



The Applicant Experience Strategy: Application

(to be considered in addition to SPA's definition document www.spa.ac.uk/applicant-experience)

In June 2009, SPA published its [definition of the applicant experience](#) and has developed a [strategy map](#) based on that definition. The applicant experience encompasses all the opportunities or points of interaction between higher education and a potential student. Such experience affects whether or not an individual becomes a higher education student, and indeed whether or not an individual chooses to apply to higher education in the first place. SPA believes that a good applicant experience is the precursor to the whole student experience and should smooth transition and aid retention. SPA has used four key stages to outline the processes involved in an applicant experience strategy:



A paper on the [pre-application stage](#) was published in November 2009, along with [summary recommendations](#). This paper details the **application stage** and considers how approaches in higher education engagement with learners as they fill in an application may influence the whole applicant experience.

Application

The application stage covers all activities from the point a learner has committed to commence an application for the given admissions entry cycle up to the point that application is considered by the institution(s) applied to. It does not include any decision-making or other post-application activities. This may be a very short period of time and in some cases only a matter of hours, or it may be a more prolonged period of contemplation, draft preparation and consultation with advisors before an application is completed and received at an institution. It may include individuals who start but never complete or submit their application, those who apply but subsequently change their mind about their choice of course, institution or mode of study and those who submit an application with incomplete or insufficient information for consideration by an institution.

Identifying Engagement

[SPA's pre-application document](#) outlines the three broad categories of engagement between a higher education institution and potential applicant:

- **direct engagement**
(where an institution has an identified interaction with a specific potential applicant);
- **indirect engagement**
(where an institution publishes information that is accessed by a potential applicant or where such information is specifically provided for an intermediary to relate to a potential applicant)
- **non-engagement**
(where a potential applicant does not access any information provided by an institution).

The application itself should be considered a form of indirect engagement: it contains information pertinent to admission that the institution has published, or approved for an intermediary to publish, for an applicant to access, complete and return. This interaction will affect the institution's ability to make informed decisions on the suitability of its applicants and poor engagement at the application stage may lead to missed potential and poor selection. Institutions should therefore consider not only how a template for application is constructed, but also how its staff may interact with the applicant during this stage.

Admissions staff are the most likely to have been involved in the construction of an application template and to interact with applicants, but they will not be the only ones. Other areas (e.g. marketing; schools' and colleges' liaison; academic staff; student records; partner colleges) may well have been involved in the design, which may also have gone through committee structures for editorial approval. Applicants may wish to interact with various aspects of the institution before submitting their applications, so management and consistency of information is important, particularly if engagement occurs with areas not involved in the application itself (e.g. accommodation; student support; finance). All staff likely to engage with applicants at this stage should be trained on the application process and be well aware of who to refer queries to on any application matter falling outside of their knowledge or level of responsibility. It is rare for the application template and process to remain exactly the same from one year to the next (questions are frequently altered, reworded, added or removed), so such training should be provided on at least an annual basis. However, as the process may be different at different points in the year (e.g. via UCAS there are differences such as any period of equal consideration, UCAS Extra and Clearing), as some courses may close and as some courses may have different start dates, it may be advisable to provide training at key points in the admissions calendar.

An individual institution may have less control over the design of applications from external service providers (e.g. UCAS; CUKAS; GTTR), but as members of those organisations, all institutions have a responsibility to suggest, scrutinise, review and approve changes. They must also plan ahead, incorporating any planned changes into their own processes, and be conscious of any resource implications (e.g. finance; staff; software; hardware; time). Applicants will rely on information and advice available as part of their application via bodies such as UCAS, much of which is supplied by member institutions. The integrity of that information and of the application process as a whole relies on member institutions adhering to the rules, regulations and spirit of the process (and confidence that all other members do likewise).

For some institutions, receipt of an application may be the first direct engagement they have with an applicant, although they may have indirectly engaged in the pre-application stage, for example through published materials (electronic or paper) or via a third-party advisor (e.g. school). Applicants to courses that recruit via a national application service provider (e.g. UCAS; CUKAS; GTTR) may have engaged with the relevant organisation and accessed additional information, advice and support in completing an application.

Individuals applying to other courses or modes of study, and individuals returning to study, may not receive the same level of assistance in completing an application. Institutions may need to consider the level of prior engagement and support and how this may affect the quality of an application or the suitability of choices made. If an application requires significant support to research and complete, or pre-supposes learner awareness of an intermediary, then this will limit who applies and how good an

individual's application may appear to be. It is the responsibility of each institution and of any national application service providers they use to minimise unfair advantage gained from coaching or insider knowledge of the application process. Simple applications should therefore be easy to access and be self-explanatory, using plain language. More complex applications should have all supporting information readily available at no extra charge and have help text in plain language accompanying each section of the application.

It would be wrong to think of this stage in the applicant experience as a purely administrative or bureaucratic process when engagement between applicant and institution sits in limbo. The application is a critical connecting point in the applicant experience, with the fewest alternative routes for progression. Many HEIs will not consider a second application in the same cycle. The UCAS scheme, for example, allows an applicant to send the same application to up to five choices, and then to Extra choices if unsuccessful, but currently does not permit multiple applications or amendments to applicant information (such as personal statement, reference or qualifications) during the admissions cycle. An institution may contact an applicant or referee for further information if anything appears to be incorrect or omitted, but in most cases, the information presented on the application up to a year or more ahead of the intended start of study is static. Without any other engagement, the limited content of an application may be the only information an institution has in choosing between suitable learners or indeed in deciding if an application is worth putting forward for further consideration at all.

The difficulty for an HEI is in evaluating the appropriate level of engagement during the application stage. The ideal situation, one which may not happen frequently enough in practice, would be where applicants have considered the available pre-application information (including any relating to post-application processes, such as interviews) and have made informed matches between their interests, aspirations and potential and the institution's character and course content. This would maximise the number of applications that could be considered to have suitable ability and desire to study the choices selected. However, if an application is not suitable, either because it falls below the threshold for consideration or because information on the application is omitted, insufficient or inappropriate, then the problem is one of *mis-engagement*. Unsuitable applications are a waste of time and effort for both applicant and institution, particularly where parties pay for a restricted number of applications, so it would be good practice for institutions and advisors to identify ways to improve engagement and match applicants to courses.

The purpose of an application

HEIs may wish to review the quality of applications they have received in previous years as a benchmark for gauging whether or not their engagement strategy in provision and access of information is successful. They should agree internally and clearly define what the purpose of an application is: why each section is needed and what it will be used for; how it is expected to inform the admissions process and what the intended outcomes are. This may sound obvious, but in everyday life people regularly fill in applications for a variety of reasons and so may have a variety of pre-conceptions of its importance and of how carefully to read the available literature beforehand.

Without clearly defining and understanding the purpose of the whole of the application it is impossible to provide comprehensive information or advice on how to complete such an application. However, the purpose of an application to higher education is not uniform across the sector or necessarily across the same institution. Different courses and different academic and administrative

functions within an institution may have different requirements of the application. The UCAS application, for example, serves many disparate purposes:

- it acts as a registration form with UCAS;
- it refers information about the applicant to HEIs;
- it is a selection tool;
- it a data-collector for a range of different stakeholders;
- it is a means of controlling entry to HE.

Not all of the information on the application is released to HEIs by UCAS at the same time (e.g. ethnicity; parental occupation; other choices) and some of it is purely for UCAS and is never released (e.g. preferred means of postal, e-mail or mobile communication; payment details). UCAS Apply is not just an application, but a means of managing, regulating and providing a central structure for applicant engagement with higher education (e.g. controlling the timing of admissions; standardising and removing multiplication of information; restricting number of choices and acceptances). Similarly, not all information required is submitted as part of the initial application (e.g. some courses may require separate information from the applicant or referee).

In some respects this makes it difficult to assess the quality of an application for all stakeholders. However, its core common value to an institution is as a demonstration of suitability to study. This should be the main reason why a learner chooses to apply for a particular course or programme and why an institution chooses to receive an application. The application therefore serves a mutual purpose and it benefits both the applicant and the institution if it is fit for that purpose. If it does not adequately facilitate an institution's judgement of each applicant's suitability then applicants may miss out on a fair opportunity to be considered for study and the institution may miss out on choosing the best students or select students not suited to the course.

Quality threshold

If the quality standard for an application is that it meets the criteria for consideration for the given course or programme (regardless of whether or not it is successfully selected for an offer), then all applications that fall below that standard must be considered unsuitable. It is important to remember that an unsuitable application does not necessarily mean that the applicant is unsuitable. Institutions should regularly review their application materials and processes to ensure they remain fit for purpose, that they do not unduly discriminate against any potential applicant groups and that any supporting information, advice and guidance required to complete a suitable application is reasonably accessible. If an institution's review deems there have been too many unsuitable applications then the institution will need to reconsider what information it publishes and/or how such information is accessed and used.

It is up to each institution, or each course/department within an institution, to determine the threshold for how many unsuitable applications constitute 'too many'. However, institutions may wish to consider the following options:

- adopting a quality threshold comparable to student retention rates;
- adopting a threshold comparable to other targets within an admissions team's key performance indicators;

- basing a threshold proportionate to available resources, staff time lost in processing unsuitable applications and the impact on the admissions service as a whole.

Identifying change

Identifying an unacceptable level of unsuitable applications does not, in itself, identify what needs to change or which stakeholders (e.g. course; department; institution; applicant; advisors; UCAS) need to effect change. It must be remembered that identifying unsuitable applications does not necessarily mean that the applicants are unsuitable, so the core goal of such identification should be to improve the application engagement and maximise opportunities for applicants to demonstrate their suitability.

Examining trends in the reasons why applications are unsuitable will indicate possible areas to consider and which stakeholders may be concerned. Recording different types of unsuccessful applicant (e.g. some admissions software have a facility to input different status categories against decisions) would facilitate identification of trends, as might any feedback to unsuccessful applicants (e.g. if admissions staff find they are frequently providing similar feedback). Engagement with relevant stakeholders would still be necessary to identify actual underlying causes and practical solutions. A survey of unsuitable unsuccessful applicants may be a straightforward way of understanding what information they accessed and where they sought advice and guidance from. Many surveys of suitable applicants who are made offers (e.g. decliner surveys; new student surveys) ask this kind of question already, so a comparison of answers between the groups may prove enlightening.

Direct engagement with unsuitable applicants, particularly if there are too few for valid quantitative data via survey, may be useful and would allow follow-up questions in response to particular answers. However, any direct engagement, whether by telephone, in focus groups or one-to-one, should be taken with due care and sensitivity, respecting that these applicants have not got into the course(s) they wanted. The HEI should ensure it takes expert advice on how to conduct such engagement and trains staff involved accordingly. It would be appropriate to ensure such applicants receive detailed constructive feedback and that advisors are available for those considering their next steps. Schools, colleges, widening participation staff and education advisors would also prove valuable resources in identifying change. They may also be able to identify and initiate change in their own practices to support applicants.

Some potentially common trends to look out for are:

1. qualifications fall below the threshold for consideration
 - Are Entry Profiles and requirements clear?
 - Are any competence standards set by the institution or external bodies clear?
 - How else are entry requirements communicated and by whom?
 - Is there a specific qualification or type of qualification disproportionately affected?
 - Do learners understand what is meant by the term 'entry requirement'?
2. information is omitted, insufficient or inappropriate
 - Are additional requirements (e.g. work experience; contextual data factors; commitment to study) clear, transparent and easily accessible?

- Are there verification issues?
 - Are there other ways of assessing potential?
 - Would any applicants have been made an offer if they had not omitted pertinent information or if omissions had been queried prior to making a decision?
3. disproportionate representation of particular social/economic/geographic/education groups compared to 'suitable' demographic
- Are any widening participation/access initiatives targeting these groups?
 - Do they have access to an equivalent level of information, advice and guidance?
 - Does the HEI engage with these groups differently / at all?
4. disproportionate representation according to level of pre-application engagement
- Is there a reliance on indirect engagement prior to receiving an application?
 - How does the institution monitor pre-application engagement?
 - Is there any difference where direct engagement exists (e.g. visits to schools; pre-application open days; widening participation/access engagement)?

Continued research

SPA will continue to develop understanding of the positive interactions and practice that make up a good applicant experience. The remaining stages of the applicant experience (post-application; transition) will follow to build a comprehensive picture of good practice in the sector.

We are keen to hear from higher education or from education support organisations that work closely with higher education (e.g. on widening participation/access) about activities that enrich the applicant experience. If you would like to share any examples of good practice within the application stage or of integrated working between staff responsible for different stages, please contact Dan Shaffer, Senior Project Officer at SPA (d.shaffer@spa.ac.uk).

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SPA

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