-holders from last year's cycle, who applied for deferred entry, and had failed to meet their offer conditions (CFR and CIR)

Consider:

- What are the different implications for each of the above category of applicant?
- What safeguards could be put in place to prevent this type of mistake happening again?
- Who else, outside of admissions, uses applicant data to send information in your institution?
- How do they access it (e.g. do they have direct access or do they have to request the data via an admissions data analysis expert)?
- Who is responsible for authorising or checking communications to applicants before they are sent?

Case study

An applicant called her Insurance choice university at 8am on GCE results Thursday as she had not yet had a decision on Track after being rejected from her Firm choice. Her Insurance offer was CCC and she achieved BCD. An adviser apologised for the delay and explained that staff had been struggling to get all decisions out. She confirmed to the applicant that the HEP had received her A-level results.

The applicant remarked that BCD is the equivalent of CCC and, as she had got a B in particular, the tutor should be impressed with her results.

The call centre operative had been told to be welcoming and helpful and replied, “Yes, you should certainly be proud of that B grade! I’m sure it’ll be alright, just be patient and you’ll hear from us soon”.

At 6 pm the applicant saw that she had been rejected on Track. She called back as she believed that she had been told by an agent of the HEP that she had got in. Over the next week she continued to appeal and missed opportunities elsewhere in Clearing.

Consider:

- How do you ensure staff strike the correct balance between ‘friendly and encouraging’ and ‘detached and non-committal’? Are some groups (e.g. temporary staff; student ambassadors; tutors; admissions administrators) a greater risk than others?
- If a complaint arises from a verbal conversation, how would you gather evidence to investigate it? What would happen if it comes down to one person’s word against another’s?
- If there is an ongoing complaint or appeal over a critical period such as Clearing, what advice could you give, or what procedures could be in place, to ensure the applicant’s opportunities are not diminished during that time? Is there a way to guarantee a place at your HEP if the appeal is upheld, whilst still allowing the applicant to secure a place elsewhere in case it’s not?

It is understandable that many mistakes may happen 'in good faith' at times of a high volume of work, and/or pressured time frames (e.g. key application deadlines, Confirmation, Clearing & Adjustment) or as a result of periods of transition of staff or structures within an HEP. At these times it is also more likely that temporary or inexperienced staff may be called upon for extra resource, filing and record keeping may fall behind, correspondence may backlog, and decision-making processes are rushed or 'shortcuts' deemed necessary.

Senior staff should consider in advance of each application cycle how to avoid or mitigate any potential for mistakes or drops in quality of record keeping and decision-making during these periods, and periodically review - looking ahead to anticipate resource needs and 'pinch points'. In addition to general HR management skills for pressured environments, senior managers may want to consider developing or using some of the following:

- Building a database of year on year application numbers and processing tracking to aid forecasting: decisions needed to be made each month to meet targets vs. decisions made. Evaluate against these targets.
- Staff annual leave (including extended leave): do you have leave restriction periods?
- Review annual staff turnover averages and upcoming structural changes: consider whether any support/briefing/training should be once a year or more regular, or targeted, or available in different accessible formats.
- 'Resource depth': determine the skills and knowledge needed during the decision-making progress and identify the number of staff with these skills. Is this sufficient for key periods? What if application numbers increase? Do you have sufficient back-up at short notice? How can you upskill or mitigate any loss of key skills and resources in preparedness?
- Continue to regularly review staff morale and working hours. Do you have a check point or warning sign for identifying where staff may be 'over-stretched'?
- Supervision: are there key areas of the decision-making cycle which should have a greater level of supervision or auditing?

Considerations

Business continuity

- How does admissions-related work fit into institution-wide business continuity plans? Is there a specific plan for admissions activities?
- Are there specific plans for high risk periods: interviews; offer deadlines (including RBD deadlines); Confirmation, Clearing & Adjustment?
- Consider having a detailed and bespoke plan for Confirmation, Clearing & Adjustment at all relevant sites (e.g. admissions, academic staff, recruitment, clearing call centres etc.).
- Have all resources been considered? Consider staff, systems, facilities, access to communication tools (including website), access to records data, bespoke systems, access to third party systems (UCAS, UKPASS, UTT, UKVI etc).
- In a decentralised admissions system, how will you ensure equal levels of access and training and support? In a centralised admissions system, beware of a reliance on one site or set of offices.
- Are all staff aware of their role in any business continuity plan?
- Is the business plan reviewed annually for each cycle, incorporating any changes in technology, staffing, business structure, or any wider influences or limitations relating to the institution, business, or wider HE context?

Training

- Do you have a clear training programme for all staff on an annual basis, relating to the decision-making processes each year?
- Do you regularly update staff on qualification updates and how different qualifications should be assessed?
- Are staff trained on use of appropriate offer text and setting conditional offers appropriately and consistently?
- Do you provide targeted training relating to key periods e.g. Confirmation, Clearing and Adjustment? Does this include any 'test' of knowledge and learning e.g. a quiz, practical exercise? Is the training close enough to the relevant period?
- Is there a culture of 'no stupid questions' and the ability to own up to mistakes and errors in the admissions services? How might this be further developed?
- Do your appeals, complaints and other processes ensure any key lessons or recommendations are 'fed back' to future planning?
- Do all staff (and agents) involved in discussing and processing admissions decisions and offers have a clear understanding of when to refer queries, and to whom they can refer questions?

Respond effectively when mistakes do occur

Sometimes mistakes will happen, regardless of how much is done to avoid them. This section of the guide is intended to provide a framework for quick and effective responses in such an event.

Are you prepared?

Admissions teams should consider and test their answers to the below prompt questions to determine their level of preparedness for dealing with mistakes.

Prompt questions

Escalating

- Is there more that can be done to establish a 'blame-free' culture within your team so that everyone knows that they can bring mistakes forward without fear or favour?
- Does everyone involved in processing or communicating decisions know where a mistake should be reported to, and how to escalate it? If not, consider using the response escalation protocol ([p28](#)).
- Can decisions-makers be contacted in an emergency (and who might this include: senior admissions staff, data analyst, legal, senior manager, media, marketing, finance, planning/timetabling/accommodation)?
- Can you run some test scenarios using possible mistakes to test out your preparedness?

Reporting and assessment of scale

- Do your reporting mechanisms allow you to quickly assess the current status of every application?
- Do your reporting mechanisms allow you to quickly see who has had which communications (from across the institution, your agents (including UCAS)?)

Expert/specialist advice

- Do you know who you can contact for legal advice?
- Do you have established contacts at the Home Office if there are visa implications?
- Do you know how to get in touch with UCAS/SPA?
- Do you have lists of decision-makers at any other external agency who might need to be involved (such as professional bodies, placement providers)?

Common Errors

- Could you have template responses for standard common errors?
- Could you have standard plans for responding to common errors?

Responding to the mistake

The nature and circumstances surrounding each mistake will require individual consideration by the provider involved but there are a number of key things we think should be considered when determining your response.

Things to consider when determining your response:

The interests of the applicant

- The first thing to bear in mind when determining how to respond to a mistake is the impact on the applicant or applicants that are affected by it.
- The impact is likely to differ depending on the timing of the mistake. For example, an offer made in error in October (and retracted soon after) is likely to have a lower impact than an incorrect confirmation decision in August, especially if the latter is not discovered until after the majority of alternative institutions have closed for Clearing applicants.

The Principles of Fair Admissions

- The five 'Principles of Fair Admissions' embodied and advocated by SPA (available at www.spa.ac.uk/resources/what-fair-admissions).
- Think in particular about how the mistake, and your response to it, affects principle 5 – to “be professional in every aspect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes”.

Timeliness

- In determining the response that you make, think about timeliness.
- Of course, the right decision that takes a little longer to implement is better than the wrong decision implemented correctly, but every effort should be taken to find a swift and equitable resolution. This will also help to resolve and mitigate issues of reputational damage where a larger-scale error has applied.
- With the advance of social media, a faster response is demanded. Further, a response should be full and complete – don't hide key facts from applicants affected by the error only to hope that they will go away and cease to be a problem later.

Strategic objectives

- The strategic priorities of the provider and the impact of the mistake on the quality of educational experience will play a key part in determining a possible response. For example, a Higher education provider may need to react differently to an applicant who was incorrectly made an offer for a programme with rigid external restrictions (e.g. a PSRB's limits on staff:student ratios), than it would if the offer was for a less restricted programme (e.g. a classroom-based programme with number targets that can be flexible).

Legal position

- The legal and contractual relationship between the HEP and the applicant will play a significant role in determining a response to an issue.
- This will be particularly relevant once an offer has been formally accepted and a contract comes into being. You may wish to discuss this matter with your legal advisor.

UCAS procedures

- The UCAS Admissions Guide, published around October each year for that year's cycle, sets out the process by which decisions can be corrected if an error is made.
- The guide sets out what corrections can be made and when. The full guide is available at <https://www.ucas.com/system/files/ucas-admissions-guide-2014.pdf> (secure HE Providers' section: login required).

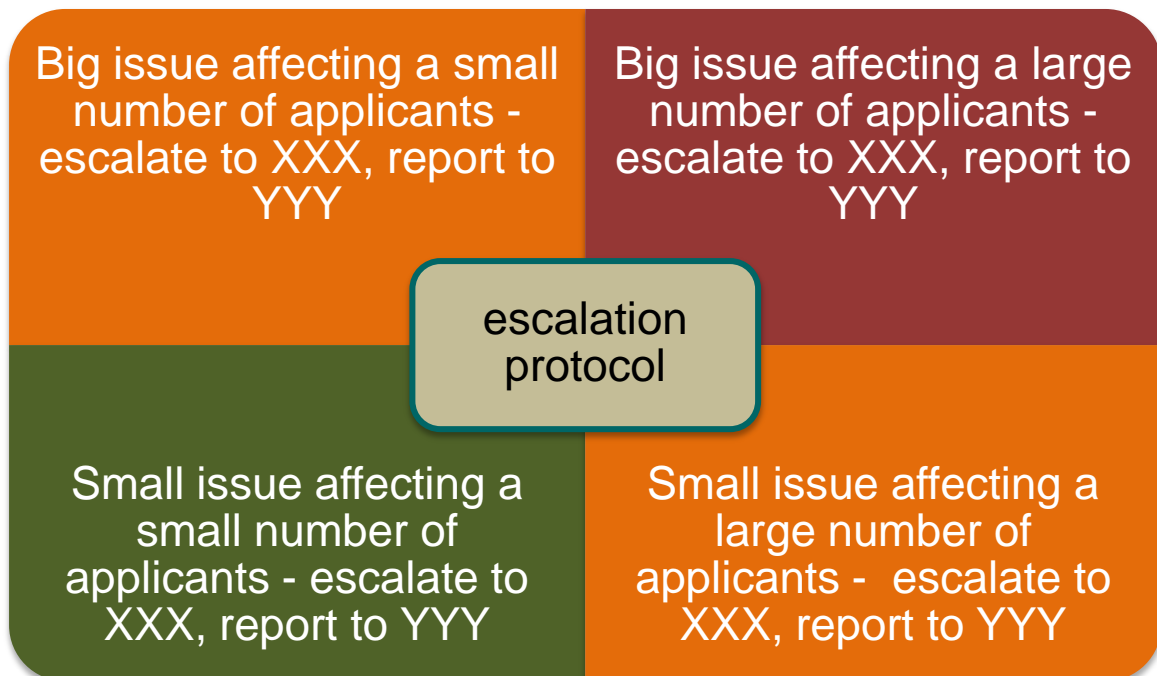
Other legislative considerations

- Think through some other legislative implications, including in discussion with your institutional legal teams. This might include, amongst others, the impact if there has been a breach of the requirements of the Data Protection Act, or if there will be direct or indirect discrimination against an individual who falls into the scope of the Equality Act.
- This is not to advocate that only issues with legal implications should be dealt with but rather that these add a further dimension for consideration.

Response escalation protocol and flowchart

It may be natural for dedicated staff to seek to resolve a mistake themselves, and in many cases such prompt action will be in the best interests of both the applicant and the institution. However, it is important for all staff to be aware that mistakes may vary greatly and may have wide ranging consequences. Before acting on a mistake, an individual member of staff should consider the scale of the issue: whether or not other applicants are/will be affected; and how significant the impact on the institution is.

It would be beneficial to have an escalation protocol in place, so staff can quickly reference and readily identify the right people to involve. We recommend using the below four categories, although depending on your institutional structures or risk exposure, you may wish to consider further gradation. Consider including examples and/or linking to where more detailed reference materials may be found.



The escalation protocol should be used in conjunction with a defined process for deciding an appropriate and proportionate response to the mistake. The below flowchart provides an example of how such a process may be structured.

Incorrect decision made and communicated to applicant

Do you have the correct level of authority to act on this scale of mistake?



¹ For UCAS applicants, consult UCAS guidelines for changes and liaise with UCAS where necessary

² Consent must be informed; incentives could be offered

³ Considerations might include:

- Would the applicant cope with the demands of the programme?
- Are there external constraints imposed: for example professional body requirements, Home Office regulations, safeguarding policies?
- Would honouring the decision compromise the quality of teaching and learning and the student experience for all students (likely to be a consideration if large numbers of places have been confirmed in error)?
- Is the impact on the HEP's financial positions and strategic objectives acceptable?

Once the mistake has been dealt with, it is important to understand why it occurred and what can be done to prevent it reoccurring in the future. An exercise on [page 36](#) provides a suggested format for reporting a mistake, recording the details and considering the issues. It is suggested that this could also be used for reporting 'near-misses' so as to avoid them becoming mistakes in the future!

Examples of mistakes and lessons learned from them

Using incomplete information

Mistake:

An EU applicant was offered a place and based on her declaration of having an English A Level (Grade A) the requirement for IELTS was waived. On the applicant's arrival it was clear that she had an insufficient level of English to be successful on the programme. In reviewing the application, it was clear that the A Level qualification was incorrect (albeit it was an innocent rather than a deliberate mistake on the part of the applicant) and should have been spotted at application given the profile of other qualifications. The admissions team met with the applicant, discussed her position, agreed with her to terminate the contract and for her to undertake an English Language qualification, and for her to return the following year if she was able to demonstrate the relevant level of English.

Lessons learned:

This problem was caused in part by accepting the information as written – whereas a quick check against the wider profile of qualifications would have shown it was an unlikely combination. Also, careful handling of the case meant that the applicant wanted to return the following year rather than pursue a complaint through formal routes.

Bulk communications

Mistake:

In common with other providers, the University sends an email to all applicants (in addition to the communications received through UCAS) which advises the applicant that an offer is being made and that they should check details on Track. On one occasion, the data used to generate the email was filtered incorrectly and a large number of emails went to applicants whose applications were still being considered, and a small number who had already been rejected. Clarifying emails were sent very quickly after this, but in doing so the data failed and some of those who received the retraction had, in fact, received the first email correctly. A second clarification, retracting the retraction, had to be sent in these cases.

Lessons learned:

Whilst it is important to react quickly, don't respond until you fully understand the facts, particularly on a Friday where it is more difficult to respond over the weekend. Also, systems have been put in place to do a double check of the data to prevent reoccurrence.

Wrong programme

Mistake:

The University offered a place on a three-year degree programme when it intended to offer a place on an equivalent four-year programme that included a foundation year. This was caused by being unable to make a note on their system ahead of a formal decision, that the applicant should be considered for a different programme from the one applied for. The University sought to amend the decision, but when this was not possible they notified the applicant of the error and of their intention to offer a place on the four-year programme. The University explained to the applicant why they thought she would benefit from a foundation year and their concerns about her entering directly into the three-year programme.

Lesson learned:

Better training for interviewers and the need for systems to capture such information.

Wrong applicant

Mistake:

An applicant was rejected in error because they had the same name as another applicant who had applied for the same programme (and had genuinely been unsuccessful). This was caused in part due to the applicant completing interview paperwork incorrectly (they had used a double-barrelled surname on their UCAS application, but subsequently only used the first half of this name, causing confusion with another applicant) and partly due to IT (when searching on the applicant's name the system only returned exact matches, and so failed to return the correct record).

Lessons learned:

Whilst this error could be corrected in the applicant's favour, it is important to put systems in place to avoid such transposition errors. Use UCAS IDs as well as names for searching.

Wrong point of entry

Mistake:

A number of providers report that their most common mistake is making an offer for the wrong point of entry – either where applicants leave out their current university level studies on an application or apply for year 3 when they mean a 3 year degree. This causes obvious problems for the applicant but explaining the situation to the applicant and the reasons why the provider thinks they should start the course at a lower entry point often diffuses the issue.

Lesson learned:

Going paperless has allowed one university to add 'warning flags' which deliberately highlights applicants who chose an entry point which is higher than 1. This allows greater scrutiny of the application.

Exercises

The below exercises are also available separately as downloadable documents: www.spa.ac.uk/resources/admissions-decision-making-nett

Integrated applicant communication plan

Consider communications which might be sent from anyone or any system in your institution which might relate to a decision status.

- Is there clear written guidance and training in place on application and offer status, authorisation, and embargos for all these departments?
- Who 'owns' each process? Agree a plan of key dates so that admissions decision activities can be co-ordinated with any other communications.
- Consider whether admissions senior staff should have 'sign off' before any communications based on applicant status or offer status are sent.
- Consider what status an applicant should have in order for the communication to be sent, and check that against current practice.

We have constructed the below table with some suggested common communications and departments to help you structure an integrated applicant communication plan, but please consider additional areas relevant to your institution and adapt it for your purposes.

In each section of the table indicate what type of applicant and applicant status is suitable to be contacted and when e.g.:

- decision status (no decision; waiting list; conditional offer; unconditional offer; reject)
- response status (Firm; Insurance; Decline; no response)
- Confirmation Status
- fee status
- course status (changed course; course subject to validation; campus/location)
- entry status (year of entry; point of entry)

You may also wish to shade some sections in to highlight high risk areas and/or areas requiring further authorisation.

Once the table is completed, ensure it is circulated to all the teams, departments or areas listed and that it is used. Be aware that anyone not directly working within admissions, and new staff to admissions, may not be familiar with all the terminology, so include explanations/clarifications wherever possible.

Integrated applicant communication plan

(List ALL the types of applicants and decision/response status of applications that each department/team has authority to manage and send different communications – add extra rows and columns as required.)

Department / team →	Admissions Office (central)	Admissions (decentralised)	Academic department	Admissions Tutor/ Course Leader	Recruitment/ Marketing team	Widening Participation Team	International Office	Funding/ Scholarships	IT	Accommodation
↓Communication										
Thank you for applying										
Holding message for no-decisions ('keep warm')										
Scholarships application information										
Invitation to interview										
Waiting list/shortlist notification										
Congratulations on your offer										
Invitation to offer-holder event/open day										
Keep warm/Respond by deadline reminder										
Request for deposit payment/reminder										
Good luck message to Conditional Firms/Insurance										
Post-confirmation congratulations or message										
Enrolment instructions										
IT log-in details or email account										
Course-start information										
First Contact/welcome message										
Module choice										
Tutor groups assigned										

High Level Mistake Management Health Check

Below is an example pre-cycle checklist for staff to discuss and consider areas of risk. You may wish to consider which members of staff have institution responsibility in each area.

Checks	yes / no	low / medium / high level risk
Process: Is there a clear written process map of selection procedures, key record keeping points, and areas of staff responsibility?		
Submission and selection: Are checks in place to ensure that all applications submitted are received by the correct staff and considered?		
Flagging and auto-selection: Are all flagging processes proportionate and consistently used? ----- Are any selection systems disadvantaging particular applicant groups unfairly?		
Coding and record keeping: Are record keeping systems standardised, easy to understand, and consistently used? ----- Are systems updated each cycle for new qualifications/courses or other data?		
Authorisation and access: Is the ability to issue decisions and offers limited to authorised and trained personnel?		
Checking: Is there a clear process and guidance for checking decisions for accuracy? ----- Is this monitored comprehensively?		
Input: Are processes and training in place to ensure accurate input of decisions and offer text to any relevant systems? ----- Is this audited comprehensively?		
Batch update and mailing: Are all staff with access to admission records trained on appropriate use of that data, and the appropriate use for communications? ----- Are fail-safes in place to prevent messages being sent to the wrong applicants?		

<p>'Keep warm' and other communications: Are all communications from the institution or its agents using clear and unambiguous language relating to the likelihood of receiving offers, meeting offers, and conditions of starting the course?</p>		
<p>Are applicants given a point of reference for any queries about their offer or application?</p>		
<p>Discussing offers: Is there a clear agreement across the institution as to who has authorisation to discuss offers?</p>		
<p>Do all authorise staff have guidelines on terminology, timelines, accurately accessing and retrieving information, data protection, and are they keeping clear written or recorded records of what has been said?</p>		
<p>Clearing: Is there a clear written policy as to who can make verbal offers, or written offers, through Clearing?</p>		
<p>Is there a record system for this?</p>		
<p>Do you have a clear training programme for all temporary staff explaining their obligations as an agent of the institution? Is there clear written policy and guidance regarding eligibility for a Clearing place (grades required, any fee status eligibility, PSRB eligibility, status in the UCAS system – offers or not).</p>		
<p>Is there clear written guidance and training for all staff as to what advice they can give regarding 'release into Clearing' and withdrawing from offers?</p>		
<p>Staffing: Is there sufficient resource depth of skills and knowledge on admissions tasks sufficient for key periods?</p>		
<p>Is it sufficient if application numbers increase?</p>		
<p>Do you have sufficient back-up at short notice?</p>		
<p>Can you upskill or mitigate any loss of key skills and resources in preparedness?</p>		
<p>Training: Do you have a clear training programme for all staff on an annual basis, relating to the decision-making processes each year?</p>		
<p>Do you have a robust test that this training has been sufficient?</p>		
<p>Culture: Is there a culture of 'no stupid questions' and the ability to own up to mistakes and errors in the admissions services?</p>		
<p>Is there a plan/review for further development?</p>		

Mistake report form

The example form below may be used as a template, or amended as required, to provide a consistent method of reporting a mistake or near miss (an error identified early enough to prevent it leading to a mistake). This should facilitate better management, aiding the identification of any trends and building into improved services and performance. It should also provide a clear record of any incident in case it is required for future reference (e.g. in cases of complaint).

What was the incident?			
Did it affect	One applicant?	<input type="checkbox"/>	Multiple applicants?
How did the mistake occur?			
How quickly was it discovered, how was it discovered, and what could have been done to identify the mistake more quickly were it to reoccur?			
How did the mistake affect applicant(s) and what was done to inform them?			
What was done to seek to rectify the mistake?			
What steps have been put in place to prevent a reoccurrence in future?			

Glossary

ABL	<p>Awarding Body Linkage The process by which results of examinations taken by applicants after they have applied (e.g. A Levels; BTECs, Scottish Highers) are transmitted from the awarding bodies, via UCAS, to HEPs. At times of the year, when HEPs receive results before applicants do, these results fall under an embargo.</p>
ELQ	<p>Equivalent or Lower Qualifications Students applying to HE programmes that are deemed at the same or lower level to a qualification they already hold (e.g. applying for a second degree) are, in most cases, not eligible for publicly-funded financial support towards their fees or maintenance.</p>
HEP	<p>Higher Education Provider Providers of higher education including universities, colleges etc. Previously referred to as Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).</p>
PSRB	<p>Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body A body with statutory authority to recognise, accredit and approve specific HE awards as meeting their standards for progression into specific career fields (e.g. General Medical Council; British Psychological Society; Institute of Physics; law Society)</p>
SITS	<p>Strategic Information Technology Services A private student administration software package used by a high proportion of UK Higher Education Providers.</p>
SNC	<p>Student Number Control The mechanism used by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, based on Government guidance, to set a limit on the number of students a Higher Education Provider may recruit.</p>
UCAS	<p>University and Colleges Admissions Service The central body responsible for processing most full-time Undergraduate applications on behalf of member HE providers.</p>
UCAS PID	<p>UCAS Personal Identification number The unique, ten-digit number generated by UCAS, sent to each new applicant after they have applied and used in all correspondence from UCAS thereafter.</p>
WP	<p>Widening Participation Measures/initiatives in place to widen access/opportunities and improve participation in higher education to all who can benefit from it, regardless of their socio/economic background or other protected characteristics.</p>

Who to contact for more information

UK Higher Education Providers can raise any questions concerning good practice in decision-making and offer-making with SPA. E-mail and telephone details for members of SPA are available at

www.spa.ac.uk/spa-team