



SPA Applicant Experience briefing:

Summary definition and key recommendations

August 2017

This document is designed to be a quick reference resource for staff in higher education providers (HEPs) who wish to summarise the applicant experience and incorporate the basic principles in to their work. It includes a [summary](#) definition of the applicant experience and overarching [recommendations](#).

Definition

An early relationship between prospective students and universities and colleges helps to prepare students for life in an HE provider and shapes attitudes towards higher education. HE providers have put significant operational and financial efforts into raising aspirations and encouraging early interest in HE study, particularly amongst those least likely to progress to university. This effort is then replicated to support these students in their transition and adjustment to HE life.

Historically, there has been a gap between widening participation (WP) initiatives and transition that may have been overlooked or under-resourced, the admissions stages, and this is where the applicant experience rests.

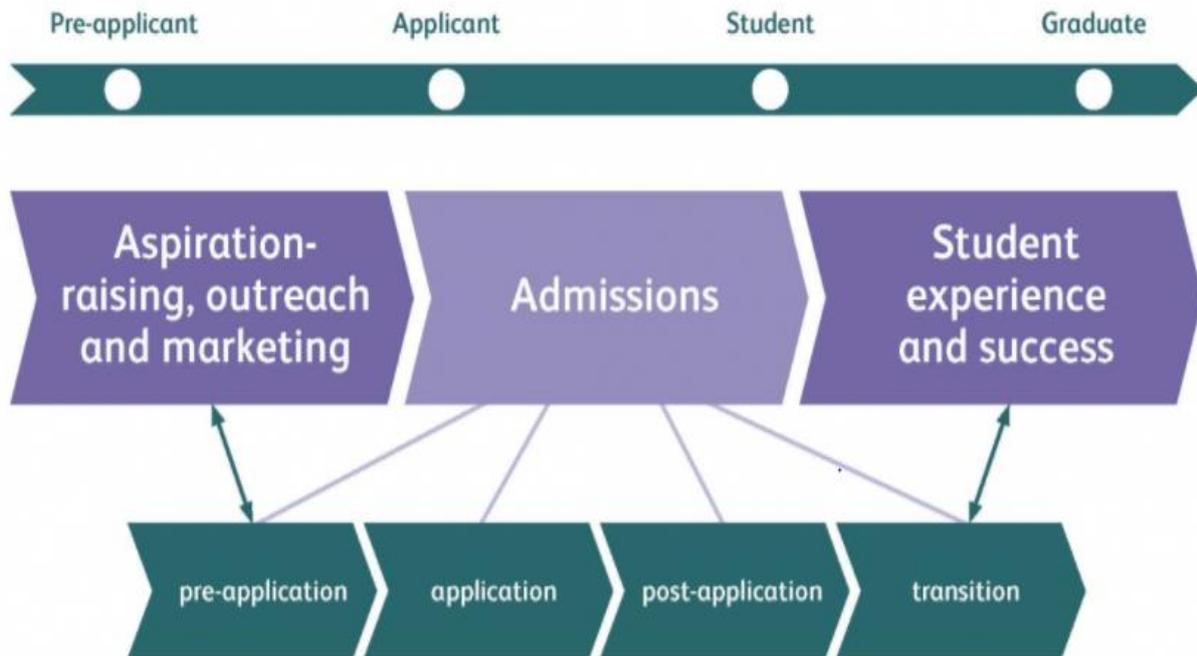
The applicant experience encompasses all the opportunities or points of interaction between HE providers and a potential student, and can be broken down in to four distinct (but connected) stages. These engagements can start before a learner has even considered higher education, and can influence whether an individual chooses to apply, becomes a student and effectively transitions to higher education. The interactions at each stage of the applicant experience should not be in isolation, and a joined-up approach is key.

The stages of the applicant experience can be summarised as follows:

- **Pre-application:** Covers individuals' consideration of higher education study and all activities and interactions prior to any commitment to commence an application for the given admissions entry cycle, including raising aspirations, widening access, understanding reasons for nonparticipation and forging links with suitable prospects.
- **Application:** Covers all activities from the point a prospective student 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.
- **Post-application:** 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.

- **Transition:** Covers all post-confirmation activities, from the point an applicant's place has been confirmed through to (and potentially beyond) the commencement of higher education studies.



The timing of each stage can vary, both between HE providers and between individual applicants. Furthermore, many engagements can cross-over the whole applicant experience, and the principles may be replicated in different stages. It is good practice to consider how any initiative could connect across the applicant experience to ensure that support is maintained and enhanced through to transition and beyond.

The applicant experience strategy is about engaging with applicants through effective information, advice and guidance. 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 a higher education provider. 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.

Conversely, a poor applicant experience is inherently detrimental to both the applicant and the higher education provider. It can create and perpetuate barriers to higher education and disengages learners and their influencers (teachers, parents, advisers). A lack of engagement can create a distinct mismatch between a learner's expectations and student experience. A poor applicant experience can also have implications for transition, retention and overall attainment.

Applicants are more than just passengers and HE providers are more than just destinations, therefore we do not consider it a journey. The applicant experience strategy is about engaging with applicants, through effective information, advice and guidance.

Full good practice guides for each stage of the applicant experience can be found here:

- [Complete guide to the applicant experience](#)
- [Pre-application](#)
- [Application](#)
- [Post-application](#)
- [Transition](#)

Recommendations

SPA encourages HE providers to consider how to provide a good experience both within each stage and by linking the stages together to ensure a coherent end-to-end, joined up approach. It is important to identify the processes within those stages to understand which points to target engagement and to appreciate the potential impact on points in later stages.

Detailed recommendations were identified during the research phase of each stage of the applicant experience and these are available [on the SPA website](#), however the majority can be adapted and applied to any, or all as part of an overarching engagement strategy.

SPA recommends HE providers consider the following to support a good applicant experience:

1. Engage with prospective applicants as soon as possible in their individual applicant experience.

Every applicant is different and their experiences and timescales will vary. Some applicants will engage very early in the pre-application stages, while some may not directly engage with a HEP until much later. The timing and scale of interactions can be the difference between a good and poor applicant (and subsequently student) experience.

A positive early relationship between a learner and an institution is important during the admissions process to initiate and shape attitudes towards higher education and their chosen institution and lays the foundations for a positive student experience.

2. Identify and coordinate engagements across the institution, considering the purpose of each engagement.

Learners will be subject to numerous interactions and engagements throughout their experience, from the point they are considering higher education through to transition, student life and beyond. These interactions can come from any number of parties, both internal to the institution and external.

A coordinated approach across all concerned parties in an institution is key to minimise the risk of disengagement, for example if an applicant cannot find all the information that they are looking for or is overwhelmed with similar information from multiple sources. Mapping and coordinating the approach across all concerned parties within an institution will allow practitioners to identify the most suitable points of interaction across the admissions process. This should include any optional engagements and those based on specific applicant circumstances (e.g. disability support engagements). Automated messages should be accompanied by signposting, help text and contact details for experts, to allow

and encourage applicants to interact directly.

The purpose of each engagement should be carefully considered (e.g. can a single engagement serve multiple purposes, or has an engagement need already been met at a prior stage of the applicant experience) and the resources available can then be targeted and distributed appropriately. Engagements from intermediaries such as UCAS, should also be considered and plotted, however institutions should be mindful that a generalised indirect message may not always be a suitable substitute for direct engagement from a HE provider

3. Use clear and transparent policies and procedures to maximise engagement.

Preparation is vital, both for a successful admissions operation and for learners making choices and submitting their applications. Appropriate information, advice and guidance should be published as soon as possible to ensure transparency and to enable prospective applicants to make informed decisions on suitability. Application processes and materials should be regularly reviewed, to ensure that they are current, fit for purpose and do not unduly discriminate against any potential applicant groups. Any supporting information, advice and guidance required to complete a suitable application should be readily accessible.

Clear policies and procedures should lead to better engagement, better quality applications and enhance the institutions ability to identify the most suitable applicants to the right courses. Consistency in published information (e.g. UCAS Entry Profiles and institution-own online course information) and directly provided will ensure the quality, transparency and relevance of accessible information, and broaden the opportunity for potential applicants from a wide range of backgrounds to have a similar level of information, regardless of any variation in access to other advisors or engagement activities.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) guidelines for HE on consumer protection law apply to the provision of information to prospective applicants, therefore ensure that staff are aware of the limits of information that they can give. SPA have produced [several resources](#) to help HEPs to comply with CMA guidelines and UCAS have produced some information for [teachers and advisers](#).

4. Identify and mitigate risks of non-engagement.

When presented with numerous engagement opportunities from multiple sources, and sometimes within a relatively short time frame, applicants are at risk of being disengaged both with an individual institution and higher education in general. Applicants may become disengaged at any stage, resulting in missed information, a poor applicant experience and potentially a complete drop out from their experience.

By carefully considering the purpose and frequency of each engagement, mapping engagements across the applicant experience and making it clear to applicants where they are required to actively engage, HE providers should be able to identify potential areas of disengagement and put measures in place to mitigate this.

5. Monitor and review the success of engagement activity at all stages of the applicant experience, and use intelligence to inform future strategies.

Engagement should have an associated measure of success, and applicant experience strategies should be monitored and reviewed to ensure they are fit for purpose. Any changes in institutional strategy will likely lead to changes in applicant experience strategies.

Where possible, engagements and interactions should be tracked through an integrated customer relationship management system. Surveys at any stage of the applicant/student experience can also be used to gain insight in to engagement activities undertaken. Data available from external companies may provide useful insight in to prospective student demographics, geography and the appropriate method of engagement/promotion within an area.

This invaluable intelligence can then be used to inform research in to the type and extent of engagements experienced by an applicant/cohort and accurately evaluate the success and impact of initiatives. It could also help identify any underrepresented/under resourced groups or activities. and inform an institution's future engagement planning, support strategies and approaches to transition/retention.

We would like to gather case studies and good practice examples to continually build and update this work and welcome any new submissions via our [website](#).

Further information

The complete work on the applicant experience is available on the [SPA website](#). The [SPA guide to the applicant experience \(2011\)](#) incorporates all published information and additional resources from our two-year research project in to the applicant experience. The guide defines the applicant experience in detail, and continues to underpin the work that SPA does.

As a continuation of this work SPA has launched a call for evidence, looking to compile case studies, testimonials and examples from HE providers who have used the applicant experience to develop and improve policies, procedures and processes in and related to admissions.

SPA is keen to hear directly from admissions practitioners and anyone involved in any part of the applicant experience on the following areas:

- How has the applicant experience been used to improve admissions policies and procedures?
- Has the applicant experience work helped to improve retention and the overall student experience at a HE provider?
- Any examples of good practice, either specific to one stage of the applicant experience or an overarching example.

Any examples, large or small would be appreciated, via enquiries@spa.ac.uk.

SPA
September 2017