**Consumer Protection Legislation**

**Guidelines for Waltham Forest College Higher Education**

The Consumer Rights Act 2015 consolidates the rights of consumers and for the first time, includes the rights of students as consumers. This means that education providers (Further Education and Higher Education) must ensure that students have access to accurate information to inform their decisions. This set of guidelines applies to all students applying for, being given advice and guidance for, the Higher Education (HE) programmes/courses at Waltham Forest College.

**What does this mean for Waltham Forest College (WFC)?**

The legislation includes **print, digital and verbal** information, which should be accurate for the duration of a Higher Education programme/course offered at Waltham Forest College. This legislation relates specifically to **material** information, which includes core units/modules, programme/course title and all entry requirements, but would not include, for example, the availability of a refreshments on campus.

**How wide-ranging is the legislation?**

Students have the right to access relevant and accurate information before they apply for a Higher Education programme/course, and should expect the information to be accurate for the full duration of their course/qualification. This means that a student considering applying for entry in September 2017 should be able to access accurate information from summer 2016 – and should be able to refer back to the information until after they complete their qualification in Summer Term 2018 (for their HNC) and Summer Term 2019 (for their HND).

The information includes:

* Pre-application and pre-entry information such as core units/modules, balance of teaching and assessment, location of study and course title;
* The terms and conditions of an offer (and accepting an offer) to study, which must be fair and balanced;
* Complaint handling processes and practices, which must be accessible, clear and fair.

**What will students expect from me?**

Students visiting Waltham Forest College for an open event or interview/selection event or meeting Waltham Forest College at an off-campus recruitment event, will expect representatives to be able to ***accurately*** answer the following questions.

* What is the course title?
* What are the entry requirements?
* What core modules will I be studying throughout the duration of my course/qualification?
* What optional modules are likely to be offered?
* How much time will I spend in taught classes, and how much outside study is expected?
* What assessment methods are used, and what is the balance of assessment methods during the HE qualification?
* What is the level of experience of the staff teaching me on the degree?
* What is the total length of the course?
* What institution will be awarding my degree?
* If I am studying for an HNC or HND, can I progress into a top-up BA/BSc? Is this automatic?
* Is there any accreditation of this course?
* What are the additional course costs, and how much will they be for the duration of my degree?
* Where will I be studying? (*This includes placement information*).
* Is there anything *surprising* that I might not be expecting? (eg. the awarding body is different from the institution offering the course).

The students may not ask these specific questions, but they have the right to be able to access this information before they make their decision to apply for a course and accept an offer of study.

**What if I cannot answer those questions?**

First thing is…..Don’t guess! The information that Waltham Forest College provides to students is legally binding – if we, as a representative, give the wrong answer to a question, Waltham Forest College could face legal action from a student. Academic colleagues should be able to answer the questions for their own course area, but, importantly, all Waltham Forest College staff should be able to direct students to the correct information on the College website.

**I *think* I know the answer……..**

Secondly……if you are not certain, don’t answer. Never make an assumption on another course and don’t base an answer on old information. It is absolutely acceptable to say: *“I don’t have a list of the* *modules/units/assessment methods for that course, but we have details on our website. I’ll show you where you can find the information.”*

**What happens if we get it wrong?**

Students have the right to make a complaint, and even take legal action, if they feel that they have not received what they expected. It is therefore essential that all material information is accurate.

**How do I know what is *material* information?**

‘Material’ information is what the average consumer needs to make an informed decision, and the questions above cover the areas suggested by the Competition and Markets Authority as relevant for Higher Education. However, Waltham Forest College may be targeting particular characteristics of students and this therefore pulls other information into ‘material’ information. Part-time students are likely to consider timetables as key information for decision-making, particularly if they are able to view published timetables before applying or accepting an offer. Courses should therefore be mindful about the challenges of guaranteeing a timetable that may not be deliverable for the full course.

**How do we ensure we are giving accurate information?**

Waltham Forest College already publishes course specification documents, and these are a useful tool for ensuring that information given to students is accurate. All staff should ensure that they do not promise something that is undeliverable, for example, 24-hour access to specialist facilities, after course employment, certain progression routes.

**If Waltham Forest College was split across a number of Centres – does this affect the rights of the students?**

All Waltham Forest College students have the right to access and be given, accurate pre-application and pre-offer information, including the location of their studies. Students in Waltham Forest College should be given information about the location of courses and teaching to allow them to understand what they can expect from their studies. This includes access to learning and support services, the Learning Resources Centre, VLE, accommodation, and the wider student experience.

**Once the students are here, do we still need to be aware of the Consumer Rights Act?**

Yes. Students will be choosing their course on the basis of information about the full qualification, so any changes once they are on-course would be unfair. Students must therefore be consulted about any changes to material information about the course (such as, change of core units and modules, assessment methods, grading).

**Other Information:**

* **Course validations:** Courses that are subject to validation or going for re-approval should bepromoted using the most-up-to-date course specification documents. Any changes to course details as a result of re-approval should be communicated to applicants via Admissions, and all documents should clearly state the entry years for which the information is applicable.
* **Contract:** Waltham Forest College will be entering into a contract with students when we make them an offer tostudy, which they accept. This means that students have rights under Contract Law, and Waltham Forest College has a responsibility to continue to provide important information, to seek consent from students for any changes to the offer/course, and give students at least 14 days to withdraw their acceptance of the offer without any penalty.
* **Course suspension:** Waltham Forest College will include a statement on publications, the website and through theAdmissions Terms and Conditions in Student Services, that courses may be subject to suspension due to low recruitment. Academics should be aware that students may ask about this, and should direct any questions to Student Services and Adult Recruitment.
* **Durable formats:** Students should be able to access information in a durable format, whichmeans it cannot be changed. This means that course specification documents should be available online as a pdf, and that editable webpages cannot be used as the only source of material information.
* **Social Media:** The legislation also applies to communication with students via social media, soWaltham Forest College staff should keep this in mind if trying to provide short responses to social media-based questions.
* **Issues raised by students:** If students make a complaint to any member of staff, tutor or HE tutor regarding their expectations ofa course at Waltham Forest College not being met, please refer to them to the [Waltham Forest College Complaints Procedures](https://my1.ucs.ac.uk/forms-policies-and-guides-students) available on the Waltham Forest College website.

**Finding out more:**

If you want to know more about Consumer Protection Legislation, see the Competition and Markets Authority [Guidance for HEIs](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/428549/HE_providers_-_advice_on_consumer_protection_law.pdf) and [Guidance for Students.](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/415732/Undergraduate_students_-_your_rights_under_consumer_law.pdf)  Please direct any specific questions to Maxine Smith, Assistant Principal responsible for Higher Education, or send email to maxine.smith@waltham.ac.uk