

It's time to engage with the applicant experience

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There has been extensive research and evidence-based good practice on the student experience, supporting the higher education (HE) sector's social responsibilities and underpinning a healthy HE community. Much of this work agrees that pre-entry engagement can play an influential role. The 1994 Group's (2007) report 'Enhancing the Student Experience', asserted, "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." Most pre-entry research, activity, funding and effort targets either early outreach, to raise aspirations towards HE well ahead of any application, or preparatory transition, to guide accepted applicants into their start of university or college. However, there is a significant and critical gap between these two points in the experience, which if managed poorly can undermine HE's best intentions. This gap is commonly referred to as 'admissions' and its vital yet potentially contradictory roles as both gateway and barricade dictate not only who does or doesn't pass that point, but what they pass onto.

Although, for full-time undergraduate entry at least, there is a wealth of data on application numbers nationally, there is little about applicants themselves. We can analyse how many applied, we can identify how many were accepted and we can extrapolate presumptions of conversion rates according to socio-economic and other demographic groupings. What we cannot tell from those figures is whether those with the best potential to succeed got into the courses and institutions they were most suited to, or even if the entire application process helped or hindered their experience of getting into HE. Universities and colleges, governments, applicants

and their advisors all want to know the answers to such questions: we all want to remove unnecessary barriers and eliminate unfair advantage. There is no external watchdog overseeing how this selection is conducted, so responsibility for ensuring a fair applicant experience rests firmly on the shoulders of the HE sector. However, as we all care about a fair applicant experience, and because so much of the experience happens outside of an individual HE provider's reach, we should all be thinking about how we can help make it as good as it possibly can be for all potential applicants and for all types of HE study. It is about people, not numbers, and the answers lie beyond balance sheets and targets.

Information, advice and guidance do not produce a good applicant experience. These are passive terms and as such do nothing in themselves. You could create vast warehouses full of information on HE, but unless others know about them, have the keys to access them, a way of finding the relevant bits and the means to understand what's there, all you've done is fill space. The benefit of initiatives such as the Key Information Sets, for example, will not be determined merely by their existence, but by how useful people find them. A good applicant experience is not a passive journey involving one individual; it is shaped and enriched by interactive participation between everyone involved. Actively informing, advising and guiding enables applicants to accurately match their aims, abilities and aspirations with the character of the HE provider. It removes barriers and improves transparency, redressing any undue advantage which better resourced applicants might otherwise have. This helps providers select from amongst the most suitable, improving conversion, transition and student retention and enhancing the strategic mission of the institution. It is mutually beneficial. Conversely, a poor applicant experience perpetuates barriers to entry, disengages potential applicants and their advisors, risks incongruence between student expectations and institutional reality and therefore embeds an enrolment strategy leading to unfulfilled potential and increased drop-out. It is mutually detrimental.

It's worth noting that a good or poor experience should not be defined by whether or not an applicant gets the place. It is still a competitive process and so long as there are more well qualified applicants than places, some will not get their first choice. You could get a place but still have a poor experience if you later find out it's not what you expected and drop out; similarly not getting a place could be a good experience if it leads you to consider something more suitable. What matters

most is that there is equality of opportunity within admissions selection and that the best possible match for student success is made, irrespective of background.

The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions programme (SPA) has plotted and reviewed the engagement activity between applicant and HE that allows providers to manage the applicant experience and plan a seamless transition into the student experience. Resource materials, including definitions, mapping exercises, recommendations and case studies are freely available on the SPA website (www.spa.ac.uk). It's a start, but engagement between applicant and individual HE providers is only part of the experience. If a good applicant experience is determined by interactive participation and that helps all involved in HE to improve access, then the full solution lies with integrating how we all work together to achieve that goal. It's time we all engaged with the applicant experience.

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Prior to joining SPA, Dan was Assistant Registrar at Aston University, and before that he was at the University of Central England (now BCU), including work as a visiting lecturer in Psychology alongside his admissions duties.

Dan's current research for SPA includes leading on the Applicant Experience Strategy, on the impact of Student Number Controls and on good practice in offer-making.