



# UK Quality Code for Higher Education

Advice and Guidance

**Admissions, Recruitment  
and Widening Access**



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### Regulatory contexts for the Quality Code

The Expectations and Core practices of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) are mandatory for higher education providers in all parts of the UK. Common practices are mandatory in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and while providers in England may choose to work towards them, they are not required to do so as these are not regulatory requirements and will not be assessed as part of the OfS's regulatory framework. National regulators and QAA are not bound by the information in this advice and guidance and will not view it as containing indicators of compliance. This guidance does not interpret statutory requirements.

### Terminology

**Admissions:** Refers to the practices and processes developed and delivered by providers that relate to admitting a prospective student up to the point of enrolment on a course through an application and selection process.

**Recruitment:** Generally refers to a broad range of activities and initiatives undertaken by providers or their representatives prior to the point of admission. This includes outreach, events and various marketing activities, which ultimately encourage prospective students to either apply to, or start a course with, that provider. Within the scope of this Code, recruitment specifically refers to the process by which providers share information and advice with prospective students.

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

**Prospective student:** Refers to all those who are applying or considering applying for any course, at any level and employing any mode of study, with a higher education provider.

**Current student:** Students who are registered/enrolled on any course at undergraduate or postgraduate level, with a higher education provider. An individual becomes a 'current student' at the point of registration/enrolment.

**Contextual data and information:** Data and information that enable higher education providers to put attainment in the context of the circumstances in which it was obtained, for example, educational, geo-demographic and socio-economic background data.

**Autonomous higher education provider:** Higher education providers that are independent, self-governing bodies, active in teaching, research and scholarship.

**Inclusive admissions:** An admissions system which seeks to minimise any unnecessary barriers in the process which may prevent some groups of applicants from making a successful application.



## Expectations and Practices

The advice underneath the Expectations and Practices is not mandatory for providers but illustrative of a range of possible approaches.

This Theme relates to three separate but interconnected areas, admissions, recruitment and widening Access, which are of interest to prospective students, enrolled students and their supporters (such as relatives or educators); and for the UK and devolved governments; and the public. This Theme aims to provide advice and guidance to build a framework for providers to assure quality in these areas. While the three interconnected activities are referred to separately and in further detail throughout the Theme, it is recognised that different learner journeys result in multiple and varied pathways to enrolment with a provider. The manner or order with which the prospective student and the provider connects with these activities will not necessarily be uniform. Further to this, all UK providers have legal or statutory obligations they must meet, particularly around information available to prospective students. This Theme does not seek to duplicate or interpret these.

### Expectation for standards

The value of qualifications awarded to students at the point of qualification and over time is in line with sector-recognised standards.

*Effective admissions, recruitment and widening access policies and procedures enable providers to recruit students who are capable of meeting the required standards for their course.*

### Core practice

- **The provider ensures that students who are awarded qualifications have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers.**

*In practice, this means managing expectations of students, from researching prospective courses through to admissions and enrolment. Providers need to ensure that only students for whom there is a reasonable expectation that they are capable of completion are admitted.*

### Expectation for quality

From admission through to completion, all students are provided with the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from higher education.

*Admissions, recruitment and widening access sets the tone of engagement for a student with their provider and the wider sector. Therefore the support a student receives from pre-entry to enrolment will be instrumental in laying the foundations for a successful educational experience.*

### Core practices

- **The provider has a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system.**  
*In practice, this means that fairness and reliability are embedded principles within admissions and recruitment, and inclusivity pervades throughout the process from outreach activity to processes and practices to enrolment.*
- **The provider actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience.**  
*In practice, this means that there needs to be active engagement with students who have recently gone through the admissions process and those who declined, with a view to continuously improve the process for future diverse cohorts.*
- **The provider has fair and transparent procedures for handling complaints and appeals which are accessible to all students.**  
*In practice, this means that providers adhere to the practice of having clearly articulated and transparent processes for handling complaints of prospective students that are accessible to all stakeholders. These should be monitored and reviewed to mitigate against the same issues arising in the future.*

## Guiding principles

The guiding principles given here are not mandatory for any provider. They are a concise expression of the fundamental practices of the higher education sector, based on the experience of a wide range of providers. They are intended as a framework for providers to consider when establishing new or looking at existing higher education provision. They are not exhaustive and there will be other ways for providers to comply with their requirements.

These principles underpin the successful delivery of admissions, recruitment and widening access processes and activities throughout the higher education sector. These encompass and build on the foundations laid by the 'Schwartz Report', 'Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice' (2004), but are aligned primarily to the Expectations and Core practices of the Quality Code. Higher education providers are encouraged to implement them in relation to the full breadth of their provision.

1

**Policies and procedures for application, selection and admission to higher education courses are transparent and accessible.**

Policies and procedures for selection and admission to higher education should be readily accessible by prospective students and their supporters, and clearly articulate how the application and selection process operates. This will include expected timescales and key milestones, what communications they will receive and through which channels, what actions they will need to undertake and when, and how to request feedback or submit a complaint or appeal.

2

**Higher education providers use fair, reliable and appropriate assessment methods that enable them to select students with the potential to complete the course successfully.**

An effective admissions process should select students based on their potential to succeed on their chosen course of study, and assessment should be aligned to this goal. Assessment methods should be fair and reliable: consistently applied and delivering consistent outcomes. Tools used to differentiate the suitability of applicants should be appropriate to the course of study and within reasonable expectations of prospective students.

3

**Higher education providers reduce or remove unnecessary barriers for prospective students.**

The application process should be inclusive and allow all prospective students to make an application and receive a fair outcome, regardless of background. Higher education providers should aim to reduce or remove any barriers not necessary to the appropriate selection and assessment of applicants. Action should be taken to ensure that internal policies and procedures do not have a negative impact on specific individuals or demographic groups and obstruct their access to the course.

4

**Information provided to prospective students for recruitment and widening access purposes supports students in making informed decisions.**

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

5

**All staff, representatives and partners engaged in the delivery of admissions, recruitment and widening access are appropriately trained and resourced.**

Admissions, recruitment and widening access activities should be conducted in a professional manner, and higher education providers ensure that anyone delivering these activities has received appropriate training and support. Training and resources should be reviewed, evaluated and refreshed regularly to ensure that practice and policy are fully aligned and reflect the current landscape.

6

**Providers continually develop widening access strategies and policies in line with local and national guidance.**

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

## Practical advice

This section provides practical, contextualised advice to providers on admissions, recruitment and widening access. The information is set against the guiding principles the advice will help you achieve. Please bear in mind that this guidance is illustrative and intended to inform the approaches you consider and ultimately implement.

### **Policies and procedures for application, selection and admission to higher education courses are transparent and accessible (Guiding principle 1)**

Policies and procedures for admissions, recruitment and widening access are clear and transparent and make provision for the equitable treatment of a diverse body of prospective students.

Providers publish explicit and clear information on:

- how and when to apply for a course of study
- what the application and selection process involve
- how long the process takes
- key milestones in the process
- expected communications between the higher education provider and the prospective student during the process.

Providers explain why personal information is requested, and whether this is optional or mandatory. Providers make it clear how this information will be used and, if disclosure is optional, outline the benefits of disclosure. For example, disclosure of a disability or a caring responsibility will allow support arrangements to be made for applicants.

Where fees are charged, or deposits taken during the admissions process, providers explain precisely what is covered by the fee or deposit and the circumstances under which it might be refunded.

Where the selection of students uses information not captured on the application form, such as interviews, auditions, additional tests or portfolios, providers explain to prospective students what these selection tools entail, why they are being used and the contribution they make to the selection decision.

Providers notify prospective students at the earliest appropriate point about any additional criteria to be considered in the selection process. For example, disclosure and barring checks may be required for courses involving access to children or vulnerable adults, or medical careers. Similar checks may be required by some professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

Procedures for recording and justifying selection decisions need to be systematically and consistently implemented, providing a sound basis for communication of the decision and the provision of constructive feedback to prospective students.

Offers should be accompanied by clear and comprehensive information about the procedures prospective students need to follow to accept, decline or request changes to the offer. Providers should offer prospective students sufficient time (while taking into account impending deadlines) and the information they need to consider their options.

Where prospective students must fulfil certain conditions to secure a place, providers ensure that there is explicit information about the actions they should take if they do not achieve the results or meet the criteria specified in the offer of a place.

Higher education providers specify the level of English/Welsh language competence appropriate for entry to the degree. A process is consistently applied to determine whether applicants meet this level of competence. Timely support is offered for applicants that have demonstrated their academic abilities, but are admitted on the condition that their English must be improved.

Where an application from a prospective student has been unsuccessful, providers determine the nature and extent of feedback to be made available to the unsuccessful prospective student. All feedback should offer clarity to enable the prospective student to undertake meaningful reflection. Providers may consider whether such feedback is available routinely or on request only and whether there are time limits to requesting feedback. Providers may wish to consider the extent to which they are able to offer advice to unsuccessful prospective students about alternative options for study.

#### Reflective questions

- Do you clearly communicate where authority and responsibility for each stage of the process lies, including that for deciding the number of admissions and the setting of admissions and selection criteria?
- Are you aware of how and where prospective students and their sponsors can access information on the admissions, recruitment and widening access processes and policies?
- If you collect information related to protected characteristics. Do you have provision for proper consideration of prospective students' protected characteristics and guidelines for making reasonable adjustments at various stages in the process?

## Complaints and appeals

A complaint is the expression of a concern about a procedure or administrative process and can be lodged at any stage of admissions, recruitment and widening access processes. An appeal is a request for a review of a decision concerning selection or admission and can be lodged only after such a decision has been made.

In the first instance, providers should consider how their general appeals and complaints policies and procedures might be applied to admissions, recruitment and widening access. Where appropriate, providers should seek opportunities for the early informal resolution of complaints and appeals. Providers should ensure that escalation policies are in line with the relevant government requirements.

When determining the timescales for handling appeals and complaints, providers allow prospective students time to pursue their next course of action within the application process, if appropriate.

Providers publish information about the processes for complaints and appeals for prospective students which includes clear and accessible guidance that articulates how to make a complaint or appeal and the grounds on which they may lodge an appeal. (See also [Concerns, Complaints and Appeals](#) Theme.)

### Reflective questions

- How does your institution manage complaints and appeals from prospective students? How is this communicated to staff and prospective students? Where do you find the information about complaints and appeals? Is the information clear and accessible?
- How do you use the information gathered from complaints and appeals to ensure continuous improvement of the processes and practices in admissions, recruitment and widening access?
- Are your staff aware of who is eligible to make a complaint or appeal?

## Higher education providers use fair, reliable and appropriate assessment methods that enable them to select students with the potential to complete the course successfully (Guiding principle 2)

Providers may consider a range of evidence when determining the potential of prospective students to be able to succeed on a course and similarly for considering applications onto competitive courses where many applicants are deemed able to succeed. They should ensure that there is consistency between the published admissions criteria and selection criteria used to make decisions. Published criteria would also include entry requirements included in partnership agreements with other providers.

Providers are advised to ensure that published admissions criteria are used appropriately in the selection process and, where exceptions are made, these are applied in a fair and equitable manner.

Providers may decide that different selection criteria should be employed across their courses, for which they may use a variety of sources of academic and non-academic evidence. Providers should assure themselves that the methods they use to gather evidence about prospective students are inclusive and fit for purpose.

Providers may choose to use contextual data to consider academic and non-academic achievements within the context in which they were attained. Approaches to the use of contextual data should be measured, evidence-based, and seek to identify potential to succeed on the course.

Providers are encouraged to evaluate their admissions, recruitment and outreach activities to identify and mitigate any unintended consequences. In particular, they should be mindful of actions that are likely to have a negative impact on prospective students, particularly with regard to their academic performance before and during higher education, their financial well-being, or their future employability. For example, making unconditional offers to applicants who have not already met the entry requirements may have an unintended impact on the student's motivation and attainment in their current study.

### Reflective questions

- Are you using valid and reliable methods of assessment? What evidence do you have to support this?
- Do you apply criteria consistently across all applicants? What is your evidence?
- Do your assessment methods take account of contextual information such as academic, socio-economic or protected characteristics? How is contextual information used and what evidence do you have of its impact?
- Are your methods for assessing potential to successfully complete a course inclusive?
- How do you adapt your processes to cater for different types of student (for example, international students and mature students) and different courses with varying modes of delivery?
- What is your process to review that new or altered qualifications are acceptable for your institution?

## Higher education providers reduce or remove unnecessary barriers for prospective students (Guiding principle 3)

When setting criteria for entry, providers should ensure that they are a direct reflection of the requirements necessary to succeed on the specified course or within the provider. Where there are specific requirements to the course or provider, these should be limited and identified as necessary to successful completion.

Reasonable selection criteria might include:

- subject-specific knowledge
- competence standards
- graded performance in previous relevant qualifications
- genuine occupational requirements
- visa restrictions
- application deadline dates
- the number of places available for a course.

Where a requirement does not appear to help the provider assess potential to succeed on the course and is not otherwise required to study the course or acquire a relevant professional registration at the end of the course, consideration should be given to removing or amending the requirement.

Unnecessary barriers to selection might include:

- graded performance in previous qualifications that are of no direct relevance to the course in question
- fixed interview dates that do not consider individual circumstance or religious beliefs
- interviews, external tests and other assessments that do not affect the outcome of the application
- over reliance on predicted grades, as opposed to considering the application more holistically, considering all evidence which indicates student potential.

The relevance of the point below might differ according to jurisdiction:

- arbitrary restrictions that prevent students from transferring between providers, which are not proportionate or based on irreconcilable concerns regarding prior course content or academic performance.

### Reflective questions

- Do you offer clear information regarding the specific entry criteria and how they are linked to professional requirements, legal requirements or course success?
- Have you undertaken equality impact assessment in relation to your selection criteria?
- Do you undertake ongoing monitoring of success on the course to ensure that the criteria remain valid?

## Information provided to prospective students for recruitment and widening access purposes supports students in making informed decisions (Guiding principle 4)

Promotional material, verbal information and events should give a fair and accurate reflection of the courses offered, the provider and the student experience it offers. Providers are also advised to be aware of the legislative requirements around the provision of information about their courses.

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



Such requirements may include:

- those made by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies or sponsoring bodies
- immigration and English/Welsh language requirements for international students
- occupational health requirements
- work-based learning requirements made by employers.

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

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

Providers determine what information and activities will best enable prospective students to begin their studies with an understanding of the environment in which they will be working. They need to ensure that the timing and nature of any information or activities provided is appropriate and relevant to the diverse needs of prospective students, for all modes and levels of study regardless of location. For example, prospective part-time students with outside commitments may find it useful to know about indicative attendance requirements. Or, distance-learning students may need to know about online enrolment/registration processes, and any technology to which they will need to have access to undertake their course. International students may be required to attend enrolment/registration earlier and may have additional induction activities.

Providers are required to publish information about all fees, charges and other costs which might apply to each course of study.

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

Providers may find it necessary to make changes to a course between the time prospectuses are published or offers are made to prospective students and the time when enrolment/registration of current students has been completed. In such circumstances, providers must inform those who have made an application at the earliest opportunity and update their information as soon as possible. Communication would detail any significant changes and ensure that there is advice of the options available; which may include applying to a different course at the same provider or applying to a different provider altogether.

When making changes to published courses, providers consider the requirements of the relevant legislative body and consumer protection legislation and ensure that changes are made in line with the provider's published information (for example, in line with Student Protection Plans in England).

### Reflective questions

- Does the information provided cover the breadth of areas required by law (material information) and that an applicant could reasonably expect to use in their decision making?
- Is the information in an accessible format and provided in a timely manner?
- What measures are taken to ensure that it is accurate at the point of provision and remains so throughout the research phase?
- Are you confident that your information systems ensure changes are cascaded in a timely and appropriate fashion?
- Do you provide staff training that is regularly reviewed and updated? Is it compulsory for those in information and guidance roles?

## All staff, representatives and partners engaged in the delivery of admissions, recruitment and widening access are appropriately trained and resourced **(Guiding principle 5)**

Staff engaged in admissions, recruitment and widening access should be trained, not only to deliver those processes which are linked directly to their provider, but also to be fully conversant with legislative and regulatory requirements. In addition, it is advised that staff should have underpinning knowledge and training to raise awareness of their own behaviour when making decisions, such as unconscious bias.

Staff should be appropriately resourced to enable them to deliver an excellent admissions, recruitment and widening access service that minimises barriers from point of contact to the point of enrolment. When planning a schedule of events and communications to support applicants, providers should consider the quality, breadth and timeliness of these, as well as the overall volume.

Where degree-awarding bodies are working with other delivery organisations, support providers or partners, the written agreements between the parties specify where responsibilities lie for admissions, recruitment and widening access processes.

Higher education providers that contract the services of external education agents undertake due diligence during the appointment of those agents and take steps to ensure that they are reputable and competent in advising on UK higher education.

### Reflective questions

- Have you benchmarked staffing levels and resourcing against sector norms or government standards?
- Do you consider staffing and resourcing as part of the annual cycle of strategic planning? Do you have an annual training plan for admissions, recruitment and widening access?
- How do you evaluate and review training to ensure relevance to your admissions, recruitment and widening access strategies?
- How do you ensure your external partners, such as agents, are operating to the same high standards you set for yourself?
- How do you ensure that those involved in admissions, recruitment and widening access have the required knowledge, skills, training and CPD?

## Providers continually develop widening access strategies and policies in line with local and national guidance **(Guiding principle 6)**

When setting out strategic approaches to widening access, providers may be advised to consider:

- which groups of students are under-represented at their own institution, and within the national context
- what priorities are reasonable and proportionate to support widening access at their institution
- why students from varying backgrounds might, or might not, apply for courses at their institution, based on feedback and research
- differing priority factors and preferences which students might have considered when pursuing higher education.

The level to which widening access strategies and policies should be implemented by providers may vary significantly by geographical location, existing and evolving guidance, and by level of study.

Providers will have an understanding of what is required of them and will meet statutory requirements with regard to the publication of relevant strategies, the delivery of these strategies, and their evaluation. Some providers may choose to undertake measures which exceed these requirements.

Providers should be clear about how their widening access and outreach activities align to admissions and selection processes. For example, checking that admissions and selection processes do not mitigate successful widening access activity, by prohibiting certain groups of applicants.

#### Reflective questions

- Is widening access embedded in your institution's strategic vision?
- How do your admissions and selection processes align to your widening access activities?
- How do you evaluate the impact and effectiveness of your widening access activities?
- How is national and/or statutory guidance cascaded appropriately throughout your institution?

## Monitoring and evaluation

This section refers to monitoring and evaluation activity that is specific to admissions, recruitment and widening access. Please see the [Monitoring and Evaluation](#) Theme for general information about this topic in relation to quality assurance and enhancement.

Higher education providers should incorporate regular and timely monitoring and evaluation procedures into all their admissions, recruitment and widening access activities, to ensure that these are fit for purpose and continuously improved. These procedures are likely to include quantitative analysis of internal and external, sector-level datasets, and should also include qualitative feedback from applicants and enrolled students.

Providers should ensure the collection of accurate data for all statutory returns and external reporting requirements and ensure that all required pre-enrolment requirements and checks have been carried out appropriately (for example, DBS checks and Occupational Health assessments).

Providers will decide within their own context what data is collected, when and by whom. Staff and prospective students need to be clear as to which data is collected at the point of application and which data is collected upon enrolment.

#### Reflective questions

- Who collates data about admissions, recruitment and widening access within your institution, region and nationally?
- Do you consider monitoring and evaluation outcomes when designing new strategies and/or policies?
- How do you use the outcomes from monitoring and evaluation to improve your processes and practices?
- How do you involve all key stakeholders in monitoring and evaluation of your admissions, recruitment and widening access activities?
- How do you promote a shared understanding of what contextual data is used in the admissions, recruitment and widening access processes, how it is used, and with what intended outcomes?

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