



## Defining the Applicant Experience

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### Summary 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.

A good applicant experience is mutually beneficial to both the applicant and the higher education provider, in that it prepares, informs and provides equality of opportunity to enter higher education. It should accurately match the student's aims, abilities and aspirations with the character of the institution. Such a matching improves student retention and enhances the strategic mission of the institution, so is an intrinsic element of any successful strategic enrolment management and student experience strategy.

In contrast, a poor applicant experience is inherently detrimental to both the applicant and the higher education provider, in that it perpetuates barriers to entry, disengages potential applicants and their advisors, risks incongruence between student expectations and institutional character and therefore embeds an enrolment strategy leading to unfulfilled potential and increased drop-out.

### Request for Case Studies

SPA believes this concept lies at the heart of a fair admissions system and is seeking to work on case studies of good practice with higher education providers who plan a unified or integrated admissions strategy across all the different stages of the applicant experience (pre-application; application; post-application; transition) and who set achievement beyond enrolment as a key performance indicator of that admissions strategy.

If, after reading the background information below, you feel your institution already adopts or plans to adopt this approach and you would like to share good practice with SPA, please contact Dan Shaffer, Senior Project Officer ([d.shaffer@spa.ac.uk](mailto:d.shaffer@spa.ac.uk)). Additionally, please also contact Dan if you are not a higher education provider, but an education support organisation that works closely with higher education (e.g. on widening participation/access) on activities that enrich the applicant experience. SPA is particularly interested in how such activities in an individual institution, regionally or nationally are monitored throughout the applicant and student experience and how such knowledge is fed back to shape future activities.

The [accompanying chart](#) depicts the main process stages for UCAS applications. It is hoped that case study examples of good practice will build on this chart to depict a rich view of all the positive interactions that make up a good applicant experience. Additional background information for each stage (pre-application; application; post-application; transition) will follow, starting with the pre-application stage and its link into application. This information will detail government and other national recommendations throughout the UK in those areas, along with case study examples of good practice from any provider interested in contributing.

## Background

The applicant experience, from a higher education perspective, is at face value an understanding and cataloguing of the chronological journey undertaken by an individual in order to gain acceptance into higher education study. However, in order to place any value or measure on such a journey it is important to understand the context in which it is undertaken and the overall purpose for it. Students of a higher education provider are members of that institution and as such contribute financially, academically and culturally to the value of that institution. 96% of respondents to the first Schwartz consultation in 2004 (and 98% to the review in 2008) said it was important for higher education institutions to have students from a wide range of backgrounds<sup>1</sup>. However, according to a House of Commons Public Accounts Committee report<sup>2</sup>, despite government grants of £392million over five years up to 2008 to universities to widen access, participation of working-class young people has only increased 2%.

The applicant experience should be considered as far more than just a one-way, or passive, journey taken by an individual. Experience is gained via participation, so there should be a fully-interactive path of engagement in which all potential students have the opportunity, knowledge and understanding to gain admission to a course suited to their ability and aspirations and in which higher education providers can inform, inspire and attract students who can add to that institution's character and succeed in their studies. Both applicant and institution benefit from this kind of experience where ability and aspirations are accurately matched with an appropriate place. The Schwartz Report's five principles of fair admissions form the bedrock to such an applicant experience, but as the experience is valued in terms of the outcomes as a student it is a vital foundation to the whole student experience.

The 1994 Group's report in 2007, titled *Enhancing the Student Experience*<sup>3</sup>, noted that,

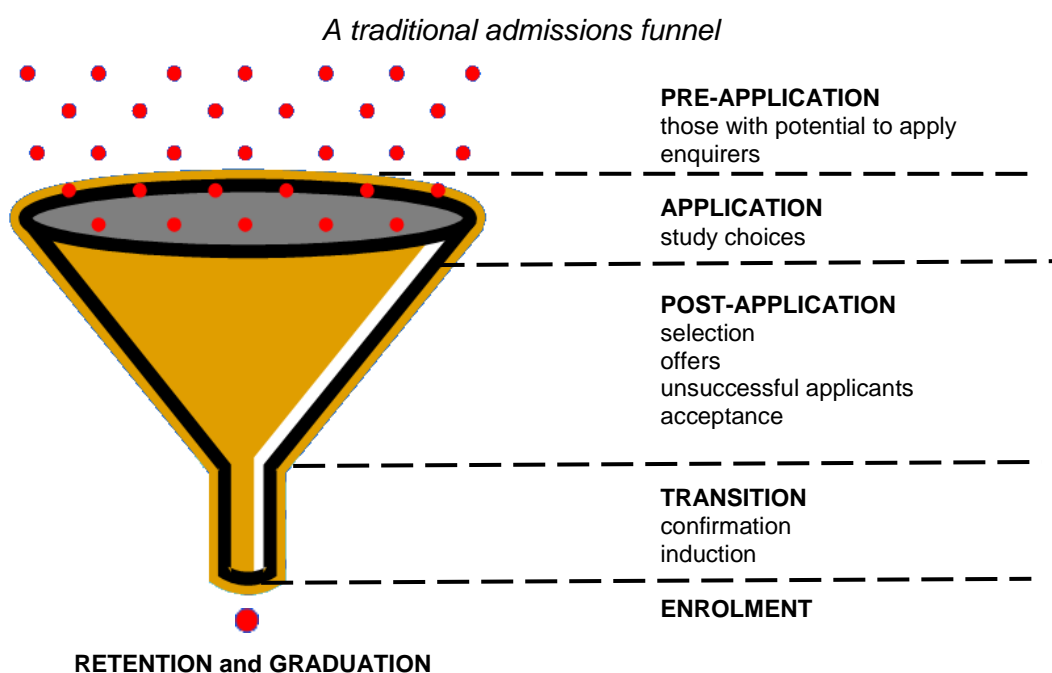
“A student's experience of university does not begin at the moment they step onto campus at the beginning of October, and it does not end when they are shaking the hand of the Vice-Chancellor at graduation. The early relationship between student and university is important during the applications and admissions process, in preparing students for university life, and to initiate their engagement with and attitudes towards their university in the best way possible. A student's experience of university can stretch back even further through effective HE engagement with schools and colleges.”

Such a holistic view of an individual's engagement with and contribution to an institution, tying the experience from pre-higher education through to post-graduation, means that the applicant experience must be recognised as a mutually-beneficial and enduring relationship that should be developed from an institution's mission through a strategic enrolment management approach.

Jack Maguire, generally cited as the principal developer of enrolment management in the USA, described it as, “A process that brings together often disparate functions having to do with recruiting, funding, tracking, retaining and replacing students as they move toward, within and away from the University.”<sup>4</sup> It constitutes a co-ordinated approach to managing both the quantity and quality of students and recognises that interaction with potential students before they apply represents the enactment of any institution's mission to preserve its vitality through enrolling and retaining students. It therefore maps alongside the overarching stages of the applicant experience (pre-application; application; post-application; transition) and throughout the student experience including retention, completion and post-completion.

Schwartz's belief in, "Equal opportunity for all individuals, regardless of background, to gain admission to a course suited to their ability and aspirations,"<sup>1</sup> is a key statement in defining the applicant experience, because fair admissions is mutually beneficial to both applicant and institution. It opens up access to an increased number and wider range of potential students and, through transparent and professionally applied practices, raises awareness and understanding of appropriate choices, thus facilitating transition into and retention within suitable higher education studies.

**The Admissions Funnel** - Traditional models of recruitment in the USA have adapted a marketing view of a 'funnel', through which ever-diminishing numbers distil down to those who enrol. This model has gained increasing awareness within the UK, particularly with the improved development of Customer Relationship Management systems within higher education, and is an expedient representation of understanding a fair applicant experience.



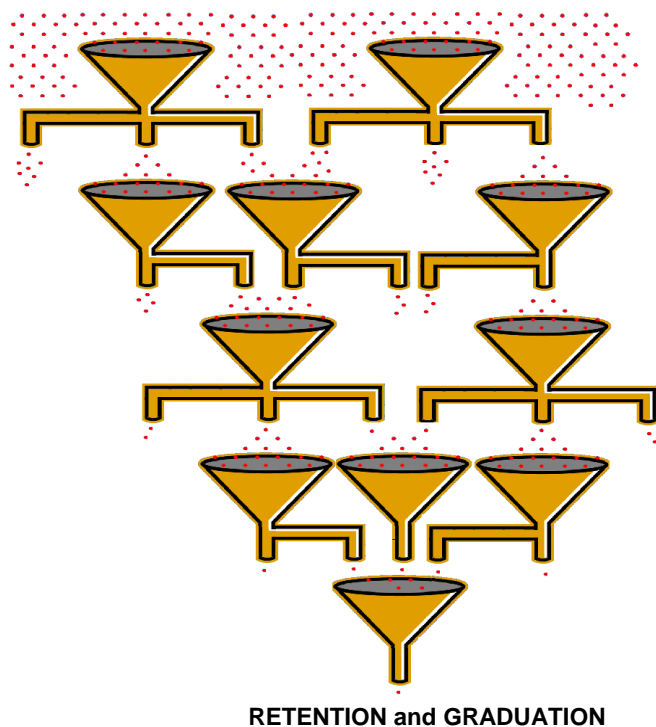
This is clearly a simplified view of the process, as the most important factors are down to what goes on inside the funnel to distil the number down, either intentionally or accidentally. In this respect it would be best to think of the funnel as having three main limiters: firstly, like adding water, some may be deliberately drawn from the catchment area into the top of the funnel whilst others may miss it altogether; secondly, like a sieve, applicants may 'escape' out of the funnel at any point; thirdly, like adding filters, applicants may be refined or prohibited from progressing further. These limiters can be used positively or have a detrimental impact, depending on the professionalism of those applying them, the transparency and availability of information and the awareness of the impact any limiters have on an individual.

Although helpful in providing a simplistic representation of admissions, thinking of the process as a single funnel may not capture all the processes involved in some institutions. For example, applicants may enter via numerous routes (e.g. via Clearing; direct enrolment; transfer) or may bypass some of the filters. Additionally, the types of filters and the means of attracting and considering individuals may vary across different groups (e.g. incentives for widening participation; local outreach). A multi-funnel, or 'funnels within funnels', model might better describe the process for

individual institutions, and indeed models within the USA are now moving towards such an approach<sup>5</sup>.

Although anything from the point an applicant becomes a student onwards (enrolment, retention and graduation) technically falls outside of the applicant experience, this student experience is the intended outcome and therefore base measure of how successful the admissions process has been and what it should be aiming towards. Any admissions or recruitment activity that does not relate forwards to this key character of the institution is working without purpose, and so it is essential that there is communication and common aim between all staff working at all stages of the funnel.

*An example of multi-funnel admissions*



**PRE-APPLICATION**

potential applicants who may engage with HE (enquirers), or engage with other advisors, or miss any engagement

**APPLICATION**

those potential applicants who submit an application either directly to each institution or through an intermediary (e.g. UCAS)

**POST-APPLICATION**

applicants going through varied selection processes with some being made offers and some accepting those offers

**TRANSITION**

unconditional acceptances proceed; conditional acceptances are reconsidered at confirmation; adjustment and clearing applicants enter consideration; induction activities prepare potential students for entering HE

**ENROLMENT**

**RETENTION and GRADUATION**

A complete mapping of the process would have far more funnels, varying for each institution, but would provide a clear picture of the points at which different staff could co-ordinate activities. Such a co-ordinated approach to the applicant experience would be good practice to the benefit of both applicants and higher education providers.

Each of these stages (pre-application; application; post-application; transition) will be examined in more detail by SPA and will consider contemporary national recommendations in these areas alongside examples of good practice. Those findings will be published to help build a complete understanding of a mutually beneficial applicant experience.

Dan Shaffer  
SPA  
June 2009

## References

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and 'Fair Admissions to higher education: a review of the implementation of the Schwartz Report principles three years on', 2008 <http://www.spa.ac.uk/schwartz-report-review08.html>
2. House of Commons Public Accounts Committee Fourth Report of Session 2008-9 <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmpublicacc/226/9780215526557.pdf>
3. 'Enhancing the Student Experience – Policy Report', 1994 Group of universities, November 2007 <http://www.1994group.ac.uk/studentexperience.php>
4. Boston College 'Bridge' magazine, 1976, according to J Black (Ed), 2001. *The Strategic Enrollment Management Revolution*. AACRAO: Washington, DC
5. J Maguire, L Butler et al, 2008. *EM=C<sup>2</sup> A New Formula for Enrollment Management*. Trafford Publishing: Victoria, BC