

Applicant Strategy CUKAS Online focus group 4 December 2014

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Executive summary

- The findings of this research echo those of the first CUKAS End of Cycle applicant survey, conducted in December 2013.
- Respondents have found the CUKAS process fairly easy to use.
- There is least satisfaction with the cost of audition fees and a perception that the CUKAS application process seems a little more complex than UCAS' application process.
- For international students, the cost of travel and accommodation for auditions are an additional burden.
- Some CUKAS applicants feel they get less support from their school than UCAS applicants, as staff don't have a comprehensive understanding of conservatoires and of the CUKAS process. UCAS should provide additional I&A to address this.
- Respondents liked the draft CUKAS web pages for ucas.com (which was re-launched in January 2015, a few weeks after the session). Tweaks were made to the pages, following this feedback.
- Respondents found the Uni Leap game to be fun, addictive, but not really what they'd expect from UCAS/CUKAS.
- Ideally, respondents would like to receive information from CUKAS/UCAS by email, social media and videos.
- Most would prefer to contact us by email.

Recommendations for improving the CUKAS applicant experience

- A smartphone app – to access Conservatoires ucas.com web pages and Track.
- Learners want to find out about the CUKAS process and deadlines earlier in the cycle.
- They would like the ‘Something has changed’ email to tell them exactly what reply they’ve received.
- Applicants would like a monthly e-newsletter. They’d like the content of this tailored to their choices and their circumstances.
- Integration of CUKAS and UCAS, so that those applying to both don’t have to make two separate applications.
- Allow payment of fees by PayPal.
- Allow applicants to communicate with the contact centre by email.
- Provide more detail about exactly what is required at conservatoire auditions.

Methodology and research objectives

- This online focus group was conducted on 4 December 2014; it comprised CUKAS applicants who have applied for 2015 entry. We plan to conduct a second session with the same respondents in April 2015.
- These online focus groups are designed to capture feedback throughout the application process. The research objectives are to:
 - Explore qualitatively the experience of pre-applicants and applicants at various stages throughout their journey
 - Understand their response to our products and services
 - Explore improvements which would enhance their experience.
- Multiple contact means their feedback is immediate rather than retrospective, which can be more reliable and not impacted by other factors that occur after the event. Each online focus group comprises a mix of research topics, suggested by colleagues from across UCAS.
- Respondents were recruited via email. Volunteers were asked to complete a screener survey, then a cross-section of suitable respondents were invited to the session. Each respondent received a £35 Amazon gift certificate or £35 Love2Shop voucher as a 'thank you' for their time.

The online focus group

- Online groups are similar to traditional focus groups, except the discussion takes place in UCAS' purpose built, secure online chatroom, in real time.
- The discussion lasts for two hours and requires two moderators.
- Chatroom technology is provided by Visionslive.
- We use mainly open-ended questions. We can show text, images and videos on the whiteboard.
- UCAS colleagues can observe the chat in real time and suggest additional questions via the 'observer chat' box.
- A transcript of each discussion is automatically created, enabling easy analysis.

The screenshot displays a Visionslive chatroom interface. At the top, a browser window shows 'The UCAS website' with navigation links like 'Home', 'How to apply', 'Undergraduate', 'Postgraduate', 'Teacher training', and 'Compendiums'. Below this is a 'How to apply' section with a search bar and application tracking options. The chatroom interface at the bottom features a 'Chat' box on the left, an 'Observer Chat' box on the right, and a 'Private Questions' tab. Red arrows point from the text labels 'Chat box', 'Whiteboard – can be used to show text, images and videos to respondents', and 'Private observer chat box – for colleagues to communicate with moderators' to their respective components in the interface.

Chat box

Whiteboard – can be used to show text, images and videos to respondents

Private observer chat box – for colleagues to communicate with moderators

Topics covered

- Experience of the CUKAS process so far – what could be improved?
- Interest in receiving CUKAS newsletters
- The CUKAS website (prior to re-launch)
- Feedback on moving conservatoires content to ucas.com
- Feedback on the conservatoires content for ucas.com
- The 'Not sure' tool on ucas.com
- Feedback on Uni Leap
- Information consumption preferences

Respondent profile

- Eleven respondents participated in this online focus group. They are aged between 17 and 22 years.
- Six are UK students; five are EU or international students (from Malaysia, Poland, Romania, South Africa and USA).
- Seven had applied only through CUKAS, four had applied through CUKAS *and* UCAS. They had applied for a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate courses.
- Subjects they want to study at a conservatoire include: Acting, Composition, Drama Performance, Musical Theatre, Music Performance (voice/piano/popular music) and Opera.
- Respondents' ideal careers include actor (stage/TV), composer, conductor, opera singer, musician, pianist and sound engineer.
- All but one had applied through a school or college.
- Several respondents had had conservatoire auditions recently, or had auditions scheduled.

Respondents have found the CUKAS process easy to use

[In Apply] the information we had to fill in all felt extremely relevant. I really felt as if I was able to present myself in the best possible way.

[I'm] really excited. I already had my audition. Got my answer in less than 12 hours. CUKAS was great. Really clear, straightforward 😊

It's exciting, but a long process!

Simple and easy to handle. Information about audition locations and times are easy to get hold of through the Track system.

It's been a good process for me. Most of [my friends] went through UCAS and it was a pretty similar process which was helpful for me when filling out my application.

- Both UK and international students would have liked to know about the deadline/ process earlier in the cycle.

Applications are never a delight to go through, but I thought CUKAS made it very easy.

My application was very last minute. Since I am also applying to US schools (which are full 2 months behind UK schedule), I didn't see the deadline coming until 2 days before!

I went to apply through the website of the school and didn't realise I needed to go through CUKAS [until then]

I only realised 8 days before the October deadline that I had to apply through CUKAS which was very unnerving at the time.

Experience of contacting us

- Those who had phoned the contact centre had had a positive customer experience.

I've contacted by phone a couple of times. Both times the process was v. quick and efficient, and the person I spoke to over the phone was friendly

The operator was really friendly and assisted me with the problem I faced. She even made a couple of light jokes and was really gracious to me – making the situation less tense (I was a few hours away from the deadline) and gave me some assurance 😊

- But their preferred method of contact is email.

I can keep track on emails, and read back on them. I don't trust my short term memory!

[I prefer] email. You can give time thinking about what to say! I find phonecalls with strangers scary!

There is least satisfaction with...

- The cost of audition fees
- The fact that the UCAS application process seems a little less complex than the CUKAS process.
- International students had difficulty with...
 - Payment
 - Submitting details of their qualifications
 - Affording cost of travel and accommodation for auditions

Audition and travel fees have been very expensive

UCAS is slightly more user friendly, as it is simplified compared to CUKAS

I agree [it's expensive to apply through CUKAS], especially as you have to pay each conservatoire a separate fee, plus the CUKAS/UCAS one!

Some respondents say their school/college did not have enough knowledge of CUKAS to support them fully

My college weren't very well prepared for anyone going through CUKAS. They didn't really have the knowledge to help me.

We did [our applications] in tutor time. But I felt the emphasis was on UCAS. There was little emphasis from my teachers about CUKAS. [Especially] applying to drama schools, I feel the college were supportive, but all their knowledge was based on UCAS, not performing arts.

When prompted, respondents say they'd like monthly e-newsletters

- Ideally, the content should be tailored to their conservatoire choices and their circumstances.
- They'd be most likely to read these emails on a laptop or phone.

Email updates would be good for deadlines and stuff like that

[I'd want] only an email for things relating to my school I have applied to or the course I want to do

Yes, would be useful to receive updates. Would be nice to know responses from music colleges rather than having to log on and check every time. Would be nice to be emailed information about the auditions, like times and dates etc.

[I'd like] information comparing the different audition processes and options of the different conservatoires. I found that a bit confusing.

Perhaps once a month [it would be helpful to get and email] – compiling a few of the distinctive achievements and performances from each conservatoire would be helpful as a summary/review. (Information on their websites could be too long at times).

Respondents' suggestions for improving the CUKAS process

- A smartphone app to access CUKAS web pages and Track.
- Inform students *earlier* about the CUKAS process and deadlines.
- Allow students applying for a PG program to re-use CUKAS details they've previously submitted when applying for UG courses.
- Improve clarity/specificity of CUKAS 'Something has changed' email.
- Integration of CUKAS and UCAS, so that applicants don't have to make two separate applications.
- More examples of how to answer questions in Apply.
- Earlier publication of audition dates at each conservatoire.
- Allow payment via PayPal.
- Allow applicants to communicate with the contact centre by email.
- Provide more detail about exactly what is required at auditions. E.g.:
 - Do the panel require copies of the music?
 - How long should they expect to wait if they are put through the scholarship round
 - If they are asked to bring a 'DVD of some recent works', how many?

CUKAS web pages

- Respondents had a fairly positive view of the CUKAS website (as it was at the time of the session) – although some reported having difficulties with confusing navigation and described its look and feel as rather ‘amateurish’.
- When we explained that the Conservatoires pages would be moving to ucas.com, they were delighted.

From next month, all of the content from the CUKAS website will be transferred to the new UCAS website, ucas.com.

So students will search for conservatoire courses and also apply at ucas.com.

Anyone who clicks on the old CUKAS site will be re-directed to the Conservatoires page of ucas.com.

Fantastic! Exactly what we have been saying [is needed]

That will be so much easier!

[It will be] easier to explain to your friends who have no clue what CUKAS is!!!!

New Conservatoires pages forucas.com

- Respondents liked the draft Conservatoires homepage forucas.com.

Now it looks like UCAS :D

Looks simple enough to navigate.
Looks a lot better.

It's user-friendly and information on application process is clear

I love love love the choice of images.



[It looks] really professional
and user-friendly

[It looks] perspicuous,
helpful, friendly

The new web pages look easy to navigate

- They'd find it easy to locate the videos.
- The 'Not sure' links were fairly noticeable. They'd expect to find FAQs/help/contact us here.
- They like the idea of a video wall showing lots of examples of music and drama students performing.
- On the 'Not sure tool' page itself, the wording 'Who are you' was felt to be too confrontational. 'Tell us about yourself' was suggested instead.
- They like the 'Not sure where to go?' page, which directs users to the relevant web pages.
- They like the content we showed them, including the 'accordion' display feature.
- They like being able to see where they are on the website.
- Where Twitter tweets were shown, they felt there were too many on the page – and that a maximum of three should be shown.

Spontaneously suggested FAQs for the new web pages

- Can I apply to 5 Conservatoires and 5 universities?
- Do my references have to be submitted when I submit my application?
- What is the UCAS/CUKAS application fee used for?
- How do I reply to audition offers?
- Will I be informed when my references have been received?
- How many people got accepted by their first choice?
- What happens if my application is late?
- What will happen at the audition?
- How much does it cost to apply?
- How will I know when my application has been received?
- What should I expect after I've submitted my application?
- What should I do if I get no offers?
- What are the different 'acceptance' options?
- Is there anyone who can check I've completed my application correctly?
- How and when do I reply to my offers?
- What is a conditional acceptance?

We want to write some FAQs for CUKAS applicants.

What questions do you think we should include?

- Where can I find out about funding/ scholarships/ bursaries that may be available to me?
- How do I find out which providers offer the course I want to do?

Prompted FAQs for the new web pages

- They like the FAQs we prompted them with. These are the top queries that come into the contact centre.

How do I pay fees?

What's the deadline
for my course?

References - how do I
send and attach details?

How do I add
qualifications?

How do I request a refund?

Outstanding fees

I can't log in – help!

Queries on auditions
and audition updates

Uni Leap

- Most of the respondents had downloaded Uni Leap and tried it out in advance of the session.
- They found it fun and addictive, but difficult.
- They hadn't expected UCAS to create a game.
- Many, felt it was aimed at much younger students – and not CUKAS applicants.
- They approve of the idea of sending optional 'push' notifications, such as CUKAS deadline reminders, to people who have downloaded the game.
- But they would definitely NOT want to receive advertising notifications from commercial companies.



I love the simple but memorable visuals, the peppy music, and the general idea

[It's] aimed at a younger target market and not students

It looks a bit childish

I hate and love that it's so addictive

I wish it had more to do with universities and applications

Information consumption preferences

- Ideally, respondents would like to receive information from CUKAS/UCAS by email, social media and videos.
- A few respondents were aware of UCAS Online, on Facebook and Twitter.
- Social media sites they use the most are Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.