

HE in FE insight into the Applicant Experience as supplier, demander, partner and competitor

Professionalising Admission to Higher Education in Further Education Conference

2 March 2010

Delegates for colleges were asked their opinions to a series of questions that focused on their unique position within the applicant experience: as both suppliers and demanders of applicants to HE; and as both partners with and competitors against other providers for students. They were able to submit their responses electronically and the results were displayed straight away.

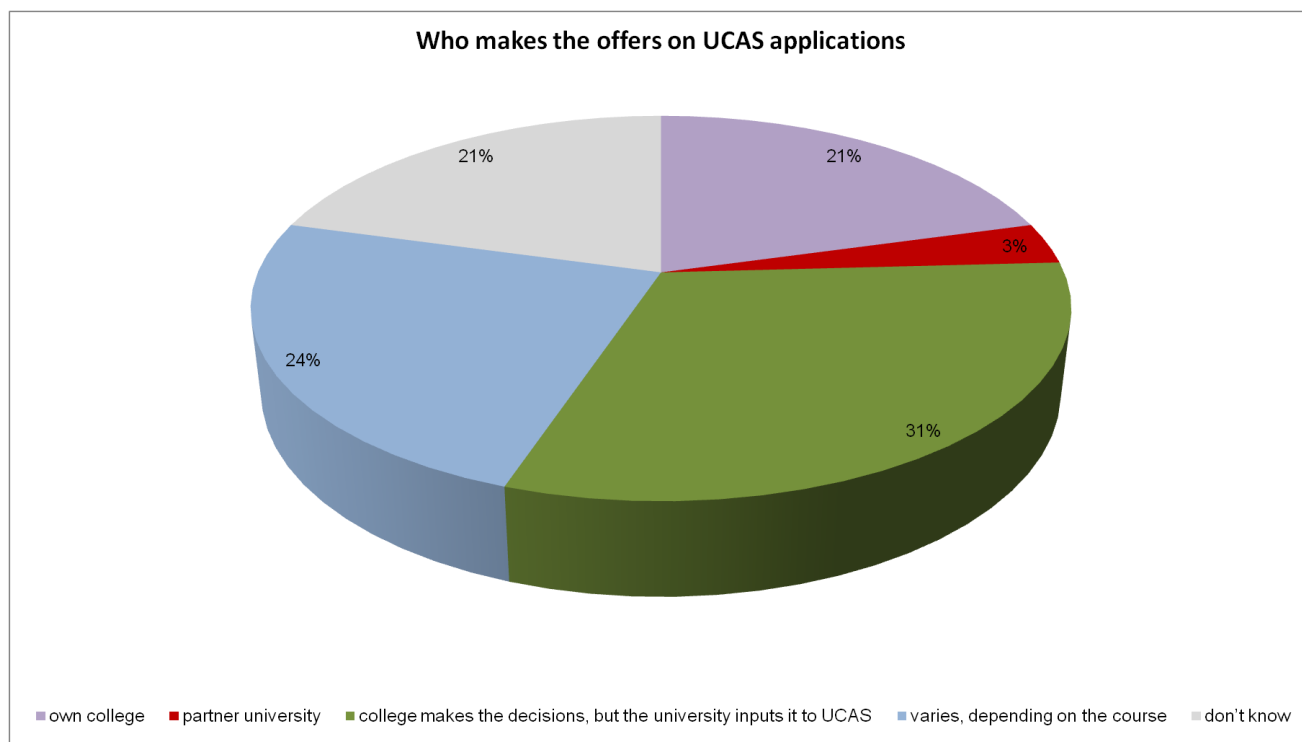
The questions were primarily asked with the intention of stimulating/focusing discussion and debate throughout the rest of the conference, so the results should not be considered as statistically rigorous, nor should the respondents be taken as wholly representative of the sector. However, the below analysis may be viewed as indicative of some of the issues HE partners should discuss to strengthen links, improve communication and embed good practice.

Summary Recommendations

- Partners should consider how their admissions can be organised to best fit their mutual strategic aims and utilise management, staff training and communication to support that organisational structure.
- Partners should collaborate to ensure information for applicants is not only accessible but is actually accessed. To start with, joint initiatives where the existing volume of information is low but need is high (e.g. part-time admissions; specific concerns of FE learners) will generally be easier to identify and have a greater impact.
- Where there are physical factors that impede regular communication on admissions matters between partners, or for those staff who do not need to be fully involved in procedural matters, co-ordinated activity should focus on those aspects of the partnership are of most strategic importance (e.g. course information and progression agreements).
- Universities with several partner colleges and colleges with several partner universities should consider whether to adopt different integrated practices for each partner or find a 'best-fit' that includes all partners under one method. This may determine how formal or informal practitioner networks between partners need to be.

Analysis

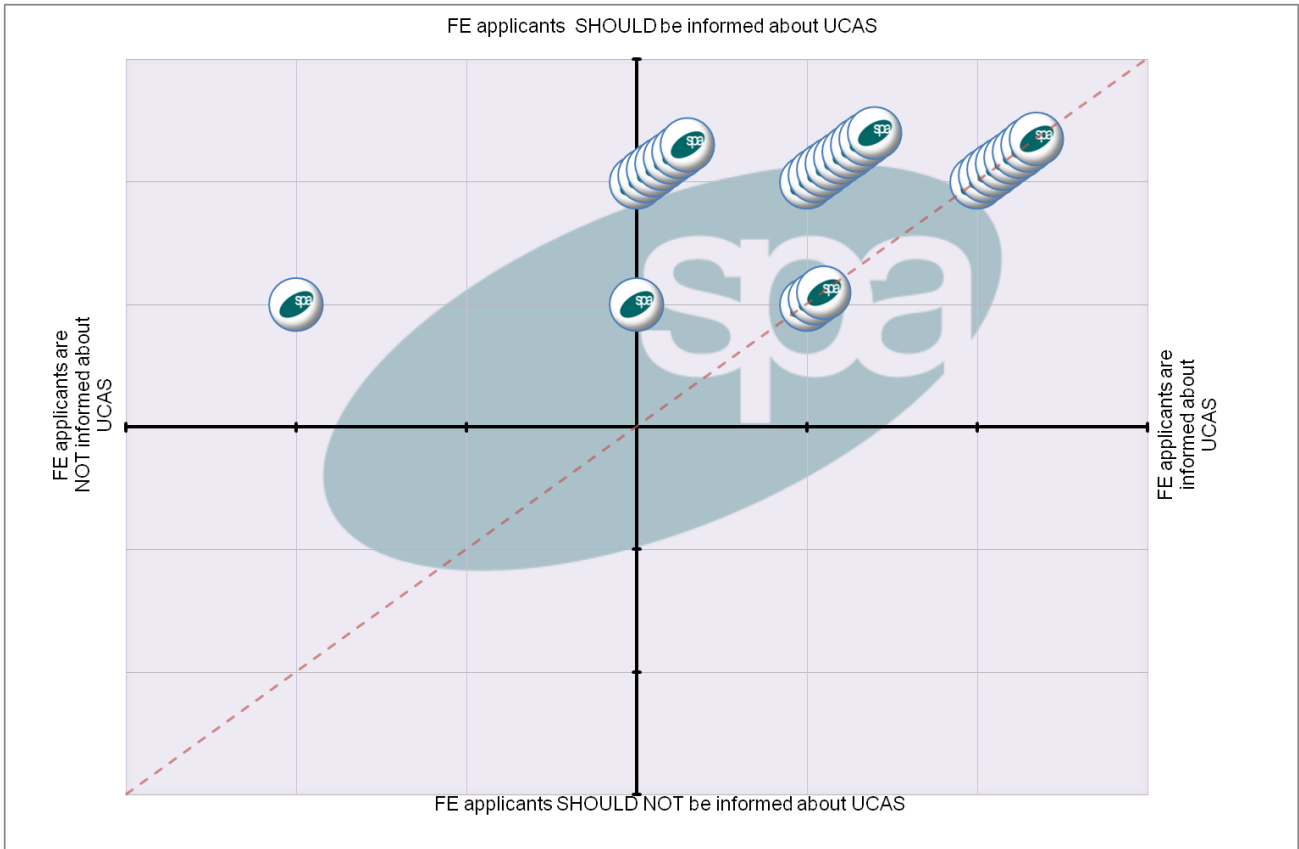
Who makes the offers on your UCAS applications?



It is worth noting that there is a variety of admissions practice within colleges. It is therefore unlikely that one strategy model will fit all institutions. However, over half of respondents indicated an element of shared responsibility between partners for application processing. Such shared responsibility may offer greater flexibility in admissions practice, foster stronger day-to-day links between partners and provide applicants with a better understanding of both institutions responsible for their chosen course. However, it may also lead to increased delays in turnaround times for applications, duplication of effort, inconsistent practice and confusion for the applicant. There is no single ideal model, so partners should carefully consider the potential advantages and disadvantages of different approaches and pick the one that best fits their strategic aims and outlook. Careful management, staff training and commitment to communication can mitigate any potential disadvantages identified.

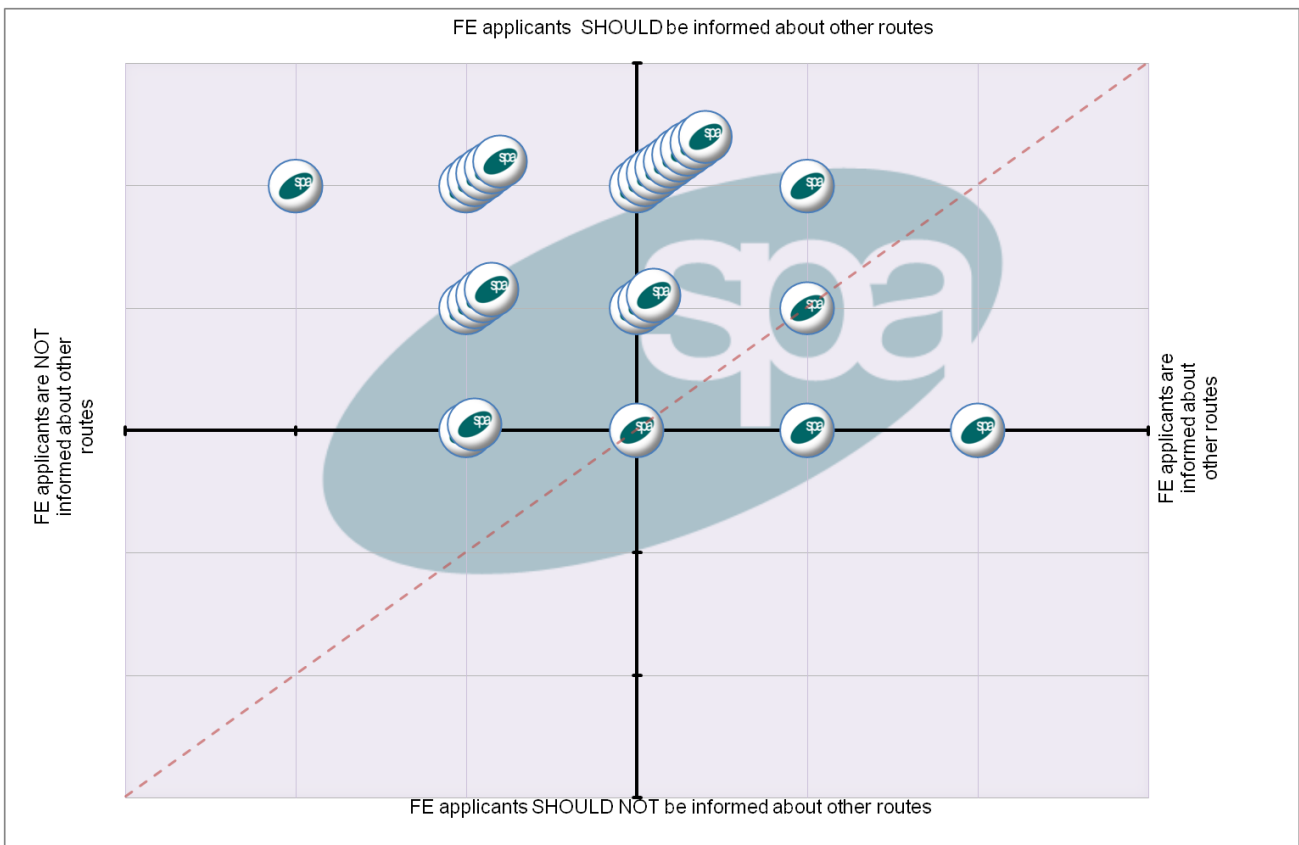
On a scale of 1-5, how well informed do you feel your FE students are about the UCAS process?

On a scale of 1-5, how well informed do you feel your FE students should be about the UCAS process?



On a scale of 1-5, how well informed do you feel your FE students are about other HE admissions routes (e.g. part-time)?

On a scale of 1-5, how well informed do you feel your FE students should be about other HE admissions routes (e.g. part-time)?

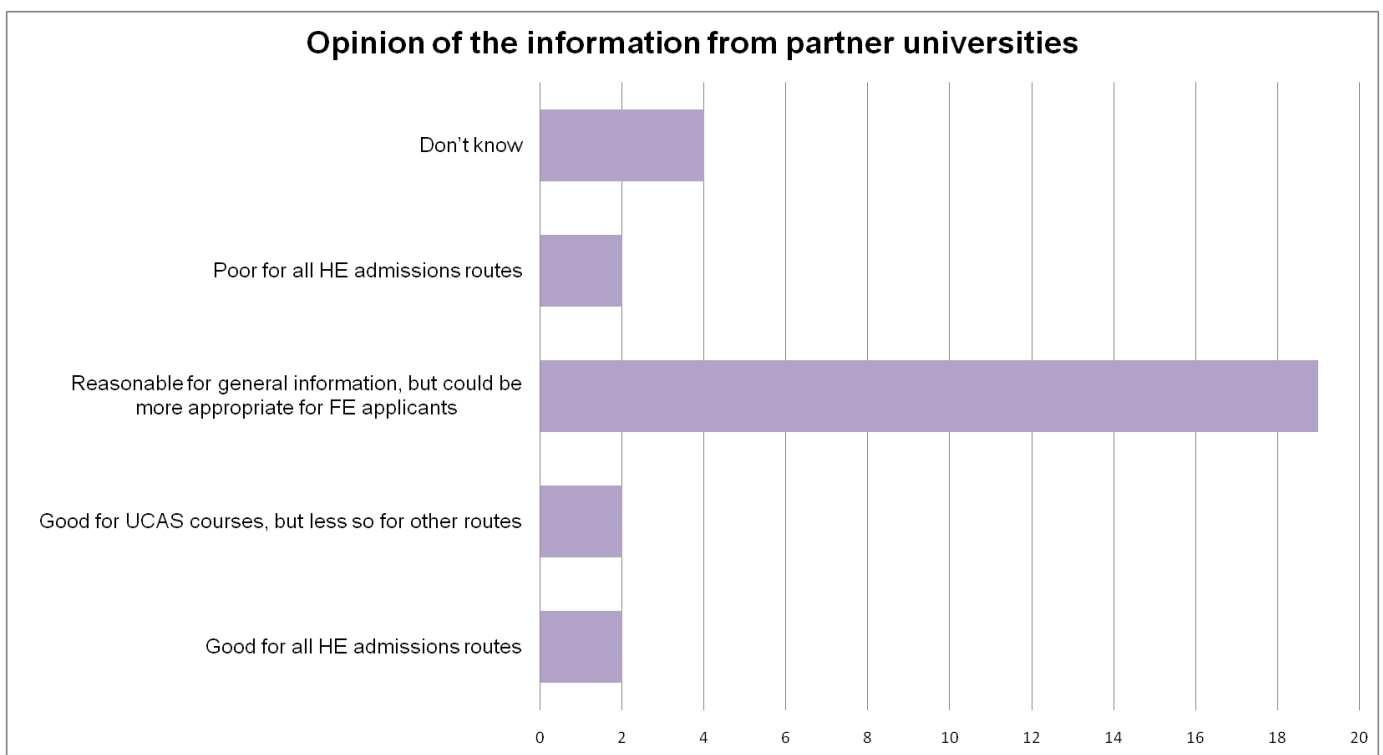


These congruence charts depict the extent to which their views on how things are diverge from how they should be (the further away from the red dotted line, the greater the divergence or incongruence). In the case of these questions it is perhaps not surprising in itself to find that the majority of delegates felt that their students should be better informed about admissions than they currently are. However, it is particularly worth noting the difference in incongruence between UCAS and other admissions routes (e.g. for part-time entry). Both elicited a strong response in favour of applicants being informed, but there is a clearly noticeable difference in how well informed applicants currently are. There is a wider range of responses on other admissions routes, but broadly there is greater incongruence (divergence from the red dotted line) for other routes than for UCAS routes. Comparing the two charts it is clearly noticeable that:

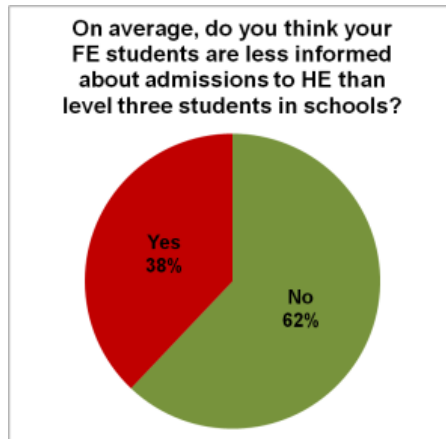
1. neither have entries below the horizontal line (indicating that everyone felt applicants should be informed about all routes)
2. the majority of responses on both charts were at the top vertical mark (indicating that the general view was that applicants should be as informed for other routes as they are for UCAS)
3. there were far more responses to the right of the vertical line for UCAS routes than for other routes (indicating that delegates believed that applicants are far better informed for UCAS than for other routes).

UCAS are beginning to look at part-time entry and published part-time vacancies during Clearing in 2009. Similarly, there are a number of government and HE sector-led research initiatives investigating improvements to web-based information, advice and guidance. Further development along these lines would be one way of 'standardising' the amount and quality of information available. However, a valid point was made at the conference that information is not the same as informed. Colleges will need to think carefully about how they ensure information is not only accessible but is actually accessed. Partner universities may be helpful in this area, but institutions will need to work closely to identify the key strategic drivers behind such collaboration. Widening participation, support for learners during a highly competitive full-time market, greater diversification of learning modes, a commitment to community learning, or recognition of in-work learning opportunities may be some of the drivers, but it would be for institutions to consider any shared social, economic or academic values, based on their own mission. Initiatives focused on improving how informed applicants are will generally be easier to identify and have a greater impact where the existing level is low but need is high than those where the quality is already high. That is not to say that institutions should neglect developing further information, advice and guidance initiatives for UCAS courses, but where resources are limited they may need to consider how best to maximise their return for any investment.

What is your opinion of the information from your partner universities?



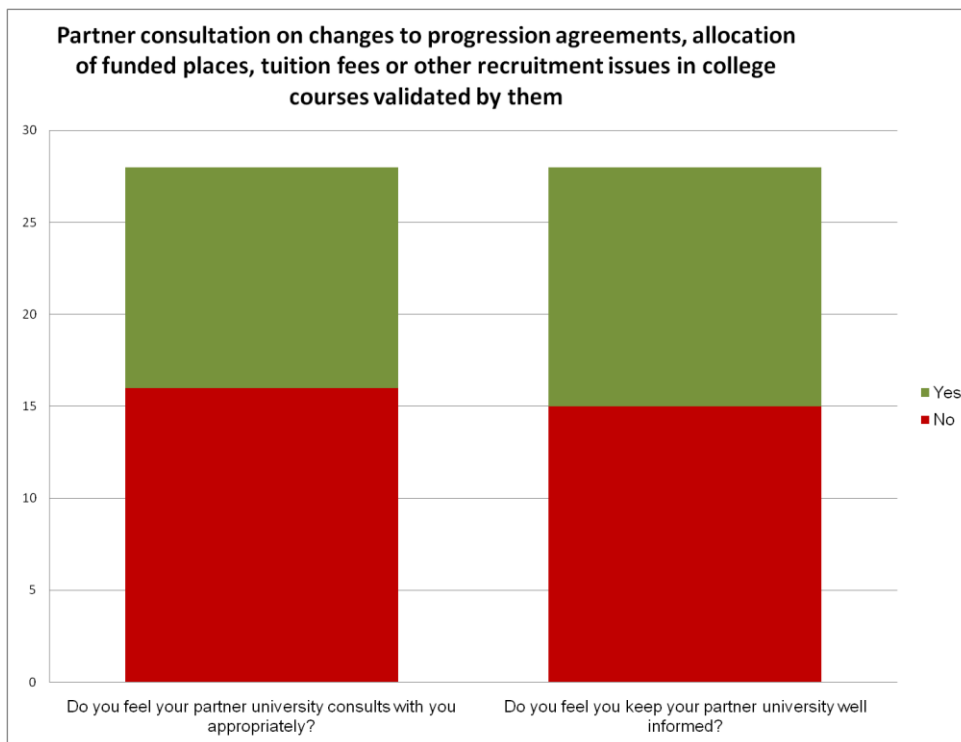
On average, do you think your FE students are less informed about admissions to HE than level three students in schools?



There was a strong view that partner universities could provide information more appropriate for FE applicants, but no clear opinion that FE students were any less informed than their counterparts in schools. These two responses combined would suggest that FE students are not necessarily at any disadvantage when making choices about HE study, but perhaps there are more specific circumstances, concerns and issues relevant to FE students' decisions on HE that could be addressed to raise aspirations. In relation to the previous congruence charts, these 'added interests' of FE students, once identified, may provide partners with a significant impact on the provision to entrants from FE. Colleges may well already know what these 'added interests' are: many may be common on a national level and therefore offer a wider return for universities to consider; but local-specific interests should not be overlooked, particularly as they may be easier to target and quickly address.

Do you feel your partner university consults with you appropriately?

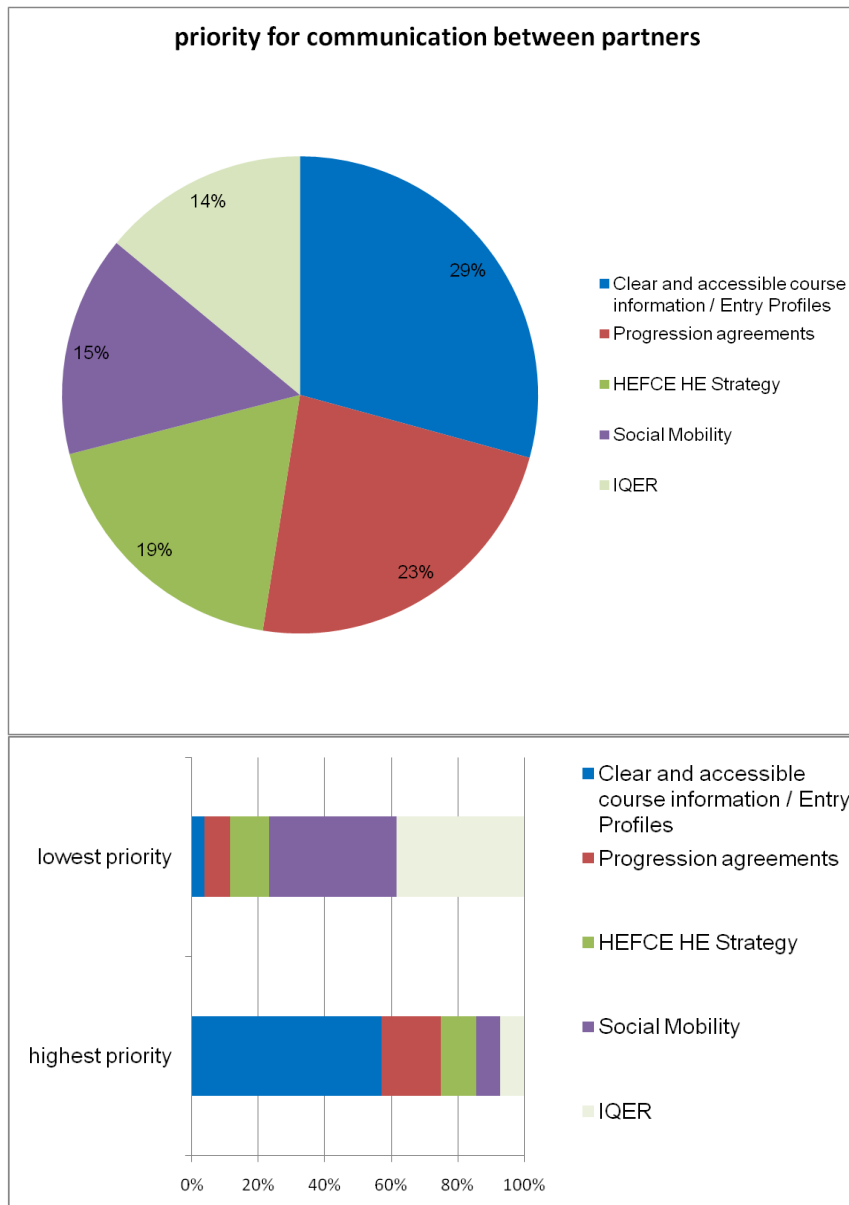
Do you feel you keep your partner university well informed?



Opinion on these two questions was divided, but delegates appear to have identified that this is not purely a one-way issue and that there is a fairly equal exchange (or lack thereof). Communication between colleges and universities would seem an essential element to any partnership, but there are clearly many physical factors that could impede day-to-day co-operation. In some cases it may be impractical to expect

consultation to be mutually fully-inclusive and indeed it may not be necessary for every aspect of the applicant experience. Institutions may therefore wish to consider which aspects of the partnership are of most strategic importance and focus on ways to mediate barriers and enhance co-ordinated admissions practice in those areas.

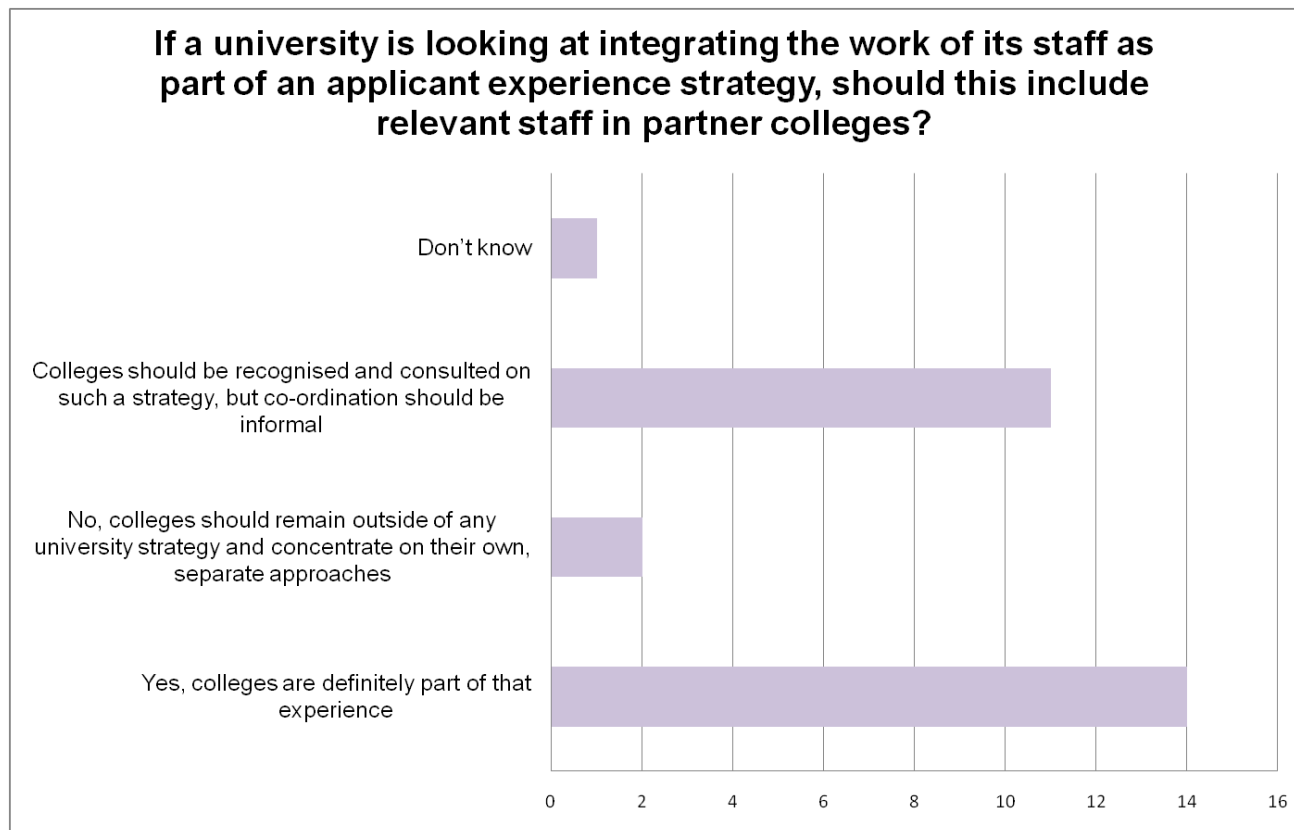
Please rank the choices to represent your order of priority for communication between partners



The above strategies do not represent the only aspects that should be important in any partnership, but were picked purely as topics that were being discussed on the day. However, the results are useful in illustrating how institutions may wish to co-ordinate activity. The above pie chart was derived from apportioning a value to the order of priority given (5 for highest priority; 4 for next; then 3; 2; and 1 for the lowest). Clear and accessible course information and progression agreements come out top, but the other three still came out with reasonable proportions of importance. Therefore, partners wishing to improve communication across a broad range of issues may well consider all five choices as relevant. However, there is a greater distinction in priorities when looking at the highest and the lowest. Clear and accessible course information is by far the highest priority, being viewed as a higher priority than all the others combined. Social mobility and IQER appear as predominantly low priorities. This may be useful if partners wish to focus on one specific area or attribute different levels of communication to different areas (e.g. regular meetings on course information involving staff from different areas; discussion of progression agreements at key points of the admissions cycle; an annual review of HE Strategy with one member of staff from partner university; e-mail or written memo updating staff on social mobility and IQER approaches). Again, it is unlikely that there will be one communication strategy that fits all situations, so

universities with several partner colleges and colleges with several partner universities would need to carefully consider whether to adopt different integrated methods for each partner or find a 'best-fit' that includes all partners under one method.

If a university is looking at integrating the work of its staff as part of an applicant experience strategy, should this include relevant staff in partner colleges?



Nearly all delegates felt that colleges should be involved in any applicant experience strategy at their partner universities, although there was divergence of opinion over the extent of such involvement. Practically, the nature of college engagement should be determined by the nature of the applicant experience strategy itself: one that is based on informal networks of experts sharing information is likely to lead to informal co-ordination with colleges; whereas one that establishes formal structures to monitor and measure practice would probably require formal involvement from college staff.

Dan Shaffer

Senior Project Officer

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