



The Applicant Experience: Pre-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](#), along with a [draft flowchart](#) depicting the main stages of the admissions process via UCAS. 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.

The four key stages of the applicant experience identified within that definition are: pre-application; application; post-application; transition. This paper details the pre-application stage and considers how approaches in higher education engagement pre-application may influence the applicant experience.

Pre-Application

The pre-application stage of the applicant experience covers individuals' consideration of higher education study and all activities prior to any commitment to commence an application for the given admissions entry cycle. It will include individuals who never become applicants to higher education, but interacting to a varying extent with such a diverse population range benefits individual institutions and the sector as a whole in raising aspirations, widening access, understanding reasons for non-participation and forging links with suitable prospects. In this respect, it is beneficial for any institution's activity at this stage to be linked to its own mission, so that a realistic match is made between prospective applicants and the character of an institution's student body and learning. This may be part of a long-term strategy, particularly if it targets learners who are years away from becoming eligible to apply, in which case planning activities that relate to enduring characteristics of higher education learning and of the institution itself should have more effect than ones purely responding to short-term recruitment needs.

Such a strategically-planned match could improve an individual's desire and ability to study, thus supporting retention throughout the entire student experience from the beginning of the relationship. Research from the STAR Project (Student Transition and Retention)¹ shows that many who leave their chosen higher education course early do so because of a, "Perceived mismatch between themselves and the institution, subject or course." Misplaced or poorly matched interaction prior to application would constitute a waste of an institution's resources and a waste of time for anyone applying who later found their subject choices were inappropriate, their qualifications unsuitable or the institution's environment inapt. It would therefore be good practice to track pre-application activity and interaction to feed back into the institution's future marketing approach and retention planning. Exact practice will vary between institutions, and in some cases within institutions, due to the different demographic and geographic nature of potential applicants and the diversity of courses offered. However, overall, potential applicants may be considered within three broad categories, each relating to the degree to which a higher education provider may interact with them:

- 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 a higher education provider).

Institutions may find it highly valuable to know the type and extent of pre-application engagement their own applicants, students and alumni experienced as this would not only improve understanding of which pre-application strategies were successful, but may also indicate undertargeted areas. For example, if an institution had a few highly successful students who had not engaged with the institution prior to applying but who had all taken the same pre-HE vocational qualification, then the institution may choose to investigate whether it would be worth attracting more by increasing indirect engagement, such as promoting its consideration of that qualification, or increasing direct engagement, such as specifically visiting students at colleges offering that vocational qualification. The extent to which an institution has control over the flow of information and can track the progress of individuals from pre-application through to graduation and beyond is of course variable across these three categories and is reliant on the quality of any customer relationship management system. However, it is in each institution's own best interests to make the most efficient use of its pre-application engagement, particularly where contextual data can be used to inform the admissions process and match applicants with the greatest potential to succeed at that institution.

Early Engagement

Deciding how many years prior to the intended admissions cycle should be considered within any definition of pre-application is a matter for some debate. Professor Steve Smith, Vice Chancellor of Exeter University, noted in the National Council for Educational Excellence recommendations²,

“We need to move the debate from a focus on which universities students attend, to one about the vast number of able students who never progress to higher education. ... This includes about 360,000 16 year olds each year who do not achieve the standards to stay on for A Levels, and around 60,000 of those who were in the top 20% at some time in their school education but do not go on to higher education by age 19. It is time for those who care about widening participation to focus on raising attainment and raising aspirations from a much earlier age so that we can deliver the best education possible for all our young people.”

The first four recommendations from the NCEE all focus on improvements to information, advice, guidance and support from primary school level onwards to help ensure the ability and aspirations of young learners to enter higher education. These recommendations are primarily based around indirect engagement with higher education, although the second recommendation that every pupil visits a higher education campus may promote opportunities for direct engagement at an early age. However, although such **early engagement** will raise aspirations and awareness of higher education, and thus pave the way for learners to make informed choices, preparing and studying for their pre-HE courses appropriately, it should not be viewed as a direct marketing tool. It is quite likely that successful early relationship building will imprint a sense of brand identity for an institution amongst the young learners it engages with, and this may influence the choice of institution applied to later. However, in keeping with the previous assertion for institutions and students to be mutually-suited, such early interaction must ensure that any loyalty to an institution is formed through a realistic understanding and identification of that institution's character, rather than through any sense of restricting choice or locking learners into a narrow path of education. Early engagement with learners that leads them to conclude that a particular institution or subject area is not suited to their

ability and aspirations, without deterring them from further study in general, would reduce inappropriate selection of choices. This should benefit both applicants and institutions may still be beneficial to an institution as it and result in a higher proportion of suitable applications to consider and improved retention amongst those accepted.

National Initiatives on early engagement

The pre-application activities of individual higher education institutions, whilst beneficial for raising awareness of the opportunities higher education can offer and useful in promoting the institution, cannot improve the fairness of an applicant experience alone, as a more co-ordinated national response is required to address external social, economic and political factors that restrict access. Efforts made by higher education providers to encourage learners onto suitable courses can only be wholly effective if other external barriers, such as financial constraints, are removed. The government's recent White Paper on, "New Opportunities: Fair Chances for the Future," seeks to address such issues of social mobility. Its measures include a commitment to guarantee pupils from low income backgrounds who are roughly in the top 50% of performers, wherever they are located in the UK, have access to a comprehensive package of assistance to attend university³. There is also an indication that OFFA will look positively on institutions which spend more of their access and outreach funding on raising aspirations by engaging more with schools and communities. Although some government measures are restricted to England, they do suggest a stimulus towards higher education providers working in conjunction with regional and national bodies to build upon existing widening participation/access activities to ensure that engagement with learners pre-application leads to effective support for progression into higher education. The keenness with which some English HEIs have chosen to financially support their regional Lifelong Learning Networks (such as the Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance) beyond their government-funded lifespan is perhaps an indication of the importance institutions place on such engagement and their desire to persist with initiatives beyond any short term incentives.

Just as individual higher education institutions require Customer Relationship Management systems to track such progression through their own provision, regional and national bodies will require similar tracking and monitoring in order to direct their resources and accurately evaluate the impact of their initiatives. There are some early models being trialled by UCAS that allow widening participation activity to be recorded at the application stage, but it could be that a larger scale project, perhaps linked to the Unique Learner Number (or equivalents in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), may be required if a truly co-ordinated approach is to be effective.

As they would not normally be considered as direct marketing, these early relationship building strategies may be well-suited to collaborative arrangements, either between institutions with a similar character, locality or targeted catchment group, or in conjunction with external organisations, like Aim Higher, working to widen access on a regional or national level. Such collaboration would help raise awareness of learning opportunities at education providers who may not otherwise have sufficient funds to support such activities. There are many examples of good practice of collaboration within early engagement in the applicant experience, and part of SPA's ongoing work on the applicant experience will be to collate them.

The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust examined existing examples of good practice in schools and universities working together and published five initiatives to help prepare young people for higher education⁴. These included recognition of the need for early engagement, but also noted

the need to continue and build upon that engagement, making it more specific as students progressed into sixth form and prepared for their applications to higher education.

Preparatory Engagement

There is a difference between the early engagement part of the pre-application stage, which may be epitomised by generalised, aspiration-building interaction at a point before a learner would normally be making specific higher education study choices and the later part of the pre-application experience, which may be viewed as more focused, **preparatory engagement**. For young learners, this shift in engagement would normally occur whilst still studying in secondary education when attention turns from general consideration of whether or not to pursue higher education study to deciding specific choices over institution and course. For many higher education providers, by far the greatest source of potential undergraduate applicants will come from this pool of young learners and so it is understandable that there is a focus on recruitment activity aimed at preparatory engagement of school/college learners. UCAS provides an unrivalled central source of preparatory engagement material for undergraduate applicants, with Entry Profiles offering particular benefit for matching institution and applicant. The Delivery Partnership Steering Group currently estimates that the UK sector should reach 94.2% of courses in the UCAS scheme with an Entry Profile by the end of September 2009. The focus will then shift away from ensuring the quantity of Entry Profiles to the quality of the information provided. SPA's recommendation would be that quality is considered in terms of the applicant experience: i.e. in providing the equality of opportunity for potential applicants to match their ability and aspirations against courses and institutions they are best suited to.

However, it must be remembered that for some institutions, such as those specialising in part-time study or those with a high intake of mature students, the primary demographic model of a preparatory engagement experience would be very different and so the information supplied and the method of promoting interaction would need to be adapted accordingly. Similarly, in order to meet any institutional mission to have students from a wide range of backgrounds, a successful recruitment campaign will need to engage with different preparatory engagement versions. This is recognised within a multi-funnel model of admissions as applicants may come from a variety of different sources who are attracted to an institution for different reasons and who interact with it from different backgrounds. Entry Profiles provide an opportunity to offer information to potential applicants from a wide range of backgrounds and thus improve the fairness of the applicant experience. However, they currently only apply to full-time undergraduate courses within the UCAS scheme (and limited postgraduate courses via GTTR and CUKAS), so further development would be needed to promote this aspect of good practice in other modes or levels of higher education learning.

Initiatives to support engagement

In its response to the National Student Forum's 2008 Annual Report⁵ the government agreed to launch a study into the recommendation for a 'first port of call' Information, Advice and Guidance portal. UCAS, in collaboration with the NUS and a cross-sector stakeholder group including SPA, were commissioned to undertake an initial feasibility study and reported its recommendations back to DIUS in June 2009. Although this initial study focused on full-time undergraduate study, the government paper specifically acknowledged the importance of part-time higher education and so it is hoped any future development will include a wide range of higher education study routes.

The National Student Forum's report also called for current good practice in the use of student ambassadors to expand further, reach out to non-traditional potential applicants and to further

widening participation activities. Many higher education institutions have recognised the valuable resource in their own students to promote the benefits, environment and ethos of that institution, and in the added empathic benefit of bringing together students and potential students who can relate to one another. Such activities strengthen the applicant experience as they help applicants to match their own qualities with the culture of the institution.

Alumni are used in the United States for similar recruitment activity and some UK institutions already use alumni, particularly in international recruitment. However, if student ambassadors are seen as good practice in demonstrating the student experience to potential applicants, then alumni may likewise be an advantageous resource, particularly for highlighting career opportunities, relating with mature prospects and those already in employment. However, there is a risk that alumni may be less familiar with recent changes to their institution's physical, social or educational environment, so additional training to that provided to student ambassadors would be advised to ensure the match between applicant and institution is still a valid one.

The use of ambassadors is just one example of direct engagement activity to attract students to higher education. As with all types of direct engagement, its value to the applicant experience (i.e. its value to both applicant and institution) must be measured in the efficacy of its targeted use. As an extreme example, there might be little value in sending a student ambassador who came straight from A-Levels at a school with a high participation rate in higher education to talk at a college that predominantly offers Access courses for mature students returning to education from work. The college students may be left feeling that the university doesn't really cater for students with their background and that the social environment isn't relevant to them. Accurately understanding the potential suitable pool of candidates for a geographical or demographical area, and then appreciating the most appropriate method for promoting within that area is key to matching student and institution within a strategic enrolment model. Geographic information systems modelling and customer relations management are widespread tools used for this purpose within the United States. Within the United Kingdom, the potential for demographic and geographic recruitment strategies could be of immense benefit to widening participation and to identifying those with the best potential to succeed within a specific higher education institution.

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 (application; 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 pre-application stage or of integrated working between staff responsible for different stages, please contact Dan Shaffer, Senior Project Officer (d.shaffer@spa.ac.uk).

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SPA

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