



Designing your Applicant Experience Strategy Map

Summary of the Applicant Experience

SPA has defined the applicant experience as interactive participation and engagement that, *“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.”*

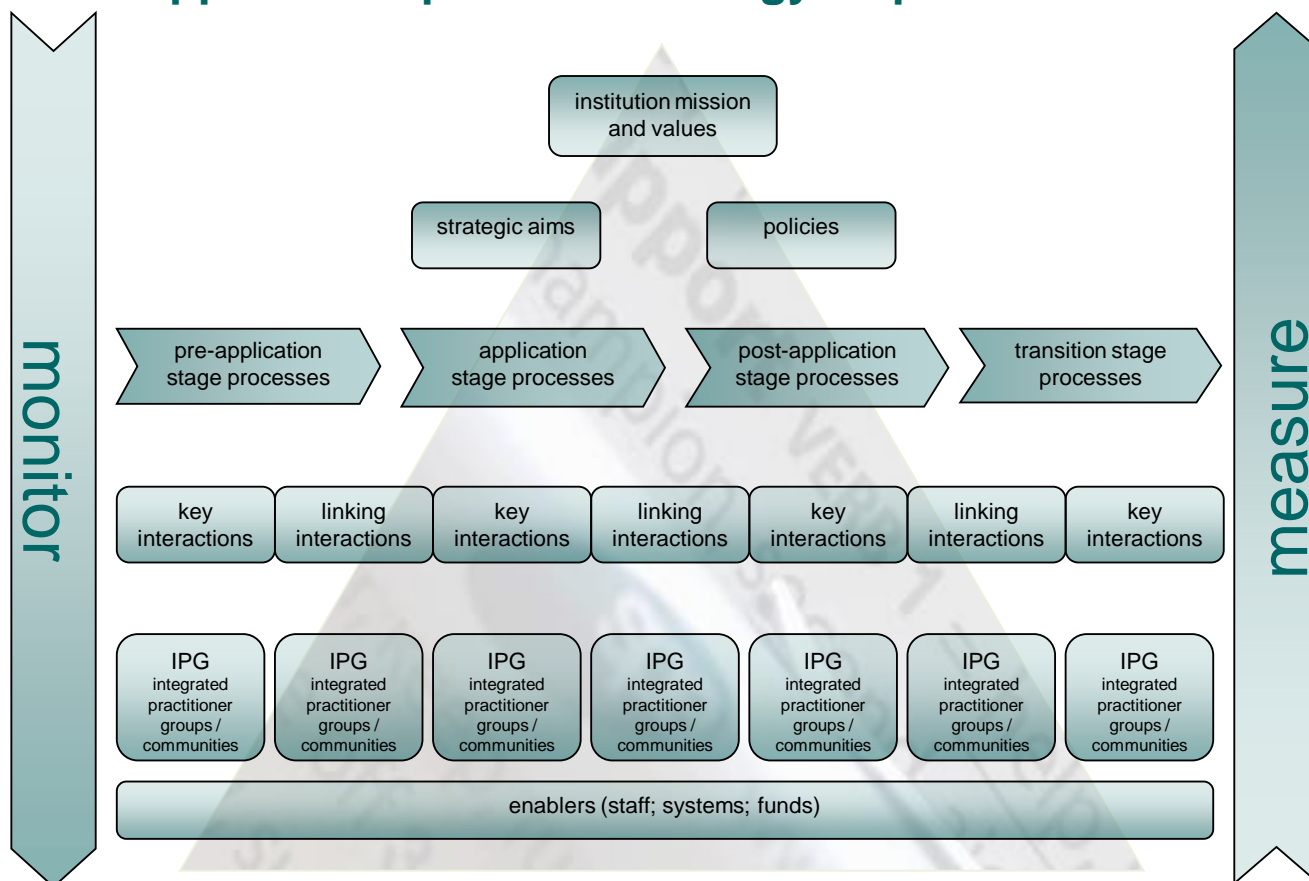
<u>A good applicant experience</u>	<u>A poor applicant experience</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ is mutually beneficial to both the applicant and the higher education provider ▪ prepares, informs and provides equality of opportunity to enter higher education ▪ should accurately match the student’s aims, abilities and aspirations with the character of the institution ▪ therefore improves student retention and enhances the strategic mission of the institution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ is inherently detrimental to both the applicant and the higher education provider – <i>both lose out</i> ▪ perpetuates barriers to entry ▪ disengages potential applicants and their advisors ▪ risks incongruence between student expectations and institutional character ▪ therefore embeds an enrolment strategy leading to unfulfilled potential and increased drop-out

Further information on the definition and research into the applicant experience may be found on the SPA website at www.spa.ac.uk/resources/applicant-experience. Institutions interested in mapping their engagement and developing a strategy centred on the applicant experience may find the below strategy map a useful template for structuring consideration and co-ordinating activity.

The 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



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.

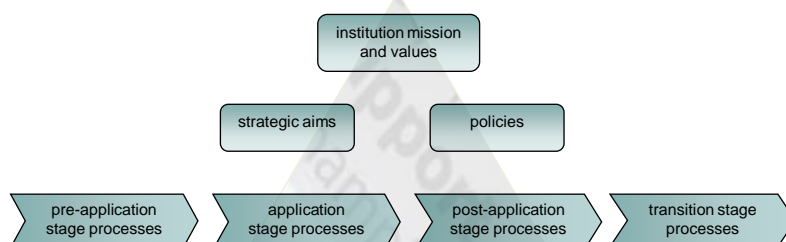
Define budget / resources: senior management buy-in is essential for an applicant experience strategy to succeed, particularly as resources will derive from many different departments and areas of budgetary responsibility.

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

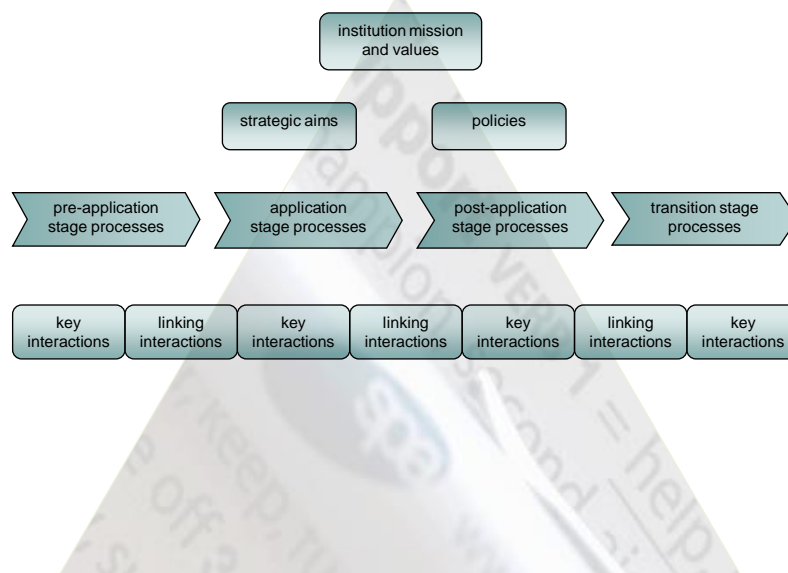
The Applicant Experience Strategy Map – top-down influencers



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.

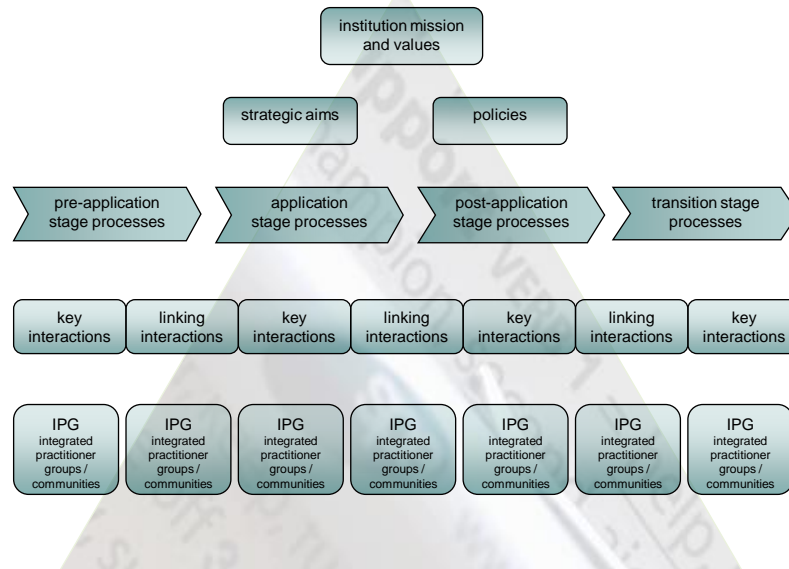
The Applicant Experience Strategy Map – bottom-up influencers



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.

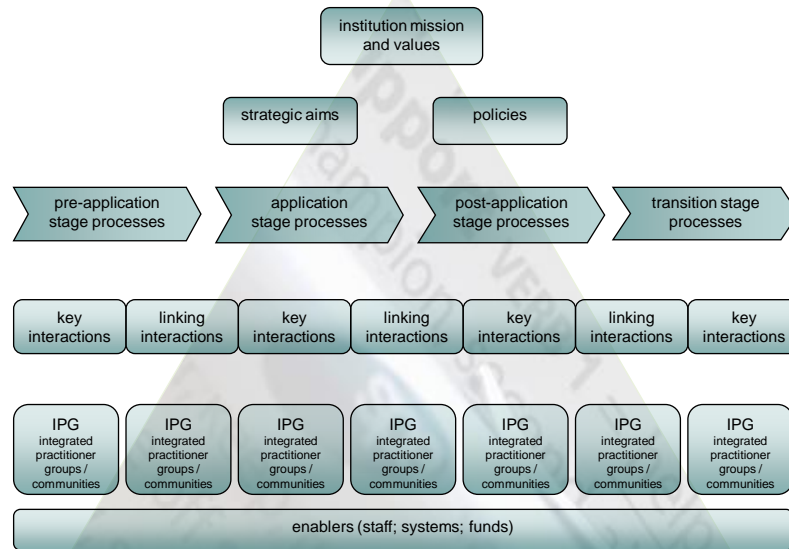
The Applicant Experience Strategy Map – bottom-up influencers



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 identify 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.

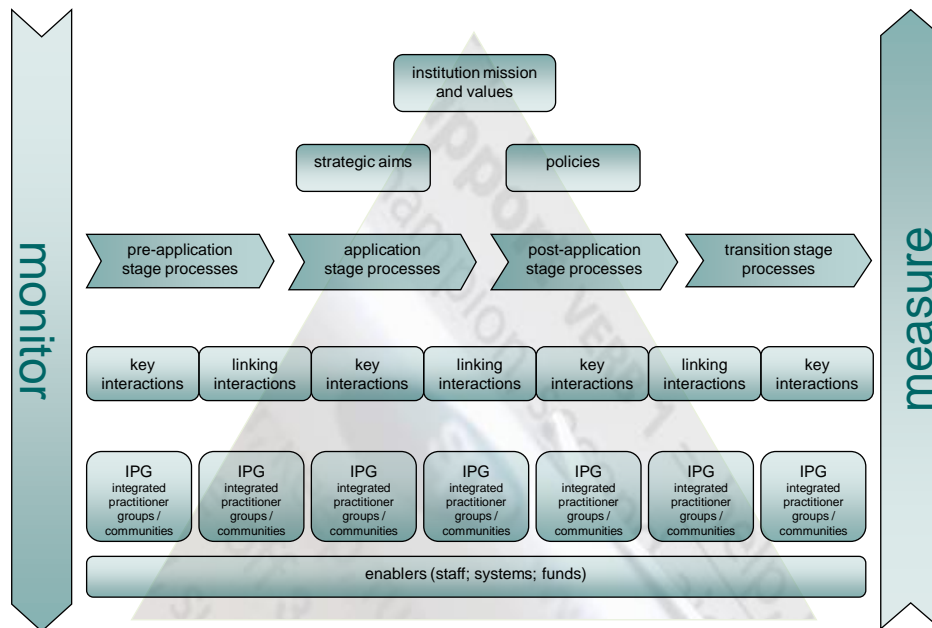
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Enablers underpin the whole strategy. These should be viewed as far more than just resources: they will directly affect the effectiveness of the strategy and no part of it can be implemented without knowing what enablers are immediately available, 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?

SPA would be happy to discuss this strategy further with anyone considering adopting such an approach or from any institution already engaged in similar practice. We would be particularly interested in hearing from any institution willing to have their experience cited as a case study. Please contact Dan Shaffer (d.shaffer@spa.ac.uk) or any other member of the SPA team.

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SPA

April 2010

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