



## The Applicant Experience Strategy: Post-application

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



Papers on the pre-application and application stages, along with summary recommendations, have already been published and are available on our website ([www.spa.ac.uk/applicant-experience](http://www.spa.ac.uk/applicant-experience)). This paper details the **post-application stage** and considers how approaches in higher education engagement with applicants whilst assessing their suitability and desire to study may influence the whole applicant experience.

### Post-application

The post-application stage covers all activities concerning an institution's consideration of a submitted application, from the point the application receives any initial institutional assessment through to when the applicant has been confirmed, or guaranteed, a place of study. This may cover a number of months, but in some instances may be done in a matter of minutes. It will invariably include applicants who never obtain a confirmed place, either through defined selective practice by the institution or voluntary de-selection by the applicant. The quality of interaction between institution and applicant will shape how informed any selection or de-selection decision is.

### Good practice

The post-application stage involves the core work most traditionally associated with an 'admissions office' and many operational aspects of admissions work within this stage have already been covered within SPA's Good Practice Statements (all good practice documents are available to download from [www.spa.ac.uk/good-practice/index.html](http://www.spa.ac.uk/good-practice/index.html), including: admissions policies; admissions tests; criminal convictions; interviews; feedback; planning and managing admissions). Much of what happens to an application during the post-application stage involves criteria, policies and offer-making strategies largely developed by an institution well before the application is made. Preparation is vital to a successful admissions operation and SPA's Good Practice Statements are an existing resource to support the post-application stage.

## Different perspectives

Admissions staff should always be mindful of the applicant's perspective and timeline: what an institution may view as preparatory work conducted pre-application may not impact upon the applicant until post-application. However, an institution may review, adapt and change its strategies and practices during the post-application stage in response to final funding allocations, trends in actual application numbers and levels of demand. There is significant overlap across pre-application, application and post-application stages, both in terms of the activities and engagement that occurs and when such activity affects different stakeholders in the applicant experience. Such overlap constitutes added risk to any institution's aims for transparency and consistency in admissions, leading to a poor applicant experience detrimental to both the applicant and the institution. Such risk may be mitigated through:

- integration of institution practices and practitioners across all the stages
- awareness of the perceived difference in timelines for applicants, advisors and admissions staff
- consideration of the impact of any change post-application.

## Identifying Engagement

Engagement has been considered across three broad categories in both SPA's [pre-application](#) and [application](#) papers: direct; indirect and non-engagement. Understanding the type and extent of engagement experienced by an institution's own applicants, students and alumni may prove valuable in improving conversion and retention rates and should aid institutions in redirecting admissions resources where they are most effective. However, unlike the previous stages, engagement of some form is a given in the post-application stage: receipt of an application is in itself a form of engagement. The three categories of engagement therefore should be slightly adjusted for the post-application stage, to reflect that the relevant considerations concern a response to and sustenance of an interaction, rather than initiating or inspiring interaction:

- **direct engagement**  
*(where an institution has an identified interaction with a specific applicant)*
- **indirect engagement**  
*(where an institution publishes generic information that is accessed by an applicant or where information is sent via an intermediary)*
- **non-engagement**  
*(where an applicant does not access any further information from an institution).*

In most cases within the post-application stage, engagement will be initiated as an aid to conversion, but there may be a number of other purposes, including diagnostic, logistic, record management and student support. Some engagement may therefore come from areas of the institution other than admissions and there is a risk of duplication, conflicting messages and other inefficient use of resources. These could result in an HEI spending more time and money than needed and may actually result in impairing conversion (particularly if mixed messages cause confusion or excessive correspondence becomes viewed a 'junk mail'). Co-ordinated engagement across all concerned parties within an institution is a foundation to a good applicant experience. Plotting the potential points of interaction against the whole admissions process should help identify the most appropriate

times for engagement to suit such different purposes (keeping in mind that some post-application needs may be best met by engagement pre-application). [Flowcharts](#) to aid such identification are available on the SPA website.

*Case study: University of Huddersfield*

The University of Huddersfield presents course joining information via a series of linked web pages which contain all the information required by new students in one place. For 2011/12 entry, the links will be communicated via their new student relationship management tool. The acquisition of a student relationship management tool has enabled the University to review the processes and content of communications throughout the student journey from initial contact through to enrolment. In the post-application stage all communications are now co-ordinated centrally using a common University tone of voice and branding which is consistent with all pre-application communication including all marketing materials such as the prospectus.

The Marketing and Admissions teams have worked closely together to develop and implement a student journey communications plan which incorporates targeted communications tailored to specific audiences; for example, by mode and level of study, campus and subject area. Additionally, the system facilitates the monitoring of view, interaction and click through rates of electronic communications.

By the end of May 2011, applications for full time undergraduate courses were up by 14% on 2010/11 entry which was higher than both the sector and their competitor group. Conversions of offers to acceptances were up by 26%, well above any expected rise merely from the increase in applications. Other changes have been implemented concurrently, such as centralised decision making and quicker offer turnaround times, so the improved conversion rate cannot be solely attributed to the new student relationship management tool. However, together they form a package of developments delivering a more co-ordinated approach to supporting the applicant experience and meeting the University's strategic aims.

Improved data collection as part of the student relationship management tool will allow the University to research and analyse the impact of the system to ensure continuous improvement.

An institution should consider the purpose of the engagement, the resources available and the timescales/deadlines involved to determine what type of engagement would be most effective. These considerations may be judged on three grounds: appropriateness; efficiency; supportiveness. The weighting attributed to each may vary according to the situation. For example, an admissions office with a reduced budget may choose to target more of its communication solely via an applicant portal if it deems the efficiency savings outweigh any added appropriateness or support benefits from telephone, e-mail or other communication streams. However, any such weighting should be based on clear, justifiable evidence (e.g. survey of previous applicants/existing students; response rates to different forms of communication; successful strategy at a comparable HEI). In most cases, what constitutes appropriate, efficient and supportive grounds will be obvious and are embedded in the principles of fair admissions. However, the differing needs of institution and applicant should always be borne in mind and if a group whose membership hold disparate duties is convened to consider the purpose of any engagement (e.g. a committee including recruitment, marketing,

widening participation, admissions, student services, student representation and teaching and learning) it would be productive to agree definitions (and possibly priorities) in advance. These will differ according to each institution's mission and each department's strategic aims, but general guidance is available within [SPA's Good Practice Statements](#) and [section 10: Admissions to higher education in the QAA Code of Practice](#). A possible model for determining appropriate engagement based on the considerations above is available in appendix A.

Having decided upon the most effective means of engagement, it would be beneficial to plan in advance the process for monitoring/measuring effectiveness and consider timely mechanisms for changing ineffective engagement (e.g. using an intermediary for a specific interaction may be quicker and cheaper in the short term, but if it proves not to deliver the desired outcomes you don't want to be tied into a long term contract).

### **Direct vs Indirect Engagement**

It would be a mistake to assume that direct engagement is always better than indirect. The type of engagement chosen should be one that best fits the needs or intended purpose behind such needs, as determined by the strategic and operational aims.

Many institutions choose to engage indirectly, via an intermediary. Indeed, it is a common form of engagement for most full-time undergraduate admissions, as it has been judged more appropriate, efficient and supportive to have a central point, UCAS, to convey information on the processing of applications. It benefits HEIs by controlling the offers and acceptances an applicant can hold elsewhere, thus improving confidence in judging conversion and planning student numbers. It benefits applicants by reducing duplication in application preparation and submission and it benefits advisors by providing a simpler application process to guide applicants through. An intermediary may actually be better resourced and have more experience of engaging with different stakeholders. This may be particularly relevant in areas of electronic communication, where resources to implement and continually update systems are restrictive for small institutions to manage independently, or where there is an identified need for a unified national system.

#### *Case study: UCAS*

UCAS is well established as the central application service for full-time, undergraduate entry on behalf of UK higher education providers: 697,351 learners applied through UCAS in the 2010 admissions cycle; filling 487,329 places. This shared service facilitates a common application and regulates acceptances, but it is worth remembering that it also handles high volumes of application processes and queries that would otherwise be directed at HEIs.

Taking the 15 January application deadline as an example: 56,000 people logged onto Apply for the first time on 13<sup>th</sup> January 2011; and 75,000 applications were submitted over 14/15<sup>th</sup> January 2011. UCAS receives around 17,000 calls in any average week, but for the week commencing 10<sup>th</sup> January 2011 there were 38,962 calls, 4,000 of which were taken in the final four opening hours of 15<sup>th</sup> January 2011 (a Saturday).

However, such indirect engagement should be viewed as a supplement to, not necessarily a replacement for, any direct engagement. The contract to admit is made between the institution and the applicant, irrespective of the involvement of any additional parties (including UCAS, agents, school advisors), so an HEI is not absolved from its own obligations, nor would a third party be liable for any acts or omissions in conveying the offer, as they would be acting on behalf of the institution. An HEI should always consider the most effective means of engagement in order to support the productive progression of applicants through the post-application stage. Where this involves multiple means (e.g. conveying an offer of a place via UCAS, via an institution portal, by e-mail and/or letter and potentially verbally following an interview), it is the individual HEI's responsibility to ensure the message is consistent. It is particularly important that the HEI has confidence in, and continually reviews, their intermediary's systems, knowledge and accessibility, to ensure it is still delivering what the HEI needs. 'Fit for purpose' should take into account future engagement needs and any intermediary only offering outdated engagement methods may no longer be providing an HEI with the most effective use for its resources.

Termination of an application, whether through it being deemed unsuccessful by the HEI or through voluntary de-selection from the applicant, should also be viewed as a form of engagement. HEIs should always consider how to offer constructive feedback to unsuccessful applicants, in line with precept nine of [section 10: Admissions to higher education in the QAA Code of Practice](#) and with the [Delivery Partnership and SPA joint statement of good practice on feedback](#).

### **Non-Engagement**

Non-engagement should be very rare in the post-application stage. It would be extremely unusual for an institution not to seek any further interaction following receipt of an application, even if such interaction is to notify the individual of an unsuccessful application. Because of its rarity, any non-engagement should be viewed with suspicion and investigated thoroughly as it may indicate a problem that needs to be resolved.

Situations where an institution does not engage with an application would include errors in the admissions process (e.g. misplacement of a paper application; incorrect input on the electronic application record; failed transmission to UCAS or other intermediary) that may affect an individual potential student or if left unchecked result in a systemic problem and a significant loss of potential students.

Situations where an applicant does not engage with the institution (e.g. no response to invite to interview; failure to submit portfolio, certificates or other requested information; no notification of acceptance/decline of offer) may indicate the applicant does not intend to or is not able to attend the institution, in which case it would be in the institution's interests to clarify the situation and ensure admissions statistics are as accurate as possible. However, it is also possible that there is a problem with the channels of communication, in terms of either misinterpretation or lack of receipt by the applicant. Again, it would be in the institution's interests to clarify the situation if at all possible and correct any confusing information or contact failures, particularly if they posed a risk of affecting more than just one applicant. It would not be appropriate to reject or withdraw an application based on no response to a request without evidentiary confidence that the applicant actually received the request.

*Case study: University for the Creative Arts (UCA)*

UCA used to send invites for interview to applicants solely by e-mail, but for 2010/11 entry over 25% of those invited did not turn up for interview. 15% of e-mails were unopened and this would have been for a variety of reasons (e-mail address was no longer valid; the applicant didn't check it regularly; service fault or mail filter at the applicant's end; or simply because the applicant did not recognise it as an important message).

UCA reacted for 2011/12 entry by communicating via text message to applicants' mobile phones and also ensuring information on the state of the application was available on their applicant portal. Non-attendance at interview fell from over 25% in the previous year to 11.3% and unread messages fell from 15% to 8.6%.

In the vast majority of situations, any period of non-engagement is likely to trigger an attempt to re-engage, even if it is just to formally close the record. An institution that has not heard back from an applicant is likely to chase that applicant for a response. Similarly, an applicant that is still interested in studying at an institution is likely to contact that institution if he/she has not heard anything. Complete inaction, therefore, is rarely justifiable.

In the few situations where inaction is deemed justified, it may indicate a need to change policies to accommodate such practice, or a need to improve application information to make terms and requirements clearer to applicants.

*Example of justified non-engagement:*

An institution operates its own on-line postgraduate application system that requires additional materials (such as a separate reference letter, copies of academic transcripts, or a deposit) before a decision is made. However, they have a high volume of applications that never submit the additional materials. Admissions staff are very busy processing the large numbers who do submit everything required and so the outstanding applications are left pending. The courses concerned are highly selective ones and target enrolment numbers are met.

A review may deem it justifiable to hold such applications without any further action on the grounds of most efficient use of available staff resources. This would be supported if it could be demonstrated that responding to all incomplete submissions would be to the detriment of completed ones and thus an excessive risk to the institution's enrolment strategy.

However, even in such a case the institution should recognise that high volumes of incomplete applications indicated some flaw in the application stage that could lead to the loss of potentially beneficial students and wasted time in initial processing and handling. The institution should therefore consider:

1. Setting a clear policy and defining a set duration or deadline for submission of additional materials, so that all such applications are handled consistently and overdue ones are removed from admissions statistics;

2. Adding additional automation to the application system to chase applicants for additional materials without staff intervention;
3. Making application information clearer and more accessible, so that applicants are aware of when and where to send additional materials and of the cancellation policy should they fail to do so;
4. Analysing affected applications for any trends that may indicate an unforeseen barrier to certain applicant groups.

Apparent non-engagement may turn out to be more of a suspended engagement: situations where a long period without interaction is broken. Examples of suspended engagement would include: a UCAS applicant who is rejected or declines an offer and then reapplies in Extra, Adjustment or Clearing; an applicant who defers entry to the next academic year; or a decliners' survey conducted after the admissions cycle has ended. Whilst such re-engagement may be treated as completely separate to the original application, there is the potential for duplication of effort, unnecessary resubmission of information and overlooking relevant information previously highlighted (including disability needs or verification concerns). It is always better, wherever possible, to link to and follow on from any previous engagement.

### **Continued research**

SPA will continue to develop understanding of the positive interactions and practice that make up a good applicant experience. The transition stage of the applicant experience 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](mailto:d.shaffer@spa.ac.uk)).

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### Example model for determining appropriate engagement

<b>Purpose:</b>	To inform applicants of their conditions for entry; making the terms of the contract to admit clear; improving/managing conversion. Engagement needs to be consistent, regardless of changing volumes of applications throughout the year and needs to make most effective use of available resources.
<b>Resources available:</b>	University admissions portal; e-mail; UCAS; small budget for publicity materials and postage; offers spread across team - equating to 1,000 conditional offers per FTE staff member.
<b>Timescales/deadlines:</b>	Internal performance target of 15 day turnaround. All decisions on 15 Jan applications to be transmitted to UCAS no later than 31 March.

Engagement options	rating out of 5 (different weighting may be given based on strategic significance)			Overall rating	evaluation methods	
	Appropriateness	Efficiency	Supportiveness		How effectiveness would be monitored/ measured	Mechanisms for changing ineffective engagement
<b>1. Indirect: Current practice - conditions transmitted to UCAS for applicant to check on UCAS Track</b>	3	5	2	<b>3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meeting performance targets</li> <li>Conversion rates</li> <li>Number of applicant queries about offer</li> <li>Review of pre-entry support via acceptor/decliner surveys</li> <li>Feedback from other departments (Student Support; Accommodation; Finance; Student Records; Faculty)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Potential to adopt an automated e-mail message in short term.</li> <li>Consider options 2,3,4 for next cycle (some may require significant set-up that could not be effected mid-cycle).</li> </ul>
	Single point for conveying offer, but no avenue for including additional terms or aids to conversion	Offer only needs inputting once	No institution-specific support information included. No link to an individual in case of queries.			
<b>2. Indirect: Set up admissions portal to automatically pull conditions off internal admissions database and send update e-mail to applicant</b>	4	5	3	<b>4</b>	As 1. above, plus: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tracking log-ins to portal</li> <li>Tracking support areas accessed/redirected to from portal</li> <li>Noting any applicant complaints or appeals on grounds of inconsistency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Involve Schools and Colleges Liaison in promoting awareness of portal to applicants, advisors and parents</li> <li>In cases of inconsistency, direct staff training as a matter of urgency. If necessary, suspend portal and direct all applicants to UCAS Track alone until issue resolved.</li> <li>Consider options 1,3,4 for next cycle (some may require significant set-up that could not be effected mid-cycle).</li> </ul>
	Can link to other information on portal, including university regs and other contacts (e.g. student services; accommodation), but potential for inconsistency with data held at UCAS	Set-up of portal could be managed prior to start of cycle.  Offer only needs inputting once (all other systems should link automatically)	Applicant can access support information via portal, but not necessarily directed to it. No link to an individual in case of queries.			

<b>3. Direct: Send formal offer letter to applicant, including conditions and information regarding next steps</b>	3	3	4	3	As 1. above, plus: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tracking hits to relevant support pages on website</li> <li>Feedback from school advisors</li> <li>Noting any applicant complaints or appeals on grounds of inconsistency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In cases of inconsistency, direct staff training as a matter of urgency. If necessary, suspend letters and direct all applicants to UCAS Track alone until issue resolved.</li> <li>Consider support staff that can be called in during any peak times</li> <li>Consider options 1,2,4 for next cycle (some may require significant set-up that could not be effected mid-cycle).</li> </ul>
	Letter can include reference to additional terms, but including full regs likely to be cost prohibitive - would need to assume reference to a web-based version. Potential for inconsistency with data held at UCAS	Offers via post would require additional staff time and additional cost, which may be difficult to resource if applications increase. Turnaround target may be at risk.	Paper copy easy for applicant to show advisors or parents to discuss. Potential to include supporting materials or link to web-based documentation. Signed letter provides an identified contact point, plus additional support contacts.			
<b>4. Direct: Include acknowledgement reply as a condition, to confirm that terms have been read and signifying interest.</b>	2	2	3	2	As 1. above, plus: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tracking hits to relevant support pages on website</li> <li>Monitoring of WP and legally-protected groups' reply rate and conversion against benchmarks</li> <li>Noting any applicant complaints or appeals on grounds of inconsistency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In cases of inconsistency, direct staff training as a matter of urgency.</li> <li>Consider support staff that can be called in during any peak times</li> <li>If necessary, due to either inconsistency or excessive demands on resources, acknowledgement reply would have to be dropped (including from any conditions already sent)</li> <li>Consider options 1,2,3 for next cycle (some may require significant set-up that could not be effected mid-cycle).</li> </ul>
	Potentially breaches agreement with UCAS; legal clarification required. May negatively impact on conversion if requirement to reply is taken unfavourably.	Requires significant additional staff time, particularly in handling replies and chasing non-replies - may be difficult to resource if applications increase. Turnaround target may be at risk.	Provides assurance that applicant is aware of full terms and conditions before accepting an offer. However, it would be reliant on supporting materials via web. It may be perceived as an additional barrier to vulnerable groups.			