Transitions and the Applicant Experience: Empowering Students to Make Informed Choices

Alyssa Newman
The University of Edinburgh, Scotland

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to discuss the range of transitions embedded in the applicant experience, and the importance of empowering students to make an informed higher education decision. This paper describes the current work being undertaken by the University of Edinburgh’s Student Experience Project: Applicant Experience strand, to empower undergraduate and postgraduate students to make more informed choices during each transitional stage of the applicant experience. This, it is argued, will enable students to make informed decisions when applying to university, improve retention, and create a positive higher education student experience. Although only four out of eleven pilot projects have been evaluated, initial evaluations suggest positive feedback. This paper closes with a discussion on next steps and scope for future research.

1 Introduction

A variety of factors influence students’ decisions about which higher education institution to transition into (Moogan and Baron, 2003; Bowman 2005; Jongbloed, 2006). However, it has been argued that these decisions are not always well informed (Harding, 2012). It is essential that students are provided with accurate and relevant information early in the decision-making process, to enable them to make informed higher education (HE) decisions. This also allows universities to manage students’ expectations, improve retention, and encourage a positive HE student experience (Thomas, 2012; Gibbs and Dean, 2014; Shaffer, 2011; Long and Tricker, 2004).

To enhance how the University of Edinburgh (UoE) empowers students to self-select during the earliest transitional stage of the student experience, the Applicant Experience (AE) strand – one of twelve strands of the overarching Student Experience Project¹ – was created in 2013. The remit of the AE strand extends from pre-application through transitions into HE.

¹ The University of Edinburgh’s Student Experience Project (SEP) was established in August 2012 to develop better understandings of the student experience, and to pilot and implement service developments to enrich the experience of students. SEP progressed from seven initial strands of work to the present twelve. SEP is a fixed-term project, running until July 2015. The work of SEP is aligned with the University’s 2012-16 Strategic Plan, which includes promoting: an outstanding student experience, partnerships, equality and widening participation, and global impact.
The aim of the AE strand is to enable greater self-selection by prospective applicants early in the application process, and to select students from diverse backgrounds who are best equipped to benefit from the UoE experience. Through the use of targeted research based pilot projects, the AE strand aims to empower all undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) students to make more informed decisions during each transitional stage. Previous work (e.g., Thomas, 2012; Yorke and Longden, 2007) has argued that ensuring students are well informed at each transitional stage enables students to self-select institutions which are most likely to provide them with the type of experience they desire. This is critical, as it has been argued that a positive applicant experience has the ability to engage potential applicants, improve the retention of students, and enhance the strategic vision of the university (Shaffer 2011).

This report is organised in the following manner: Section 2 discusses the range of transitions embedded in the applicant experience and why it is important to empower students to make informed higher education decisions. Section 3 discusses the research methods used throughout the project. Section 4 discusses key findings from the research phase of the project. Section 5 lists the pilot projects developed to address the aims of the AE project and key outputs. Section 6 discusses initial evaluation findings and the impact of these pilot projects. Section 7 concludes with a discussion on next steps and scope for future research.

2 Linking transitions and the applicant experience

2.1 Defining the ‘applicant experience’

Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) defined the ‘applicant experience’ as ‘encompassing all the opportunities or points of interaction between higher education and a potential student’ (Shaffer, 2011, p 3). The student experience begins at the first point of contact between the student and the higher education provider. This first contact could impact the students’ decision to attend a HE institution, impacts the transition process into university, and lays the foundation for the students’ overall university experience (Thomas, 2012; Shaffer, 2011; Davies and Cook, 2009). Therefore, it is vital to ensure a positive pre-applicant and applicant experience.

2.2 Key stages of the ‘applicant experience’

SPA (2011) defined the ‘applicant experience’ as encompassing four key stages. These are: pre-application, application, post-application, and transition.

- **Pre-application**: Includes all activities related to an individuals’ engagement with a HE provider prior to application for admissions to an HE provider.
• **Application**: Includes all activities from the moment an individual decides to complete an application for admission to an HE provider through the moment that an application is considered by the HE provider(s).

• **Post-application**: Includes all activities related to the HE provider assessing an application, providing applicants with a decision regarding the success of their application, and the process of applicants accepting an offer.

• **Transition**: Includes activities from the moment the applicant secured a place at a HE institution, confirmation, and pre-arrival and induction activities.

The key stages of the applicant experience appear to be consecutive, with applicants transitioning from one stage to the next until they are fully matriculated students at a HE institution. However, in practice this process is not necessarily always consecutive and linear. During the research phase of the project, a study was carried out in 2013 which conducted 14 focus groups with school students, college students, undergraduate students, and postgraduate students. This study – whose methodology is explained in section 3 – found that while some participants reported having transitioned through each stage consecutively, others decided to re-visit certain stages. For instance, some students reconsidered their application to a specific university after visiting the campus and gaining a sense of the ‘atmosphere’ and ‘feel of it’. It was found that some students who reconsidered their applications had transitioned from the ‘Application’ stage back to the ‘Pre-application’ stage. These findings – that students do not always complete the application process in a stepwise manner – are consistent with those made by Diamond et al (2012). Their study found that students’ HE decisions are not always made in a straightforward manner and that the decision-making process rarely involves systematic assessment. It can be concluded that, while the application process is linear, students do not always complete the process consecutively, and often revise their decisions based on their experiences at specific stages.

These differences in approaches to researching, applying to, and accepting a place at a university reflects the diverse needs and priorities of applicants and potential applicants. The implication is that, for HE providers, a ‘one-size fits all’ approach to the type of information conveyed during the admissions process may not be wholly appropriate. This is supported by Briggs (2006) who stated that universities need to be focused with their educational marketing and that this could positively impact the decisions potential students make. It is also supported by Thomas (2012) who argued that students require different types of information at different times of the pre-application and application process to inform their decision making. Therefore, in order to empower students to make more informed HE decisions, students should be supported through each transitional stage of the applicant experience through a multi-pronged approach which recognises the diversity of experiences throughout the applicant experience.

### 2.3 Empowering students

A positive applicant experience is beneficial to both the applicant and the HE institution. A positive applicant experience improves the retention of students, engages potential applicants, and enhances the strategic vision for the university (Shaffer, 2011). Therefore, it is the responsibility of universities to strive to provide students with a positive applicant experience. To achieve this, universities must understand and respond to the needs of
prospective students and effectively communicate the nature of the student experience at their HE institution (Shaffer, 2011; Thomas, 2012; Long and Tricker, 2004).

When institutions provide students with a positive applicant experience and students actively engage with the process, this type of information should empower students to make more informed choices, early in the decision-making process. It has been argued that this has the potential to increase student satisfaction and minimise student disappointment (Gibbs and Dean, 2014; Shaffer, 2011; Thomas, 2012). Furthermore, it enables what has been termed a ‘quality fit’ (Briggs, 2006, p 708) between the students and the university/degree programme.

3 Methodology

A range of qualitative and quantitative methods were utilised to gather and analyse data relating to the pre-application and application experience as part of the overall student experience, and to evaluate the impact of the pilot projects. The initial research findings informed the development of the pilot projects across UoE.

The initial research phase of the project occurred from September 2013 - November 2013 and the pilot projects were developed and evaluated from March 2014 - July 2015.

Due to the nature of the project, primary sourced qualitative data methods were used, as these are believed to be more appropriate for gaining insight into participants’ thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Spencer, 2015; Krueger and Casey, 2009). Qualitative research also allows for more open-ended questions, enabling a more exploratory approach, which can clarify perceptions and generate new ideas. This was deemed essential information for the development and evaluation of the pilot projects.

The following research methods were used throughout the project:

- A literature review of the secondary, further education, and higher education sector in the UK – with a specific focus on the pre-applicant and applicant experience.
- Review of qualitative and quantitative data previously gathered by UoE.
- Primary sourced observational data (e.g., UoE undergraduate and postgraduate Open Days, presentations to schools, and tours of UoE).
- Primary sourced quantitative research data (e.g., annual SEP staff survey and survey feedback from UoE Open Days).
- Primary sourced qualitative research gathered using focus groups (21 focus groups) with school students (82 students), college students (14 students), current students at UoE [undergraduate students (15 students) and postgraduate students (24 students)] and students’ advisors (3 advisor interviews).

4 Key research findings

- **Engage early with students.** Based on the literature from (Briggs and Wilson, 2007; Thomas, 2012; Diamond et al, 2012; Moogan and Baron, 2003) and findings from the focus groups with high school, college, and current undergraduate and postgraduate students, students benefit from receiving different types of information at different ages and stages of the pre-application and application process. This type of information would improve the ability for students to make more informed HE
decisions, develop realistic expectations, improve retention, and create a positive HE student experience (Thomas, 2012; Yorke, 2000).

- **Make effective use of the authentic student voice to articulate the nature of the UoE experience and its degree programmes.** Based on the focus groups with current and prospective university students and further supported by the work of Moogan and Baron (2003), Moogan (2011) and Wasmer et al (1997), information is seen as creditable and trustworthy when it comes from current students studying at a university. By providing detailed, relevant personal accounts of students’ academic and non-academic experiences at UoE, this would further inform university decisions made by prospective students in the pre-application process.

- **Educate potential students and their advisors on the UoE student experience.** This should take the following form:
  
  o **Manage students’ expectations of the UoE experience.** Based on focus groups with current students at UoE, students experiences of studying at UoE did not always match their expectations, both academic and non-academic. The literature (e.g., Harding, 2012) suggests that not all students make informed HE choices and that those who did predominantly came from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore, it is recommended to build upon the existing work at UoE and other SEP strands (e.g. Programme and Course Information Management) that seek to provide accurate and accessible information on UoE’s degree programs and courses by incorporating the authentic student voice, to inform applicant decisions.

  o **Provide more informational resources/ toolkits to students’ advisors.** Advisors are often highly trusted by applicants and potential applicants and can influence the HE choices made by students (Moogan and Baron, 2003). Since misconceptions about UoE can be held by advisors, this could lead to advisors providing students with incorrect information, advice, and guidance that can lead to poor decisions and inaccurate expectations of HE. Meeting the needs of advisors and providing purposeful informational resources/toolkits to them can improve their knowledge and update them on current student life at UoE to minimise these misconceptions. This would enable accurate advice, and informed admissions decisions.

### 5 Pilot Projects

The findings and themes analysed and disseminated during the research phase of the project have informed the direction and tasks for each of the pilot projects. The pilot projects were developed and implemented from March 2014 - July 2015. Some pilot projects are University-wide and some are subject focused, but with relevance across other subject areas. Eleven pilot projects were implemented.

#### General Undergraduate and Postgraduate Pilot Projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capturing the general UG and PG Edinburgh student experiences</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Three pilots are included under this project along with a video best practice guideline.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1) Student created clips on the Edinburgh student experience. See: <a href="#">Perfect Match videos</a>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2) Structured video clips with Edinburgh students and staff produced by Edinburgh’s Communications &amp; Marketing team. See: <a href="#">Undergraduate</a> &amp; <a href="#">Postgraduate</a> student videos.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3) Video clips of different types of teaching/learning methods at Edinburgh.</td>
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**General Undergraduate Pilot Projects**

**Resources for advisors of school students**

Comprises of an informational resource/ toolkit for advisors of school students on the Edinburgh student experience.

**Degree structure repository for the undergraduate prospectus**

Includes a degree structure repository to enhance the sample degree structure information in the undergraduate print and online prospectus.

**General Postgraduate Pilot Projects**

**Postgraduate student profiles**

Contains a set of four postgraduate student profiles (including PGT, PGR, and PhD) using agreed upon targeted thematic approaches for print and online material. This includes: funding opportunities (PGT/PGR), programme selection and skills development (PGT), programme selection and skills development (PGR), and employability (PhD).

**Creating exemplars to better articulate entry requirements and selection criteria**

Includes the development of exemplars and best practice guidance to better articulate entry requirements and selection criteria.

**Undergraduate - Subject Specific Pilot Projects**

**Differentiating between similar sounding degree programmes**

Utilising the UG BA Art/ MA Fine Art as a case study, the student voice will be used to better articulate the nature of the degrees through a live-blogging event.

**Understanding what a subject area involves**

Utilising the UG Mathematics programme as a case study, potential applicants will be provided with a better understanding of what the degree involves through the creation of an online and print based diagnostic tool.
6 Evaluation: Initial findings

Using qualitative and quantitative data methods – including focus groups and surveys – initial evaluations have been conducted on the four completed pilot projects, to begin to measure their impact. The four completed projects are: templates for Open Day speakers, the Perfect Match student video campaign, structured interviews with undergraduate and postgraduate UoE students, and a degree structure repository for the undergraduate print and web prospectus. The remaining pilot projects will be evaluated once they have been completed. Qualitative methods included two focus groups with school students (15 students in total; eight S5 students and seven S6 students) and three focus groups with current undergraduate and postgraduate UoE students contemplating future postgraduate study (21 students). The SEP annual staff survey evaluated how the work of SEP has impacted UoE staff and surveys were carried out to evaluate the Open Day templates.

Three key themes emerged from the data. These were: the importance of providing clear and practical informational material to students; the role of videos in the application process; and the role of trust.

- **The importance of clear and practical material**

A recurrent theme identified following analysis of focus group interviews with students and surveys completed by staff is that clear and practical resource materials could support applicants and potential applicants to make more informed HE choices.

In the focus groups with school students, participants were asked to compare the previous degree structure table with our enhanced version. Several students indicated their preference for the enhanced degree structure, feeling that it helped them to clearly visualise and understand this information.

[On the enhanced table] ‘It shows you more exactly what you’ll be able to do. It shows you the names of all the courses you’ll be doing so it helps you to picture in your head what kinds of things you’ll be studying rather than just the titles…It tells you basically what’s in that course so that you have an idea of what you’ll be going into. It gives you more information about what the course will entail’ (S5 student).

The Open Day toolkit provided staff with a resource which included a breakdown of the type of information that students value in a clear and interactive format. A survey was conducted after the Open Day and a majority of respondents agreed with the following statement: *the suggested content guidelines will allow potential applicants to make a more informed decision*. An academic member of staff provided the following comment:

‘The slides were great, in terms of clear signposting, and really enhanced the professionalism of my presentation. A great initiative, so thank you!’

These responses mirror feedback from the SEP staff survey.

‘It [the pilot projects] has had an extremely positive impact in our ability to communicate what it means to be a student at Edinburgh, thus helping applicants to make more informed choices and better prepare for entry’ (member of staff).
• The role of videos in the application process

In the focus groups, students identified that videos provided them with a more visual way to source information and that they preferred to see this type of information included with descriptive text. Some students discussed how the videos ‘break up walls of text’ and made them ‘feel more welcoming’. Students discussed the value of embedding video content to illustrate the authentic student voice within the University’s text-based informational material.

‘We get a reflection of the University and the kind of Master’s programme from the words of students, how they speak, how they experienced it. Their photographs and videos make it more attractive rather than just reading it online’ (potential PG student).

These responses mirror feedback from the SEP staff survey. Staff members identified that the AE student videos provide distinctive information to prospective applicants on what it means to be a student at UoE.

‘Student voice videos are being embedded into recruitment presentations, for use at home and overseas. These bring presentations to life, and speak directly to prospective students in a way that staff cannot’ (member of staff).

Although the student focus group participants indicated that they valued the use of videos within the application process, none of the students felt the videos as a standalone resource was enough to make a decision about a university. Rather, these videos acted as a complement to information that they gained in another way.

‘Videos are addition rather than essential information’ (potential PG student).

• The role of trust

When speaking about the Perfect Match student video campaign, many focus group participants expressed that they believed the students were trustworthy and seemed genuine.

‘They [the Perfect Match videos] didn’t seem fake because they were filmed on a phone’ (S5 student).

Other participants felt there were problems with some videos, including low video production quality and sound acoustics, which seemed to hinder their ability to trust the students.

After viewing the Perfect Match student created videos, student participants were shown the structured student video interviews, which were professionally produced by the University’s Communications and Marketing team. When asked their views on these videos, students articulated a range of reactions, from feeling very convinced to distrust and suspicion of the students’ sincerity.

The more trusting focus group participants discussed how:

‘I liked how it was sort of an interview, so it was sort of put on the spot, so that felt like the truth and it wasn’t sort of fabricated’ (S5 student).

The least trusting focus group participants discussed how:
‘I don’t trust these students, because you know it is marketing’ (potential PG student).

The student participants were also asked to compare the two sets of videos; the student created videos and the videos created by the University’s Communications and Marketing team. Many participants reported that the professionally created videos were more trustworthy and believable.

‘It’s [the professional video] weirdly more staged but also more convincing, more trustworthy’ (potential PG student).

7 Conclusion

This paper provided an overview of the range of transitions embedded in the applicant experience and why it is important to empower students to make informed HE decisions. This paper also describes the research and project work carried out during the lifecycle of the Applicant Experience strand. These included: 1) Initial research to analyse the pre-application and application experience as part of the overall student experience 2) The development of pilot projects based on research findings across the University of Edinburgh 3) Evaluating the impact of these pilot projects.

Although only four out of eleven pilot projects have been evaluated, initial findings suggest positive results. However, data gathered using focus groups and surveys do not provide direct measures on the impact of these pilot projects on empowering students to make more informed choices throughout each transitional stage of the applicant experience. This is because many of the pilot projects will be delivered at the end of the AE project, in the spring/summer 2015. As a result, these pilot projects have not had an opportunity to affect a full admissions cycle and impact subsequent cohorts of UoE students. Therefore, it is recommended to evaluate the impact of these pilot projects after the completion of a full admissions cycle and on subsequent cohorts of matriculated UoE students to measure the impact of these pilot projects on retention, development of realistic expectations, and on creating a positive student experience.

To maximise the value of these resources, another recommendation is to further embed these interventions into pre-existing UoE materials, such as prospectuses. As discussed in the initial findings, the true value of these pilot projects might be realised if they are used to support pre-existing materials rather than acting as stand-alone interventions.

It is encouraging that the University of Edinburgh provided significant funding for the Student Experience Project and included applicants and pre-applicants with this initiative. Initial positive feedback from the AE evaluations suggests that the AE expenditure was justified. Therefore, we recommend that this type of work is sustained in order to continue to benefit and support the diverse needs of pre-applicants and applicants.

8 References


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