The Applicant Experience

www.spa.ac.uk/applicant-experience
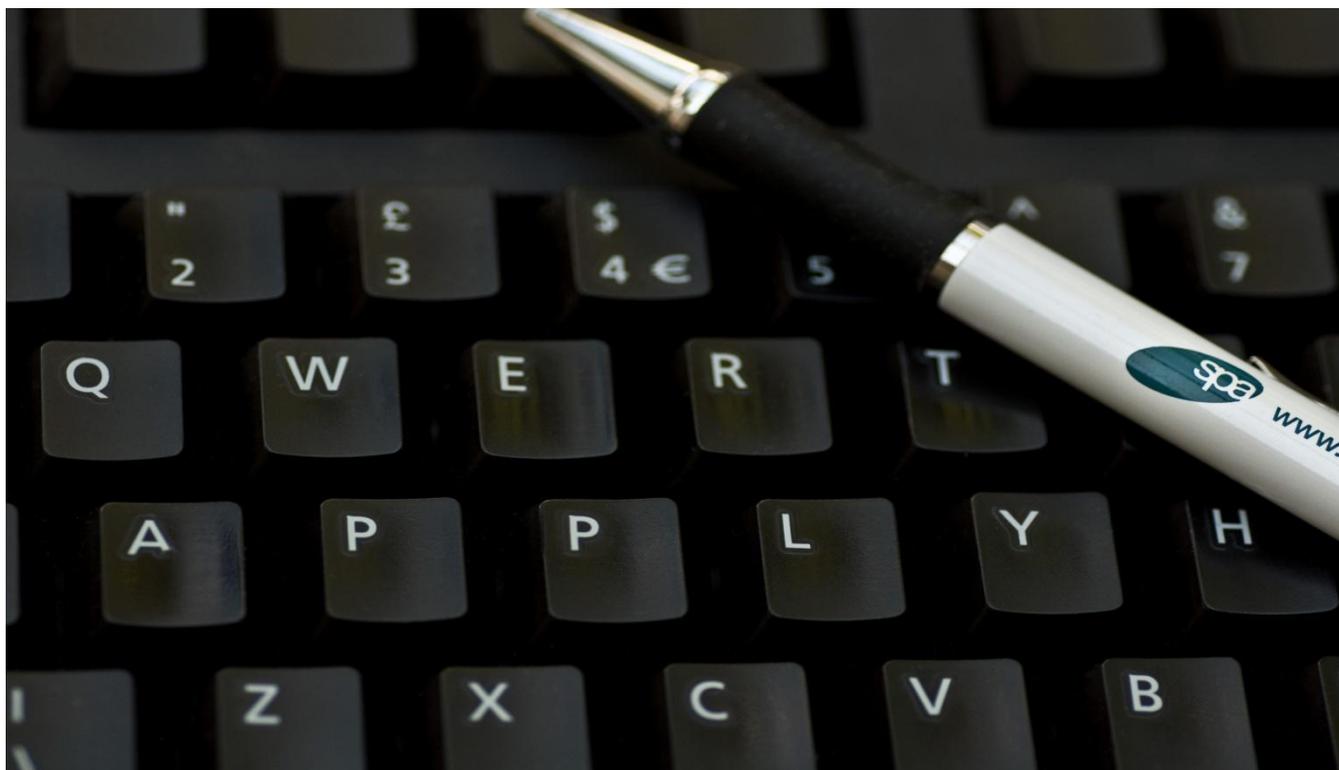
Dan Shaffer

Senior Project Officer

Supporting Professionalism in Admissions

Tel: 01242 544895

e-mail: d.shaffer@spa.ac.uk

website: www.spa.ac.uk

Contents

Chapter 1
Defining the Applicant Experience

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.

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[1]. However, according to a House of Commons Public Accounts Committee report[2], 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*[3]*,* 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."
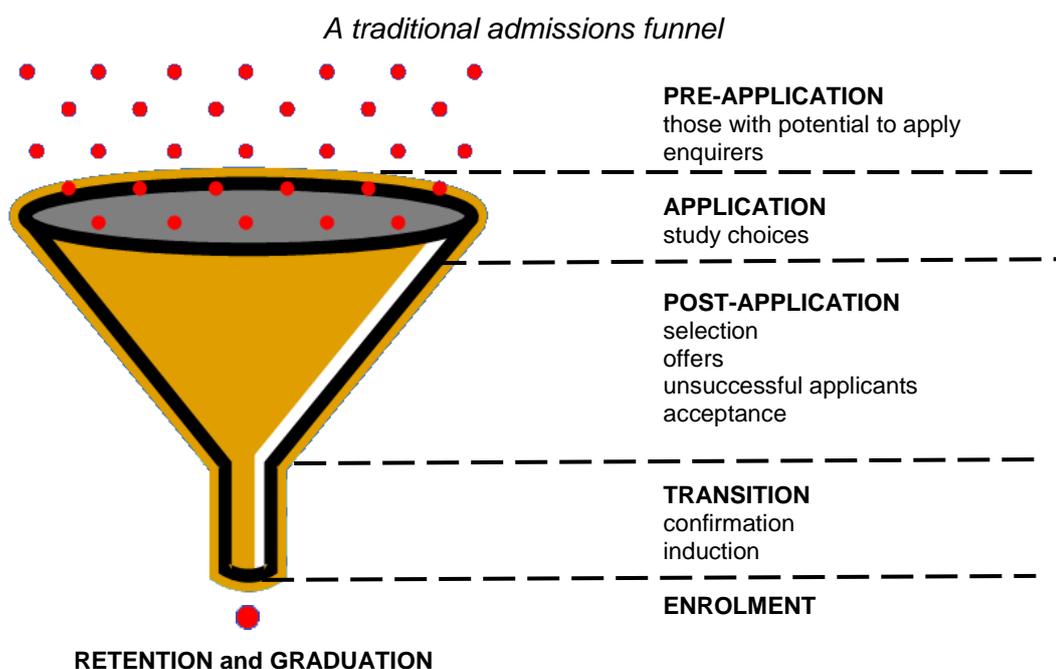
Such a holistic view of an individual's engagement with and contribution to an institution, tying the experience from pre-higher education through to post-graduation, means that the applicant experience must be recognised as a mutually-beneficial and enduring relationship that should be developed from 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."[4] 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,"[1] 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, thorough 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.

A traditional admissions funnel

PRE-APPLICATION
those with potential to apply
enquirers

APPLICATION
study choices

POST-APPLICATION
selection
offers
unsuccessful applicants
acceptance

TRANSITION
confirmation
induction

ENROLMENT

RETENTION and GRADUATION

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 by-pass 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[5].

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
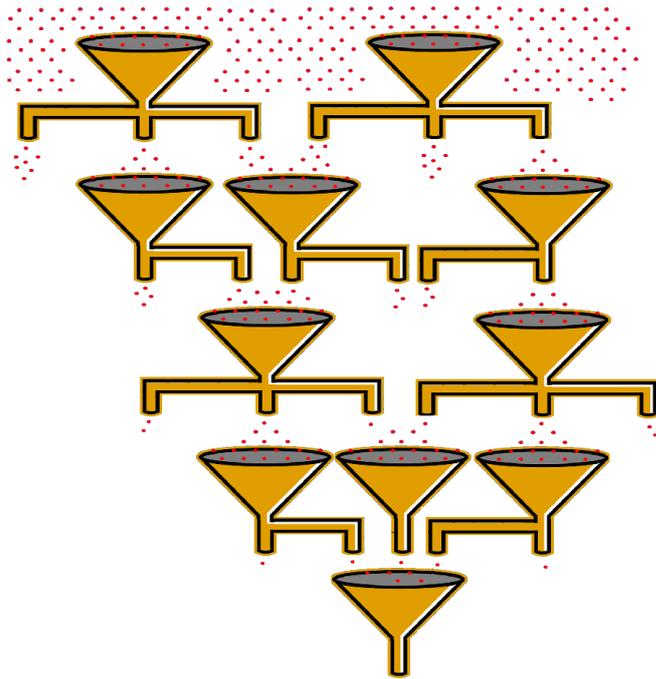
RETENTION and GRADUATION

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

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.

References

1. *'Fair Admissions to HE: Recommendations for Good Practice'* - the Schwartz report, 2004
   http://www.admissions-review.org.uk/downloads/finalreport.pdf
   and *'Fair Admissions to higher education: a review of the implementation of the Schwartz Report principles three years on',* 2008 www.spa.ac.uk/resources/schwartz-report-review

2. House of Commons Public Accounts Committee Fourth Report of Session 2008-9
   http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmpubacc/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=C² A New Formula for Enrollment Management.* Trafford Publishing: Victoria, BC

A traditional admissions funnel

PRE-APPLICATION
those with potential to apply
enquirers

APPLICATION
study choices

POST-APPLICATION
selection
offers
unsuccessful applicants
acceptance

TRANSITION
confirmation
induction

ENROLMENT

RETENTION and GRADUATION

The Applicant Experience

Models of recruitment may be represented using an adapted marketing view of a 'funnel', through which ever-diminishing numbers distil down to those who enrol, although more contemporary models from the USA adopt a multi-funnel view to better represent the variety of routes into and out of the recruitment process. Although such models only provide a very simplistic representation of the process, they do illustrate the importance of co-ordinated activity if an institution is to accurately monitor and control recruitment. They are therefore expedient representations for planning a fair applicant experience.

Institutional Review

Using either a traditional or multi-funnel representation (or both) as a guide, map your recruitment activity against the stages from pre-application through to transition and consider:

1. What interaction takes place?
2. How is this monitored?
3. How is information passed on to other stages to ensure a smooth flow for identified prospects with potential, support for suitable prospects in need, or other initiatives to attract and retain only students with suitable ability and aspirations?

An example of multi-funnel admissions
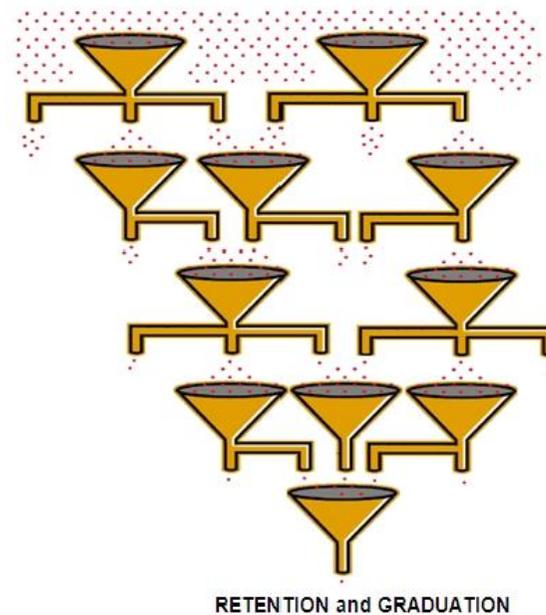
PRE-APPLICATION
potential applicants who may engage with HE (enquirers), or engage with other advisors, or miss any engagement

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
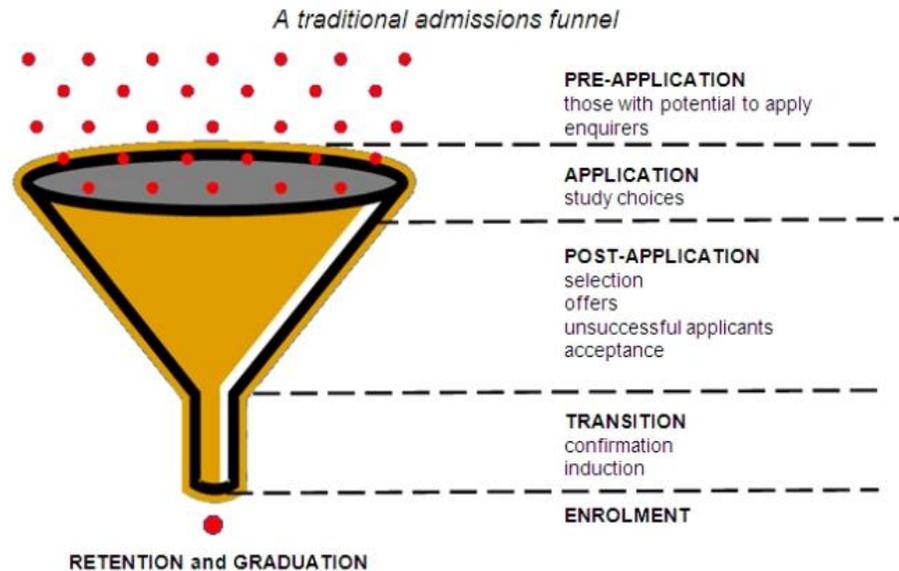
ENROLMENT

RETENTION and GRADUATION

spa
Supporting Professionalism in Admissions

8

Resource 1.2 – Admissions Process Flowchart (via UCAS)

PRE-APPLICATION | APPLICATION | POST-APPLICATION | TRANSITION

Early engagement with HE
Raising HE awareness and aspirations

Preparatory engagement with HE
Considering HE study

Applicant engagement with HE
Entering HE study

Pre-HE academic / vocational / experiential learning

Check course and institution data available via UCAS

Possible external admissions tests required

Seek alternative Firm place via Clearing

Additional choice via Extra

Information, advice & guidance from school/college, careers advisors, friends, family

Compact/Progression schemes

Institution feedback to any unsuccessful applicants

New Firm place reconsiders application

Unsuccessful at new Firm place

Read UCAS on-line information on the admissions process and deadlines carefully

Reference added (usually by school/ college)

All choices unsuccessful

Conditions not met

Academic support (e.g. finalised module structure; timetables; personal/subject tutor information, pre-sessional and in-sessional mediatory education)

Gain background understanding of HE and what it offers

Research potential choices

Complete application to UCAS with up to 5 choices

UCAS sends copy of application to each choice

Institutions consider applications against their internal admissions criteria

Institutions notify UCAS of decision, who inform applicant

Decline all choices

Unsuccessful at Firm place; Insurance place becomes new Firm

Conditions met or exceeded

Experience HE environment (visit an HEI; HE 'taster' modules; summer schools on HE campus)

Visit potential choices at open days, review their websites, ask any questions

UCAS sends acknowledgement for applicant to check

Possible requests for additional information

Conditional and/or Unconditional offers

Firm place reconsiders application

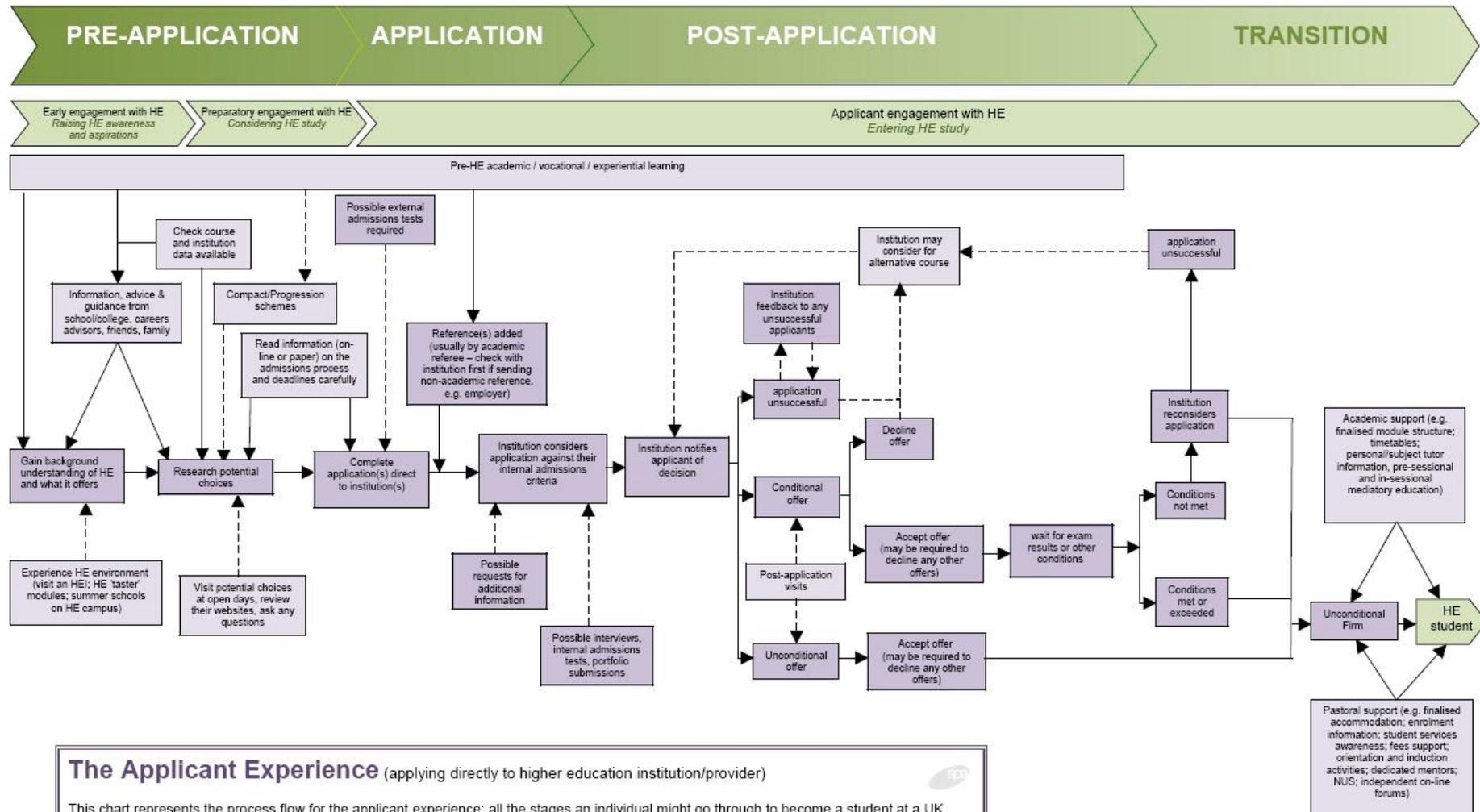Unconditional Firm

HE student

Possible interviews, internal admissions tests, portfolio submissions

Post-application visits

Accept 1 firm and 1 insurance place, declining all others

Conditions not met

Conditional Firm wait for exam results or other conditions

Conditions met

Conditions exceeded

Pastoral support (e.g. finalised accommodation; enrolment information; student services awareness; fees support; orientation and induction activities; dedicated mentors; NUS; independent on-line forums)

No new acceptance; applicant stays with original Firm place

Applicant chooses to enter adjustment

New institution accepts applicant

The Applicant Experience (via UCAS)

This chart represents the process flow for the applicant experience: all the stages an individual might go through to become a full-time undergraduate student at a UK higher education institution.

The green areas denote the sequential stages of the applicant experience, whilst purple areas denote the process steps occurring within, and overlapping, those stages. Each step in the process is an opportunity for applicant and institution to interact: the quality of that interaction will dictate whether or not the most suitable students for institutions progress onto the most appropriate courses for those applicants. Co-ordinated activity across all steps is therefore vital in managing the flow of potential into higher education. Pale purple areas do not constitute essential steps within the application process, but are elements that may enhance interaction within a step and enrich the applicant experience.
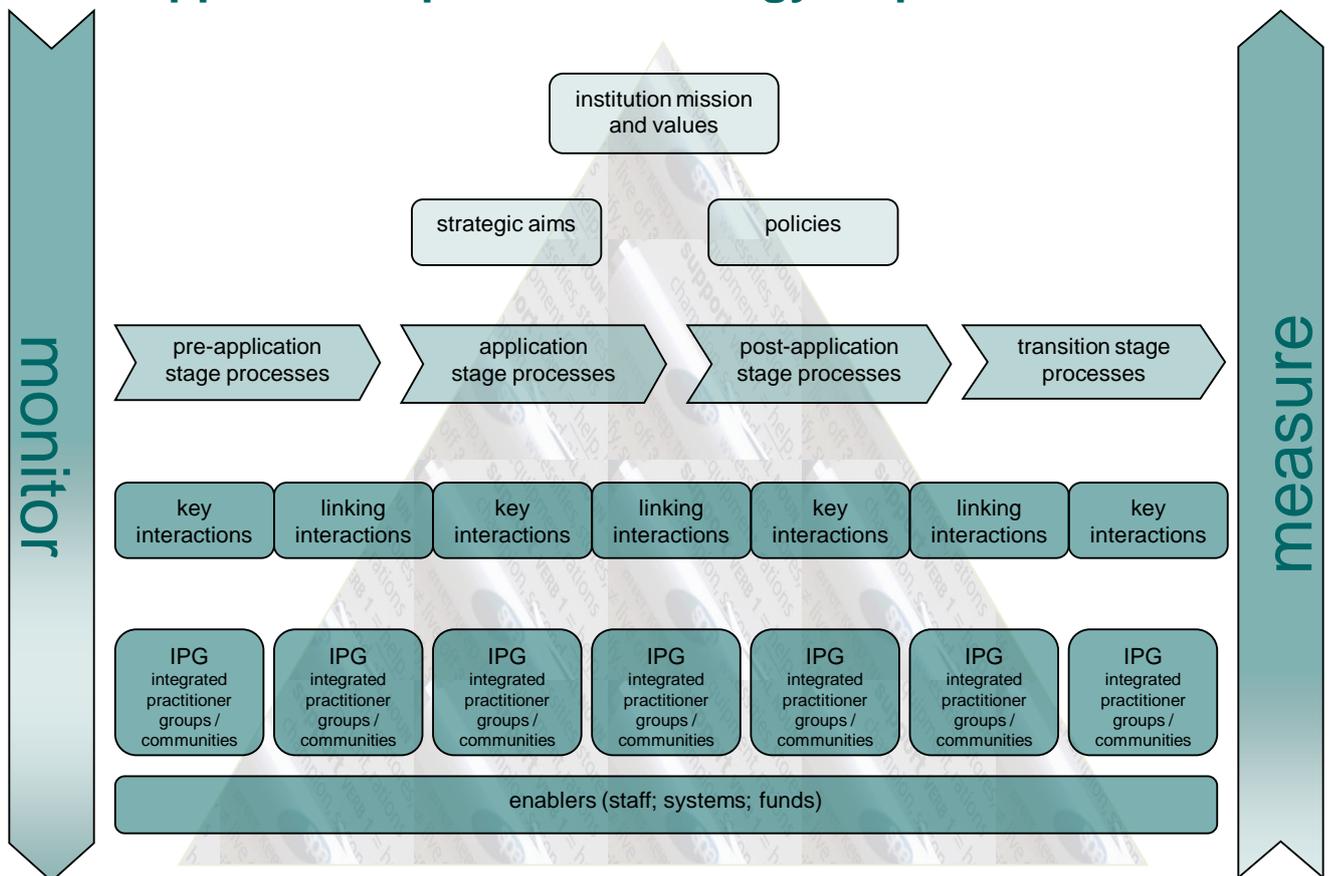
Individual institutions may wish to map their own processes against this flow chart to review where staff with different responsibilities can best co-ordinate efforts to maximise the potential of attracting, nurturing and recruiting the most appropriate students to succeed at their institution.

Resource 1.3 – Admissions Process Flowchart (via direct application)

PRE-APPLICATION | APPLICATION | POST-APPLICATION | TRANSITION

Early engagement with HE
Raising HE awareness and aspirations

Preparatory engagement with HE
Considering HE study

Applicant engagement with HE
Entering HE study

Pre-HE academic / vocational / experiential learning

Check course and institution data available

Possible external admissions tests required

Institution may consider for alternative course

application unsuccessful

Information, advice & guidance from school/college, careers advisors, friends, family

Compact/Progression schemes

Institution feedback to any unsuccessful applicants

Read information (on-line or paper) on the admissions process and deadlines carefully

Reference(s) added (usually by academic referee – check with institution first if sending non-academic reference, e.g. employer)

application unsuccessful

Institution reconsiders application

Academic support (e.g. finalised module structure; timetables; personal/subject tutor information, pre-sessional and in-sessional mediatory education)

Gain background understanding of HE and what it offers

Research potential choices

Complete application(s) direct to institution(s)

Institution considers application against their internal admissions criteria

Institution notifies applicant of decision

Decline offer

Conditional offer

Conditions not met

Experience HE environment (visit an HEI; HE 'taster' modules; summer schools on HE campus)

Visit potential choices at open days, review their websites, ask any questions

Possible requests for additional information

Accept offer (may be required to decline any other offers)

wait for exam results or other conditions

Post-application visits

Conditions met or exceeded

Possible interviews, internal admissions tests, portfolio submissions

Unconditional offer

Accept offer (may be required to decline any other offers)

Unconditional Firm

HE student

Pastoral support (e.g. finalised accommodation; enrolment information; student services awareness; fees support; orientation and induction activities; dedicated mentors; NUS; independent on-line forums)

The Applicant Experience (applying directly to higher education institution/provider)

This chart represents the process flow for the applicant experience: all the stages an individual might go through to become a student at a UK higher education institution.

The green areas denote the sequential stages of the applicant experience, whilst purple areas denote the process steps occurring within, and overlapping, those stages. Each step in the process is an opportunity for applicant and institution to interact: the quality of that interaction will dictate whether or not the most suitable students for institutions progress onto the most appropriate courses for those applicants. Co-ordinated activity across all steps is therefore vital in managing the flow of potential into higher education. Pale purple areas do not constitute essential steps within the application process, but are elements that may enhance interaction within a step and enrich the applicant experience.

Individual institutions may wish to map their own processes against this flow chart to review where staff with different responsibilities can best co-ordinate efforts to maximise the potential of attracting, nurturing and recruiting the most appropriate students to succeed at their institution.

spa
Supporting Professionalism in Admissions
draft version July 2009

Chapter 2

Designing your Applicant Experience Strategy Map

SPA's Applicant Experience Strategy Map was developed in line with its definition of the applicant experience and principles of good practice. It has been modelled through engagement with recruitment and admissions practitioners and it incorporates elements from existing strategies within the UK (notably specific influence from Glasgow Caledonian University's 'Moving Forward' project and Newcastle University's Widening Participation Strategy map).

The Applicant Experience Strategy Map

monitor · measure

- institution mission and values
- strategic aims
- policies

| pre-application stage processes | application stage processes | post-application stage processes | transition stage processes |

| key interactions | linking interactions | key interactions | linking interactions | key interactions | linking interactions | key interactions |

| IPG integrated practitioner groups / communities | IPG integrated practitioner groups / communities | IPG integrated practitioner groups / communities | IPG integrated practitioner groups / communities | IPG integrated practitioner groups / communities | IPG integrated practitioner groups / communities | IPG integrated practitioner groups / communities |

enablers (staff; systems; funds)

The strategy map is composed of 'blocks of productivity'. Each one would need to be filled with the actual input and output detail for your institution and it would be for the institution to decide, based on its own mission and values, what content is relevant to the strategy and what weighting to apply to different blocks. You should also keep an open mind to incorporating any innovative extra blocks that may be specific to your approach.

If you already have a comprehensive student experience strategy map, you should first consider whether an applicant experience strategy is best absorbed as a key component of that student strategy or whether there are any operational or tactical advantages to approaching it separately. If the latter, attention should be given to ensure synergy between the applicant and student experience strategies. The Transition stage is the most appropriate link between the two, but there may be other connections to consider. For example, if your student strategy has specific widening participation benchmarks you may need to link to early engagement activities in the pre-application stage.

Some additional links may become apparent as the mapping process develops, so it's best to approach development of such a strategy map by considering how the blocks are pieced together.

The Applicant Experience Strategy Map - boundaries

All good project management is based on firstly defining the boundaries of the project: objective; time; budget. This ensures that anything falling within the project is achievable and anything that cannot be met within those boundaries is either excluded or early approval is given to shift the boundaries and permit more to be achieved. Each block that is added to the strategy map should be checked against these requirements to ensure it fits and can be achieved. Most institutions will already have a well-defined project-management structure to follow.

Define objectives / outcomes: these should come from your own institution mission statement and existing strategies and policies. However, if any have not been reviewed in some time it would be advisable to do so to ensure terms and aims are consistent. Any conflict within existing strategies or policies should be resolved before the applicant experience strategy is implemented.

Define timescales / cycle: the application cycle may form a readily-identifiable rolling timescale. However, care may be needed and flexibility built-in if resources will be needed over a longer period of time. A paper prospectus, for example, will have a defined period for development and publication within the previous admissions cycle, but

an electronic prospectus may need to be reviewed and updated beyond publication and throughout the current cycle.

Define budget / resources: senior management buy-in is essential for an applicant experience strategy to succeed, particularly as resources will derive from many different departments and areas of budgetary responsibility.

The Applicant Experience Strategy Map - process
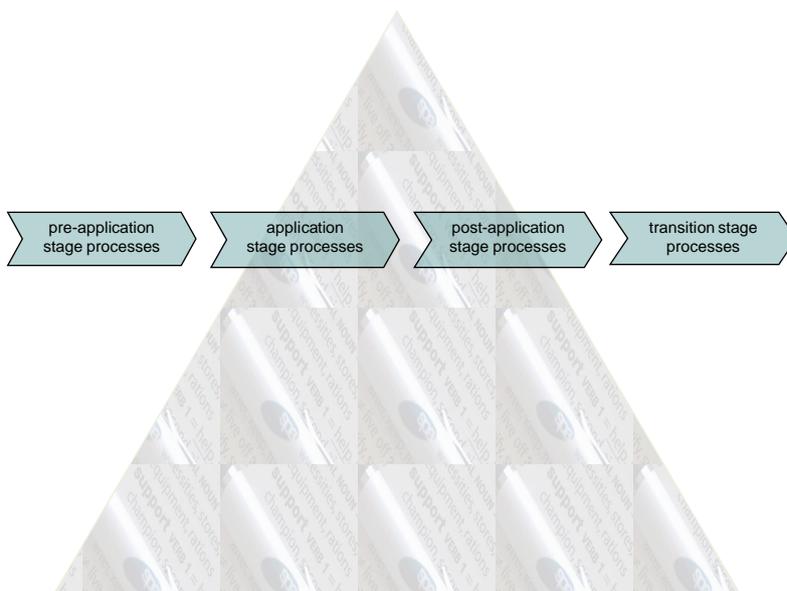
The application cycle may be broken down into four stages of the applicant experience. It is important to identify the processes within those stages in order to understand which points to target engagement and to appreciate the potential impact on points in later stages. SPA has designed flowcharts detailing these processes for both UCAS and direct entrants to HE, which are available as resources in chapter 1.

The Applicant Experience Strategy Map – top-down influencers
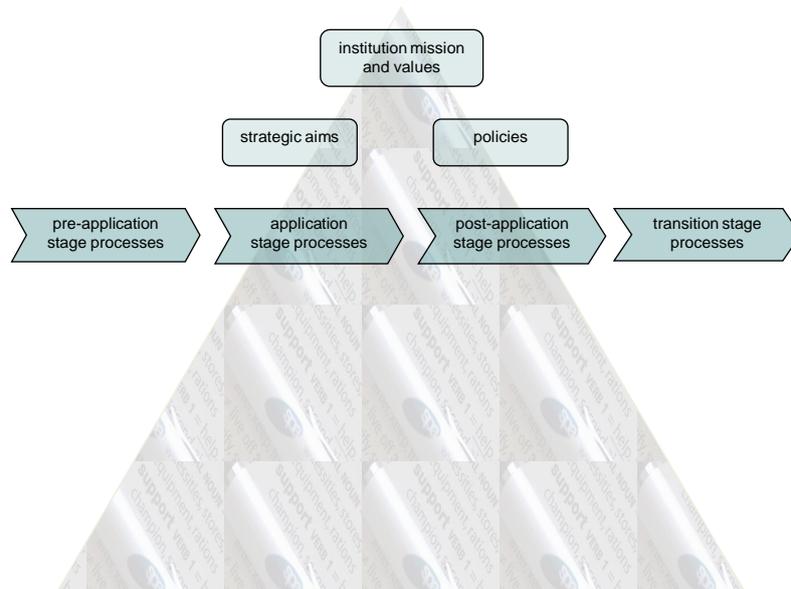
The strategy should always stem from the institution mission and intrinsic character of the institutional community. This drives the strategic aims and policies and sets the purpose behind the strategy. Without these as objectives there would be no direction to any approach, no benchmark for success and no justification for performing any action. The admissions policy is crucial, but by no means the only policy to influence the applicant experience, so you should carefully consider what other institutional aims and policies should be included. Equality, Widening Participation, Marketing, Accommodation, Enrolment, Student Experience and Teaching and Learning are some but not necessarily all of the areas whose aims and policies would need to be included.

The Applicant Experience Strategy Map – bottom-up influencers
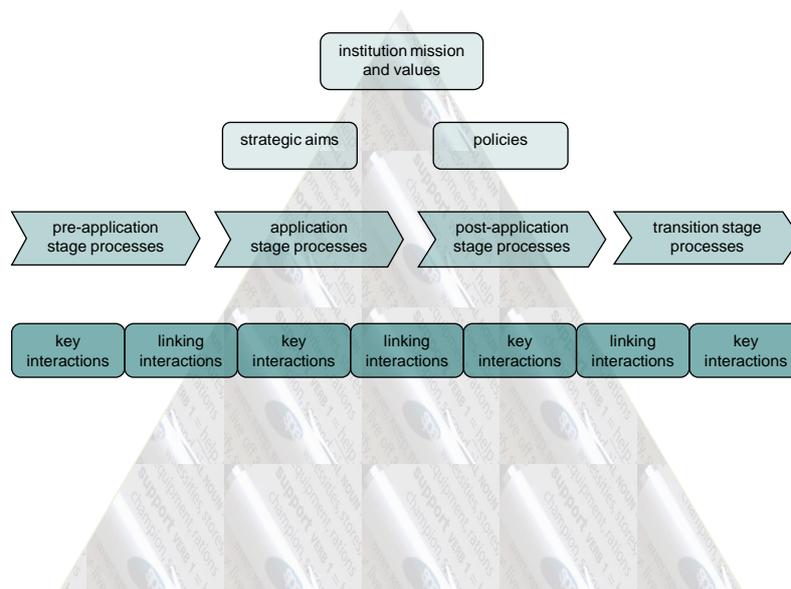
The key interactions, or activities, will determine the nature of the experience, as they will be the points at which the institution and applicant engage. These may be direct engagement such as open days, interviews or summer schools, or indirect ones such as prospectuses, web-publicity or talking to advisors. Plotting existing activities against each stage will help structure those interactions, put them into the context of the wider purpose, facilitate targeting and tracking and highlight where gaps in support exist, where aims and policies are not being supported by activities and where new avenues for engagement may exist.

However, consideration should also be given to linking interactions. These may be similar to key interactions, but are ones specifically designed to bridge the gap between stages and facilitate the smooth transition of applicants from one stage to the next. Alternatively, they may be more internalised activities to ensure applicants who engaged with a key interaction in one stage are tracked through the process into the next and that staff involved in those stages share knowledge and intelligence.

The Applicant Experience Strategy Map – bottom-up influencers
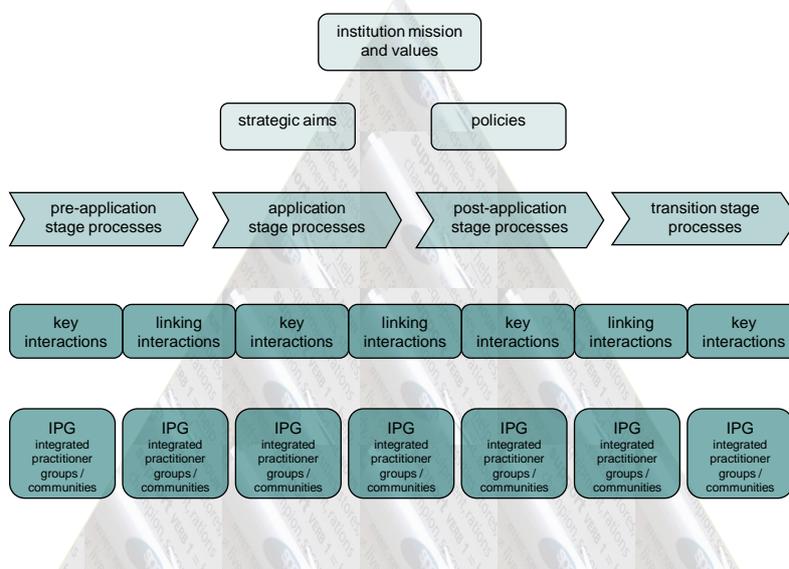
All identified interactions will require the best people to perform them. Integrated practitioner groups (IPGs) constitute communities of experts to oversee, guide and shape activities in the strategy and to identify where improvements need to be made, where new interactions can be delivered and when existing ones have run their course or are no longer fit for purpose. These communities may be formally structured and longstanding, as with committees, or could be ad-hoc teams drawn together to deliver a specific task. The structures themselves should be determined by what best fits the operational style of the institution and the requirements of the task itself and you can call them whatever best suits your existing conventions.

They should not be limited to or confined by segregated departmental roles, but should be wholly inclusive, making best use of the most relevant practitioners needed to deliver the tasks. Each IPG should have a remit to consider who the relevant stakeholders are and identity communication routes to ensure they remain informed and involved. Some IPGs may cover a portfolio of activities that spans more than one stage, or be oversight groups that co-ordinate, review or approve the work of several IPGs. Therefore, lines of reporting should also be included in IPG remits.

The Applicant Experience Strategy Map – bottom-up influencers
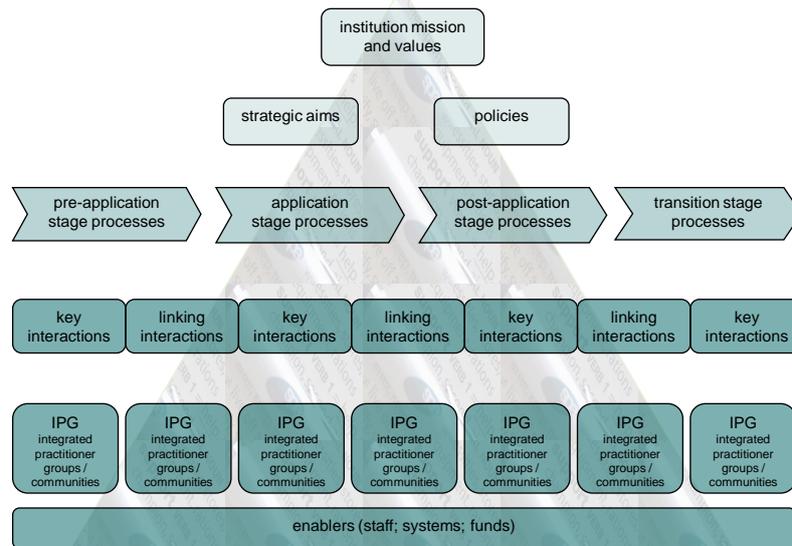
Enablers underpin the whole strategy. These should be viewed as far more than just resources: they will directly affect the effectiveness of the strategy and no part of it can be implemented without knowing what enablers are immediately available, how long they will be available for, what scope there is for change and how accessible new or additional enablers will be.

The same resources that constitute enablers can readily become limiters if not embedded as part of the whole strategy from the start. For example, if you decide to develop a customer relationship approach that tracks learners through all stages of the experience and delivers pertinent information and advice at distinct points of the process, then consideration of how that will be enabled is vital. If you do not already have a dedicated CRM (Customer Relationship Management) software and do not have allocated budget to develop one, then such an approach will be staff and time intensive and would impact on the effective delivery of other interactions, potentially having an adverse effect on the strategy as a whole.

The Applicant Experience Strategy Map – monitor and measure
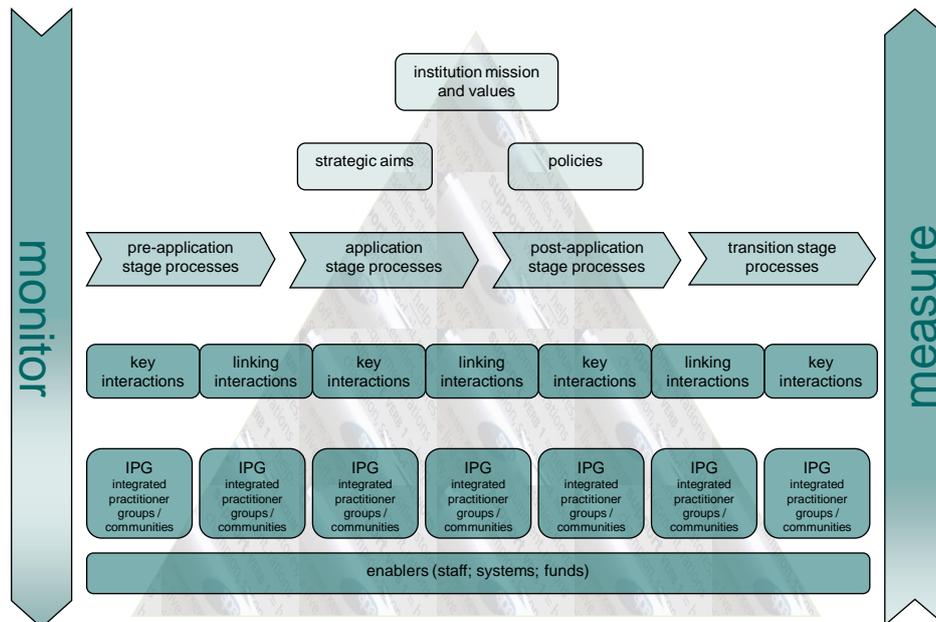
No strategy should be static. The character and values of an institution will evolve over time. Interactions will need to change as applicant demographic, institution targets and market requirements change. IPGs will need to change to accommodate the best practitioners and best practice for delivery. Enablers will need to change to meet new technological demands and to incorporate practical financial considerations. The only way to inform and to pre-empt such changes is through rigorous monitoring and measuring throughout the strategy.

- Top-down monitoring
    - ensures that the vital purpose of the strategy is reflected throughout
    - retains direction and checks that practice is efficient to that end.
    - will inform the strategy and allow scrutiny of activity.
    - allows planners to prepare enablers in response to demands.

- Bottom-up measuring
    - ensures that performance is meeting the needs of the strategy
    - provides a quantitative value on activity as indicators of success
    - identifies where the strategy is working, where further development is needed or where activities are redundant
    - allows managers to assess the use of enablers and justify redistribution or reallocation.

Without proper monitoring and measuring there can be no realistic evaluation of the strategy and its success is reduced to the anecdotal.

Specific questions to ask in development

- How will it help foster a better relationship between applicant and institution?
- How will it help staff in the institution across different roles and different levels of seniority identify the part they play?
- How will it help manage student intake and retention?
- Who is *essential* to the strategy? Who else is desirable?
- What are the vital enablers to such a strategy?
- What are the potential barriers?
- Should partner colleges and other partners be included in the strategy?

Chapter 3
Pre-Application Stage

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 recommendations[2],

> *"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 university[3]. 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 education[4]. 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 Report[5] 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.

References

1. Student Transition and Retention, the STAR Project
   http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star/prior_to_entry/prior.htm

2. National Council for Educational Excellence recommendations, October 2008
   http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/ncee/docs/7898-DCSF-NatCouncilEd.pdf

3. HM Government White Paper. *New Opportunities: Fair Chances for the Future* (section 5.28), January 2009
   http://www.hmg.gov.uk/media/9102/NewOpportunities.pdf

4. SSAT article, March 2009
   http://www.specialistschools.org.uk/article.aspa?PageId=1563&NodeId=1

5. National Student Forum Annual Report, 2008
   http://dius.ecgroup.net/files/110-08-HE_b.pdf
   DIUS, The government response to the National Student Forum's annual report 2008
   http://www.dius.gov.uk/~/media/publications/R/response_to_national_student_forum_report

SPA pre-application recommendations

SPA recommends higher education providers consider undertaking or reviewing the following practice to support a good applicant experience:

1. **Engage with learners well in advance of any potential application to initiate and support the applicant experience**

   - engaging with a diverse population 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

   - the nature of any engagement should be based upon, and actively reflect, an institution's own mission, so that a realistic impression is made that facilitates a match between prospective applicants and the character of an institution's student body and learning

   - engagement to raise aspirations far in advance of any potential application should be planned as part of a long-term strategy to ensure activities will benefit the long-term goals of the institution, rather than just short-term recruitment needs

   - collaboration between institutions with similar missions, and with external organisations which promote values contiguous to an institution's mission, may provide an effective way to raise aspirations in a wide cross-section of learners far in advance of any potential application

   - the use of student ambassadors may facilitate engagement with non-traditional potential applicants, by realistically promoting the benefits, environment and ethos of the institution, and in an added empathic benefit of bringing together students and potential students who can relate to one another, matching their own qualities with the culture of the institution

   - alumni may likewise be an advantageous resource for accurately representing the institution, particularly in highlighting career opportunities, relating with mature prospects and with those already in employment

   - further development of UCAS Entry Profiles and institution-own on-line course information, ensuring the quality, transparency and relevance of accessible information, will 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

2. **Utilise experience gained through such engagement to continually inform and improve the applicant experience.**

- track pre-application activity and interaction through an integrated customer relationship management system to efficiently direct resources and accurately evaluate the impact of initiatives, thus feeding back into the institution's future marketing approach and retention planning

- research the types and extent of pre-application engagement experienced by an institution's own applicants, students and alumni, to improve understanding of which pre-application strategies were successful and indicate any undertargeted areas for future engagement

- apply appropriate geographic information systems modelling and customer relations management tools to more accurately understand the potential pool of candidates for a geographical or demographical area and to appreciate the most appropriate method for promoting within that area to attract those most suited to the institution.

Chapter 4
Application Stage

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

The previous chapter 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)?

SPA application recommendations

SPA recommends higher education providers consider undertaking or reviewing the following practice to support a good applicant experience:

1. **Strive to ensure that learner engagement with the application process maximises the institution's ability to identify the most suitable**

   - 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 suitable applicants to courses.

   - Applicants may 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.

   - All staff likely to engage with applicants 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.

   - All institutions have a responsibility to suggest, scrutinise, review, approve and adhere to changes to any admissions operations they are members of (e.g. UCAS).

   - It is the responsibility of each institution and of any national service provider they use (e.g. UCAS) to minimise unfair advantage gained from coaching or insider knowledge of the application process.

     o Simple applications should be easy to access and be self-explanatory, using plain language.

     o 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.

2. Review the quality of applications to measure successful engagement

- 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.

- An unsuitable application does not necessarily mean that the applicant is unsuitable, so the core goal of a review should be to improve the application engagement and maximise opportunities for applicants to demonstrate their suitability.

- Regularly review 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

Chapter 5

Post-application stage

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, 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. 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. A case study of co-ordinated engagement from the University of Huddersfield is available as a resource at the end of this chapter. 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 as a resource in chapter 1.

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 the QAA UK Quality Code for

. A possible model for determining appropriate engagement based on the considerations above is available as a resource at the end of this chapter.

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. A case study of UCAS as an intermediary is available as a resource at the end of this chapter.

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

the QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education – Chapter B2: Admissions 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. A case study of rectifying non-engagement from the *University for the Creative Arts (UCA)* is available as a resource at the end of this chapter.

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.

Resource 5.1 – Example model for determining appropriate engagement

Purpose:	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.
Resources available:	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.
Timescales/deadlines:	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**
1. Indirect: Current practice - conditions transmitted to UCAS for applicant to check on UCAS Track	3 Single point for conveying offer, but no avenue for including additional terms or aids to conversion	5 Offer only needs inputting once	2 No institution-specific support information included. No link to an individual in case of queries.	3	• Meeting performance targets • Conversion rates • Number of applicant queries about offer • Review of pre-entry support via accepter/decliner surveys • Feedback from other departments (Student Support; Accommodation; Finance; Student Records; Faculty)	• Potential to adopt an automated e-mail message in short term. • Consider options 2,3,4 for next cycle (some may require significant set-up that could not be effected mid-cycle).
2. Indirect: Set up admissions portal to automatically pull conditions off internal admissions database and send update e-mail to applicant	4 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	5 Set-up of portal could be managed prior to start of cycle. Offer only needs inputting once (all other systems should link automatically)	3 Applicant can access support information via portal, but not necessarily directed to it. No link to an individual in case of queries.	4	As 1. above, plus: • Tracking log-ins to portal • Tracking support areas accessed/redirected to from portal • Noting any applicant complaints or appeals on grounds of inconsistency	• Involve Schools and Colleges Liaison in promoting awareness of portal to applicants, advisors and parents • 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. • Consider options 1,3,4 for next cycle (some may require significant set-up that could not be effected mid-cycle).

Option						
	3	3	4	3	As 1. above, plus: • Tracking hits to relevant support pages on website • Feedback from school advisors • Noting any applicant complaints or appeals on grounds of inconsistency	• 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. • Consider support staff that can be called in during any peak times • Consider options1,2,4 for next cycle (some may require significant set-up that could not be effected mid-cycle).
3. Direct: Send formal offer letter to applicant, including conditions and information regarding next steps	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.			
	2	2	3	2	As 1. above, plus: • Tracking hits to relevant support pages on website • Monitoring of WP and legally-protected groups' reply rate and conversion against benchmarks • Noting any applicant complaints or appeals on grounds of inconsistency	• In cases of inconsistency, direct staff training as a matter of urgency. • Consider support staff that can be called in during any peak times • If necessary, due to either inconsistency or excessive demands on resources, acknowledgement reply would have to be dropped (including from any conditions already sent) • Consider options 1,2,3 for next cycle (some may require significant set-up that could not be effected mid-cycle).
4. Direct: Include acknowledgement reply as a condition, to confirm that terms have been read and signifying interest.	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.			

Resource 5.2 – Case Studies

Co-ordinated engagement 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.

Intermediary 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 13th January 2011; and 75,000 applications were submitted over 14/15th January 2011. UCAS receives around 17,000 calls in any average week, but for the week commencing 10th January 2011 there were 38,962 calls, 4,000 of which were taken in the final four opening hours of 15th January 2011 (a Saturday).

Rectifying non-engagement 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%.

SPA post-application recommendations

SPA recommends higher education providers consider undertaking or reviewing the following practice to support a good applicant experience:

1. **Prepare, review, publish and implement policies well in advance of any consideration of applications**

   - Much of what happens to an application during the post-application stage involves criteria, policies and offer-making strategies developed by an institution well before the application is made.

   - Admissions staff should always be mindful of the applicant's perspective and timeline: what an institution prepares and works on pre-application may not impact upon the applicant until post-application.

   - Preparation is vital to a successful admissions operation and SPA's Good Practice Statements are an existing resource to support the post-application stage.
     www.spa.ac.uk

   - HEIs should consider how practice complies with the precepts within the QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education – Chapter B2: Admissions.
     www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/quality-code-B2.aspx

   - Risks to transparency and consistency in admissions may be mitigated by:
     - 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.

2. **To improve conversion and retention rates, understand the type and extent of engagement experienced by an institution's own applicants, students and alumni**

- Recognising and comprehending engagement should aid in redirecting admissions resources where they are most effective.
    - Engagement will most commonly be initiated as an aid to conversion, but there may be a number of other purposes to consider, including diagnostic, logistic, record management and student support.
    - Identify engagement from areas of the institution other than admissions to mitigate a risk of duplication, conflicting messages and other inefficient use of resources.
    - Co-ordinate engagement across all concerned parties within an institution.
    - Plot potential points of interaction against the whole admissions process to help identify the most appropriate times for engagement to suit different purposes.

- Consider the purpose of the engagement, the resources available and the timescales/deadlines involved to determine what type of engagement would be most effective.
    - Judge considerations on grounds of: appropriateness; efficiency; supportiveness.

- Plan the process for monitoring/measuring effectiveness and consider timely mechanisms for changing ineffective engagement.

- 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.
    - An intermediary may be more appropriate in meeting institution aims if better resourced and more experienced in engaging with different stakeholders.
    - However, any such engagement should be viewed as a supplement to, not necessarily a replacement for, direct engagement.

- Always consider how to offer constructive feedback to unsuccessful applicants.

- Non-engagement should be investigated thoroughly as it may indicate a problem that needs to be resolved.
    - 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.

Chapter 6
Transition Stage

The transition stage covers all post-confirmation activities, from the point an applicant's place has been confirmed through to the commencement of higher education studies. This may cover a number of months or even over a year for deferred applicants, but in some instances acceptance, enrolment and commencement may all be in the same day. It will unfortunately include accepted applicants who never commence their studies at their chosen institution, either through unexpected barriers pre-enrolment or through voluntary de-selection by the applicant. The quality of interaction between institution and applicant will shape this transition and should seek to minimise non-commencement. However, interaction throughout the previous stages of the applicant experience will have been vital in the early identification of institution barriers or applicant concerns towards de-selection.

Transition does not stop the moment an applicant enrols; it continues well into the first year and potentially beyond as each individual student adjusts to the higher education environment. However, as the legal status of a 'student' is different to that of an 'applicant', and as different regulations apply, the applicant's experience in transition hands over to the student's experience at the point of enrolment.

Good practice

Significant research into transition has already produced a wide range of good practice recommendations and it is not our intent to replicate that work. Anyone unfamiliar with existing student experience and transition good practice may find the following links a useful start:

- The Higher Education Academy's retention and success resource
  - www.heacademy.ac.uk/retention-and-success
- QAA Scotland's enhancement theme project, 'Transition during the first year'
  - www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/resources/publications/first-year-experience
- UCL's Transition Programme
  - www.ucl.ac.uk/transition/
- JISCmail forum on retention, created by Action on Access
  - www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=STUDENT-RETENTION-AND-SUCCESS

The need for engagement

Despite significant research in this area, increased institution attention to transition strategies and improved awareness of issues affecting student retention, the main reasons for voluntary withdrawal have changed little over the years. The National Audit Office reports (2007[1] and 2002[2]) highlighted students of similar types are not evenly distributed across the sector, and those less likely to continue may in part be a reflection of the practices of the institutions that tend to recruit those students as well as reflecting the characteristics of the students themselves. Many students leave for a combination of reasons, but the most common reasons for voluntary withdrawal cited in the National Audit Office reports were:

- personal reasons
    - including homesickness (especially among young women and students from rural areas) and domestic obligations (e.g. childcare or elder care)
- lack of integration
    - including absence of positive ties and cultural isolation (especially among students from deprived areas)
- dissatisfaction with course/institution
    - including course not leading to the professional accreditation sought
- lack of preparedness
    - including unexpected course content, lack of appropriate study skills and late application for Disabled Students' Allowance
- wrong choice of course
    - including not enough research of choices, channelling into inappropriate subjects (especially working class men) and lack of information about higher education (especially students from disadvantaged areas)
- financial reasons
    - including limited funds and fear of debt, unrealistic lifestyle expectations
- to take up a more attractive opportunity
    - including late realisation of academic interests or career goals.

The report *Rethinking working-class 'drop out' from higher education* published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Quinn et al 2005[3]) found that choosing the wrong course was given as the main reason for leaving by many of those involved in their research, "Leafing through a prospectus with no real sense of what they should be looking for … with little guidance from family, university or schools."

More needs to be done to address these causes before a student commences studies. There is no benefit to either the applicant or institution in accepting someone who then drops out before or after enrolling because of an issue that could have been identified and addressed beforehand. In order to provide better pre-entry engagement there needs to be a shift away from the passive mentality of making information, advice and guidance available without knowing how or even if it's used, towards a more interactive and targeted approach of *informing*, *advising* and *guiding* potential applicants. Such an approach requires greater integration of practice and more co-ordinated use of the large volumes of applicant and student data available internally and externally.

Identifying Engagement

Engagement has been considered across three broad categories in all stages of SPA's applicant experience: 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 commencement and retention rates and should aid institutions in redirecting admissions resources where they are most effective:

- **direct engagement**

  (where an institution has an identified interaction with a specific accepted applicant)

- **indirect engagement**

  (where an institution publishes generic information that is accessed by an accepted applicant or where information is sent via an intermediary)

- **non-engagement**

  (where an accepted applicant does not access any further information from an institution).

In most cases within the transition stage, engagement will focus on preparation for joining the institution and starting the chosen higher education study. 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 as '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 needs may be best met by engagement pre-application). Flowcharts to aid such identification are available as resources in chapter 1.

Direct and Indirect Engagement

Much engagement between confirmation and enrolment may be indirect, via an institution's website/portal or via an intermediary, such as UCAS. This may be particularly true for conveying standard information across all new entrants (e.g. student regulations; joining instructions; fees details), where indirect engagement may be a more efficient method. However, even for the apparently most straightforward of transitions, institutions should always be mindful of the potential for individual exceptions or queries and ensure that methods for direct engagement are readily accessible. Any automated engagement systems in particular (e.g. CRM software) should include help text, signposting and routes to experts that will allow applicants to interact, if necessary outside of the automated system, rather than just receive what someone else thinks each individual needs. Consider the risk of disengagement if an applicant can't find what he or she is looking for.

The type of engagement chosen should be one that best fits the needs or intended purpose behind such needs, as determined by strategic and operational aims. SPA's example model for determining appropriate engagement provided as a resource in chapter 5 may also provide a useful tool for considering appropriate engagement in the transition stage.

Engagement to reduce non-commencement and improve retention

It is important to identify the risks of accepted applicants not starting or dropping out shortly after starting their studies at your institution. The most common reasons for voluntary withdrawal cited in the National Audit Office reports constitute a reasonably evidenced set of causes to target. Engagement should be tailored to most effectively address each risk and may need to vary to be most suited to different social, cultural or economic groups, particularly if certain groups have been identified to be at greater risk. Individual applicants may have several issues, so may be at risk of

dropping out for more than one reason. A resource at the end of this chapter provides a table with some considerations for mitigating the risks against each of the reasons cited by the National Audit Office, some of which (e.g. mentoring; pre-sessional events) may be applied to several risks at once.

Many risks will relate to specific academic concerns and direct or indirect engagement with academic staff responsible for the chosen course will provide the most relevant source of support for such concerns. Many applicants may not have engaged with academic staff during the post-application stage, so interaction during transition may be especially important. Student support, welfare and counselling services are another vital source of expertise in ensuring a smooth transition to higher education. However, it must be remembered that their core duty is to students, so if such support is extended to accepted applicants outside of term time, opening times and staff cover must be in place. It is also important all admissions staff, including any temporary staff used during Clearing, are trained to identify when to refer an applicant to an academic, student service or other appropriate expert. Any ill-informed or inaccurate advice, no matter how well meaning, over the transition stage can have a detrimental affect on an accepted applicant's retention and success.

Occasionally, regardless of engagement activities throughout previous stages of the applicant experience, some accepted applicants will legitimately conclude that they have not made the most suitable match of course, institution and/or career path. A student in unsuitable study is not in anyone's interests and it is far better for an institution to address such concerns pre-entry than have a dissatisfied student withdraw post-entry. It is important to support accepted applicants in making the best choice and it is responsible for an institution to ensure accepted applicants considering change are doing so for the right reasons. Be as flexible as possible if an applicant realises the course isn't right for him or her, and consider any alternatives that may be more suitable. This may be needed more where there are several courses offered across similar subject areas that have distinct differences in the detail of module provision, assessment, mode of study, etc., where there is a wide range of combinations (e.g. joint honours; major/minors), or when an applicant has been accepted through Clearing and not benefited from the institution's normal post-application engagement. However, if it is not possible to change an accepted course, be clear in feedback about the legitimate reasons why (e.g. requirements to succeed on course; course full; fairness and consistency with other applicants not accepted onto that course), as they will help the applicant make an informed decision on what to do next. Many accepted applicants who do not commence studies on their original choice at your institution may be able to return at a later date, so be clear about their options and routes to re-entry (e.g. deferral; foundation course; further level three qualifications; work experience; financial assistance).

The reasons for voluntary withdrawal cited in the National Audit Office reports are general; there will undoubtedly be different or additional reasons that are specific to each HEI, campus, mode of study, or course, and different reasons depending on different applicant groups within those institution-specific variables. Identify and seek to address such specific reasons by tailoring engagement to their different needs. Surveying late withdrawals, releases, no-shows and drop-outs will help understand specific reasons and identify trends. Some engagement to mitigate risk may be offered to all accepted applicants, although analysing non-commencement and drop-out against contextual data on applicants may help target engagement to those most at risk. Institutions should also consider what impact any changes made in admissions policies/practices may have on retention (e.g. new entry qualifications accepted; more non-traditional entrants; different interview practice; higher fees and any applicant anticipation of bursaries). Several institutions already have long-standing good practice in supporting transition based on specific retention issues. UCLan's Flying

Start Project is one such example where initiatives to address one specific target group have been so successful they have been rolled out to other accepted applicants. More information on Flying Start is provided as a resource art the end of this chapter.

Non-Engagement

Non-engagement should be very rare in the transition stage. It would be extremely unusual for an institution not to seek any further interaction after accepting an applicant. 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 accepted applicant 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 accepted applicant does not engage with the institution (e.g. no response to pre-enrolment requests; failure to submit certificates or other requested information; failure to arrive at designated induction meeting) 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 communication failures.

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 accepted applicant is likely to chase that applicant for a response. Similarly, an applicant who still intends studying at an institution is likely to contact that institution if he/she has not heard anything. Complete inaction, therefore, is not justifiable, but it should never be assumed that the other party will reinitiate contact.

References

1. National Audit Office (2007). *Staying the course: The retention of students in higher education*. London: TSO

2. National Audit Office (2002). Improving student achievement in English higher education. London: TSO

3. Quinn, J., Thomas, L., Slack, K., Casey, L., Thexton, W. and Noble, J. (2005). *Rethinking working-class 'drop out' from higher education*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation /York Publishing Services Ltd

4. Resource 6.1 – Engagement considerations to reduce common causes of non-commencement and improve retention

(N.B. these are example considerations and are in no way an exhaustive list – institutions should consider their individual circumstances,

causes specific to their own institution and what resources, existing and new, they can direct to the issues)

NAO most common reasons for voluntary withdrawal	examples	engagement considerations
personal reasons	homesickness (especially among young women and students from rural areas) and domestic obligations (e.g. childcare or elder care)	▪ Target additional engagement aimed at young women, students from rural areas and those with dependents. ▪ Highlight support facilities available that address concerns (e.g. secure accommodation; family accommodation; orientation activities). ▪ Ensure academic staff are sensitive to such concerns, so that allowances can be made whenever possible (e.g. unexpected/short-notice absence; extenuating circumstances for late submission of work) and that students are made aware of such allowances. ▪ Connect targeted applicants to student mentors with similar backgrounds/experiences (potentially through e-mentoring pre-entry). ▪ Provide timetables and workload expectations well in advance, so other obligations can be planned. ▪ Invite targeted applicants to events (residential and non-residential) to improve familiarisation ahead of main induction activity. ▪ Make financial support available to minimise fears of the cost of short home visits.
lack of integration	absence of positive ties and cultural isolation (especially among students from deprived areas)	▪ Connect targeted applicants to student mentors with similar backgrounds/experiences (potentially through e-mentoring pre-entry). ▪ Highlight student societies and any local attractions with similar cultural links. ▪ Notify Students' Union of any changing trends in new student backgrounds/cultures; if there are no existing representative societies or groups, help the Students' Union establish one (possibly with set-up costs or awareness event).
dissatisfaction with course/institution	course not leading to the professional accreditation sought	▪ Ensure any professional body accreditation and career/progression routes are clearly highlighted (ideally in the post-application stage if not earlier), and highlight courses that may be commonly misconstrued as having accreditation (e.g. a joint honours law degree that doesn't contain all pre-requisite components to satisfy the Law Society). If such a course does not have accreditation, illustrate the additional routes that can be taken to

		• attain professional recognition. • Be prepared to offer alternatives (e.g. foundation pathway; deferred entry) where possible to redirect applicants onto their preferred accredited course.
lack of preparedness	unexpected course content, lack of appropriate study skills and late application for Disabled Students' Allowance	• Ensure course content is clearly available and easy to access well before a student starts. • If any diagnostic assessment of study skills (e.g. maths competency) was undertaken as part of the admissions process, ensure they are followed up with additional pre-sessional and in-sessional support. Pre-sessional events should be free, or at least subsidised for the most financially disadvantaged, and could include a range of support and familiarisation aids to ease transition. Such support should be rolled out and made available to all accepted applicants, to help any not previously identified as needing/wanting it. • Ensure all accepted applicants with a disclosed disability are fully aware of the process for claiming Disabled Students' Allowance and offer support for any who are uncertain of their eligibility. Highlight the availability and benefits of Disabled Students' Allowance to all accepted applicants, as a number may not have disclosed.
wrong choice of course	not enough research of choices, channelling into inappropriate subjects (especially working class men) and lack of information about higher education (especially students from disadvantaged areas)	• Ideally, selection and engagement in the post-application stage (if not earlier) should focus on ensuring an accurate match between applicant and course. Have additional reasonable measures in place in transition, particularly for groups where disadvantage has been identified (e.g. working class men and students from disadvantaged areas). This may be needed more where there is provision of similar subject areas that have distinct differences in the detail of module provision, assessment, mode of study, etc., where there is a wide range of combinations (e.g. joint honours; major/minors), or when an applicant has been accepted through Clearing and not benefited from the institution's normal post-application engagement. • Be prepared to offer a more appropriate alternative, where possible and practical. This may be easier where the move is within a similar study area and where target entry numbers can readily be transferred between courses. • Invite targeted applicants to events (residential and non-residential) to improve familiarisation ahead of main induction activity. • Connect targeted applicants to student mentors with similar backgrounds/experiences (potentially through e-mentoring pre-entry).

financial reasons	limited funds and fear of debt, unrealistic lifestyle expectations	▪ Clearly convey all financial information to accepted applicants, including fees, accommodation costs, living costs, and publicise where financial advice can be accessed. ▪ Allow any payments to be broken down into smaller, regular instalments whenever possible and always have alternative payment methods available to those most in need. ▪ Make sure that all bursary and scholarship information is clear and easily accessible to ensure no accepted applicant has false expectations. If there are a limited number of bursaries available based on residual household income, but more accepted applicants meeting the eligibility threshold (e.g. below £25,000), criteria for selecting entitlement must be transparent and applied consistently. Have additional support and advice in place for those eligible who do not receive such bursaries. ▪ Make financial support available, including hardship funds. Identify where new students are most likely to spend their money and consider whether agreements can be reached to provide special offers, vouchers or other savings, particularly for identified target groups. ▪ Connect accepted applicants to student mentors with similar backgrounds/experiences (potentially through e-mentoring pre-entry) and/or moderate a social network site that allows them to share money concerns with peers.
to take up a more attractive opportunity	late realisation of academic interests or career goals	▪ Provide information on adjustment, withdrawing and being released into Clearing. Ensure all admissions staff are aware of the institution's policies and that they handle requests sensitively and promptly. Due care should be taken to ensure accepted applicants are making the right choice for themselves and they must be forewarned of any action that would result in the irrevocable cancellation of their accepted place. ▪ Make additional careers advice available to accepted applicants considering alternatives during the transition stage. ▪ Be mindful that the applicant may be taking up a new opportunity for a limited duration and may seek to re-engage in later years. Signpost routes back into your institution or back into HE generally.

Aiding Student Transition through Summer Events & Induction
Dr Vikki Cook – Flying Start Project Coordinator

Introduction

Flying Start is a student-centred project, which derives its focus directly from the University's mission: in promoting access and widening participation the University is aware that its student population is diverse and in many ways non-traditional. Flying Start strives, therefore, to always treat each student as an individual and to provide support that meets each person's needs.

Flying Start began in 1999 as a pilot study, which adopted an early intervention strategy to combat high levels of attrition amongst Advanced GNVQ students entering UCLan. This proved so successful, that 2002-3 saw the Project being broadened to enable all students with a confirmed conditional or unconditional place, regardless of entry qualification, to engage with Flying Start. Ten years on, Flying Start continues to go from strength to strength.

The Project has two main strands: firstly, as an early intervention strategy that invites prospective UCLan students to attend a free pre-enrolment residential or non-residential 'event'; the second, begun in 2008, to encourage the 'embedding' of key elements of the Flying Start events across UCLan, within Induction and beyond. The Project is specifically designed to support retention and reduce levels of attrition amongst students at UCLan. In 2011 Flying Start offered three 3-day residential events and one three-day non-residential event, with a total of 600 residential places and 75 non-residential places. The 'embedding' strand of the Project was started through the launch of a 'Flying Start Induction Pack', which went out to all course tutors and the involvement of Flying Start Project Staff and Student Mentors in a number of Induction Activities.

Description

Flying Start aims to better prepare students for living and studying in Preston and at UCLan, as well as providing them with additional support networks of academic and pastoral care. Invitations for the summer events are sent out to prospective students in conjunction with the University's Admissions process, and since 2009 students have been able to self-refer via an online application form on the website; tutors are also able to refer students directly to the Project.

The residential events are extremely popular and always over-subscribed, however, they tend to appeal largely to school-leavers. Therefore, in 2007 it was decided to add the option of a 'non-residential' event, for under-represented categories such as mature students, working students and students with families.

Each event is designed to provide students with: campus and city orientation; knowledge of commonly used University 'jargon'; academic skills (e.g. Critical Thinking & Referencing); help developing the life skills needed when living and studying away from home (e.g. budgeting & time-management); where to go for help and support; and, above all, a social network before they enrol upon their course of study. Accommodation is provided free of charge by the University for the residential events, and there is a programme of free social activities (including a barbeque) in the

evenings. A free lunch is provided each day on the non-residential events and students are encouraged to meet up together after the day's sessions.

The programme is delivered using a Lecture/Seminar format. The lectures and presentations are given in a large lecture theatre to the whole student cohort by academics and support staff from across the University. These are designed to be relevant and interactive to ensure maximum engagement with the students. Research shows that successful students are "experts" at being students and are, therefore, best placed to help novice students in the transition towards becoming experts themselves. Flying Start employs 25 successful second and third year UCLan students as Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) 'Mentors', whose role is to deliver the seminar sessions, and offer informal, friendly advice from their own experience. Mentors work in pairs for the seminars, taking groups of between 20 and 30 students who are grouped dependant on age, course or area for each different session. Changing the students' groups in this way enables them to mix with as many different people as possible, thereby offering the maximum opportunity for the formation of social networks. A great deal of emphasis is placed on seminar sessions being highly interactive, and Mentors use activities that are designed to 'break the ice' and facilitate this social-bonding process.

In order to ensure a high-calibre of "expert" students to act as Flying Start PAL-Mentors, there is a rigorous recruitment procedure that utilises the University's standard HR processes. Applicants must fill out the full University Staff Application Form and, if shortlisted, undertake an interview process that involves giving a presentation, one-to-one questions with the interview panel, and a further group assessment of team-working and facilitation skills. Mentors are also selected with a view to representing as many Schools as possible from across the University, as well as being representative of the student body in terms of diversity, including age, gender and ethnicity. Each year, the Flying Start Mentor Team consists of around two-thirds of the previous year's "experienced" Mentors, and around a third of "new" Mentors. These student Mentors are all trained together for four days in all aspects of the delivery and facilitation of the group sessions, and are given full training and up-to-date information regarding the support available at UCLan. It is important to train both experienced and new Mentors together, as this approach mirrors the Peer-Mentoring used by the Project itself, and exemplifies the way in which PAL works for the students and Mentors. Experienced Mentors are encouraged to take part in facilitating the sessions for the new Mentors, and there is intensive use of "team-building" techniques, in order to form a strong bond between the group each year.

Feedback shows that attendance on a Flying Start event, prior to starting at UCLan, clearly inculcates a sense of 'belonging' to the University. In 2011 Flying Start set up its own 'official' Facebook page, which has proved very popular and offers a useful way of answering students' questions prior to arrival. Many of the students who attend Flying Start go on to create their own groups on social networking sites such as 'Facebook', and Flying Start students seem to identify themselves more closely with UCLan before they commence their studies. This in turn leads to students becoming more closely involved in University life when they start their degree and encourages a sense of collegiality, which enhances their motivation and commitment and thus has an effect on rates of attrition.

As the Project has become more substantially embedded within UCLan, Flying Start students and PAL Mentors have become a key resource, providing motivated and enthusiastic role-models across the University. Many of these students have gone on to become 'Course Representatives', and 'M and M Mentors', thus offering practical support in terms of retention. Flying Start PAL Mentors have

gone on to be employed at UCLan as 'Student Ambassadors', 'Student Liaison Officers', 'Student Interns' and some, having completed their degrees, now work in key areas of Student Services and Support. The expansion of the Project into using Flying Start PAL Mentors to work within Induction and the first year is continuing to grow; results so far have been encouraging, with tutors reporting higher student engagement, lower numbers of referrals and fewer drop-outs in the courses concerned.

UCLan is clearly in the forefront with regard to Widening Participation, and research into the background of Flying Start students shows that on average at least 80 percent each year are "first-generation", having no family experience in Higher Education to draw on. The institution's overall non-completion rate for year one has decreased significantly over recent years, however, the attrition rate for Flying Start students continues to consistently average around half that of UCLan students as a whole.
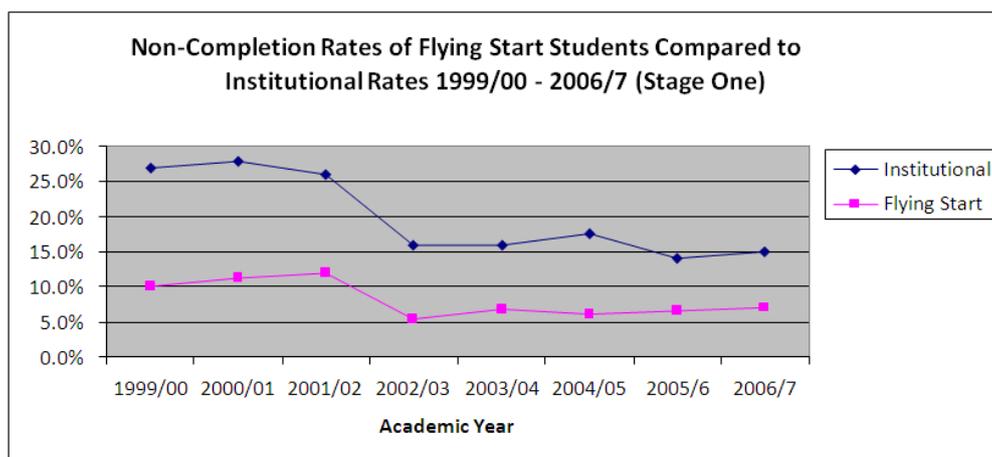
Beneficiary citations

Cat Race was a student on Flying Start, is an ex-Flying Start Mentor and now a Graduate in Web & Multi-Media, she says that: *"Flying Start is probably the most beneficial thing I participated in as a student. . . [it] taught me that everyone is an individual, has their own problems and insecurities and we are all here to support each other, acting as a positive influence. The nature of Flying Start, introducing new students to uni life and helping them to face and overcome the potential problems in their path, initiates a sense of understanding and united team ethos within the group of mentors; all with the same goal of passing on our experiences. As a dyslexic and hard of hearing student myself, I found being in the company of such understanding people uplifting, giving me the confidence to continue being pro-active within the university without allowing my disabilities to prohibit me from being involved. I can say with assurance I am a much more confident person now and I believe Flying Start was the catalyst for this."*

We receive an overwhelming amount of positive student feedback – here is a very small sample:

"Flying start Mentors made the trip. The way they interacted in a professional manner during the day, and then socialised with the students of an evening was fantastic. The experience really made me feel like UCLan is the place I want to spend the next 3 years of my life."

"All the Mentors were ace. Not scared any more!"

"I feel much better equipped to start Uni as a mature student. Mentors are all very knowledgeable and helpful"

"Thank you to all the Mentors for being really friendly and nice, and also for being there to help no matter what the problem was. Flying Start has been amazing!"

"The basic outline of the summer school is very thorough and positive, but what really enhances it is the work of the Mentors who are really good at complimenting the summer school and making you feel comfortable."

"Being a mature student I was quite worried about meeting new people and making new friends, but through attending the Flying Start Programme that has been made a very easy and worry free transition for me."

It is important to note that Flying Start does not only benefit those students who actually attend an event, as the following student's comments show:

"I came to university as a reluctant student who had decided before even moving to university that I was going to give up before the Christmas holidays. However, my plans soon changed after moving to Preston and meeting my fantastic flatmates. I was fortunate enough to have four people in my flat that had all been on the Flying Start summer schools. Because of their experiences of the University and the knowledge they had acquired about the University and Preston as a city, they were better prepared for the start of their university lives than I was and were able to help me in so many different ways.

If it were not for my flatmates and the things they did on Flying Start I would not have settled into university and would have moved back home to my 9-5 job, never stopping to think about returning to education. Because of the impact Flying Start had on my flatmates, and indirectly on me, I applied as a volunteer M and M Mentor at the beginning of my second year and have just completed my first summer as a Flying Start Mentor. I think I am an example of how Flying Start can have a positive impact on someone's life even if they haven't been through the scheme themselves."

www.uclan.ac.uk/study/flying_start

SPA transition recommendations

SPA recommends higher education providers consider undertaking or reviewing the following practice to support a good applicant experience:

1. **Ensure the type and extent of engagement best fits the needs, or intended purpose behind such needs, as determined by the institution's strategic and operational aims**

   - In most cases within the transition stage, engagement will focus on preparation for joining the institution and starting the chosen higher education study.

   - Some engagement may 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
     - 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

   - It may be more efficient to send standard information for all new entrants (e.g. student regulations; joining instructions; fees details) indirectly, via an institution's website/portal or via an intermediary, such as UCAS.

   - However, institutions should always be mindful of the potential for individual exceptions or queries and ensure that methods for direct engagement are readily accessible.
     - Any automated engagement systems in particular (e.g. CRM software) should include help text, signposting and routes to experts that will allow applicants to interact.

   - Consider the risk of disengagement if an applicant can't find what he or she is looking for.

2. **Identify the risks of accepted applicants not starting or dropping out shortly after starting their studies at your institution and mitigate those risks, particularly for the most disadvantaged**

- Use the reasons for voluntary withdrawal cited in the National Audit Office reports.
    - o Engagement should be tailored to most effectively address each reason and may need to vary to be most suited to different social, cultural or economic groups, particularly any identified to be at greater risk.

- Many risks will relate to specific academic concerns and direct or indirect engagement with academic staff responsible for the chosen course will provide the most relevant source of support for such concerns.

- Student support, welfare and counselling services are a vital source of expertise in ensuring a smooth transition to higher education.

- All admissions staff, including any temporary staff used during Clearing, should be trained to identify when to refer an applicant to an academic, student service or other appropriate expert.

- Be as flexible as possible if an applicant realises the course isn't right for him or her, and consider any alternatives that may be more suitable.

- Identify and seek to address additional specific reasons by tailoring engagement to different needs.
    - o Surveying late withdrawals, releases, no-shows and drop-outs will help understand specific reasons and identify trends.
    - o Some engagement to mitigate risk may be offered to all accepted applicants, although analysing non-commencement and drop-out against contextual data on applicants may help target engagement to those most at risk.
    - o Institutions should also consider what impact any changes made in admissions policies/practices may have on retention (e.g. new entry qualifications accepted; more non-traditional entrants; different interview practice; higher fees and any applicant anticipation of bursaries).

Chapter 7
Continued research

The information within this guide was compiled between 2009 and 2011.

SPA will continue to develop understanding of the positive interactions and practice that make up a good applicant experience. This understanding will be further developed, considering best practice in a fully integrated strategic approach that ensures admissions practice nurtures the student experience. This integrated strategic approach will lead the direction of future research by SPA in this area.

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/retention) about activities that enrich the applicant experience. If you would like to share any examples of good practice within admissions or of integrated working between staff responsible for different stages, or if you have any questions about the applicant experience, please contact us.

Dan Shaffer
Senior Project Officer
Supporting Professionalism in Admissions
Tel: 01242 544895
e-mail: d.shaffer@spa.ac.uk
website: www.spa.ac.uk

www.spa.ac.uk/resources/applicant-experience