



Supporting Professionalism
in Admissions

SPA National Expert Think Tank

Fair admissions in a
competitive environment

Communication channels with
applicants

June 2016

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SPA National Expert Think Tanks

National Expert Think Tanks (NETTs) are expert groups convened by SPA to inform and influence topical national debates on fairness and good practice in higher education (HE) admissions. In 2015-16, the NETT considered how fair admissions can be maintained and enhanced in the current HE landscape, how fair admissions is understood across the sector in the UK, and what it means to individual HE providers. The aim of the NETT was to support HE providers in addressing these issues in the more competitive and resource-stretched higher education landscape.

This work has focussed on the communication channels where information is ‘pushed’ directly to applicants from Admissions, rather than indirect, passive channels for displaying information, such as website or broader marketing campaigns.

Introduction

Effective communication between applicant and admissions staff requires interaction. Always think about how applicants will engage with any messages and how they can find out more, raise questions or take the next step.

The principles of fair admissions should be embedded within any effective communication with applicants, to ‘enable applicants, regardless of background, to select a course as judged by their achievements and potential’. The principles are:

1. be transparent
2. enable institutions to select students who are able to complete the course, as judged by their achievements and their potential
3. strive to use assessment methods that are reliable and valid
4. seek to minimise barriers for applicants
5. be professional in every aspect and underpinned by appropriate institutional structures and processes

This will also help ensure the communication with applicants meets the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education \(QAA\) Expectation for the recruitment, selection and admission of students](#).

The NETT has produced a set of resources, designed to work as a staged plan for HE providers to:

1. Understand different communication channels and their take-up by different applicant audiences, through [findings from the NETT survey](#).
2. View a [template survey](#), allowing other HE providers to conduct a similar survey of their own.
3. Consider a [case study \(UWE, Bristol\)](#) illustrating how one university used the survey to identify areas to further develop the effectiveness of their communications.
4. Review a list of [key reflective questions](#) to help challenge fairness and effectiveness in recruitment and admissions communications.
5. Focus on the impact of different communications on equality, WP, disadvantaged or other institutionally-targeted groups through a series of [SWOT analyses](#).

These resources will support HE providers consider, review and manage their applicant communications plan. This will ensure all applicants feel supported, informed and enabled when choosing what and where to study. As such, this approach to building a communications plan forms a vital tool to aid conversion and to effectively engage with underrepresented groups.

If you want to find out more, ask any questions, or provide a case study of your own, please contact enquiries@spa.ac.uk.

1. Findings from the NETT survey

A survey examining applicants' perceptions of the communications they receive from all their choices was conducted as part of the NETT's research into fair admissions.

Responses were gathered in April 2016 and findings from 1,604 respondents from UWE, Bristol are represented here.

These findings will:

- ✓ Help UWE, Bristol to review, refine and enhance the timings, frequency, content and customisation of their applicant communications.
- ✓ Help other HE providers consider what they can do to evaluate their own communication.
- ✓ Allow other HE providers to compare themselves against this example from UWE.

Q1: How many communications would you like between application and offer?

Only one
(i.e. offer only)



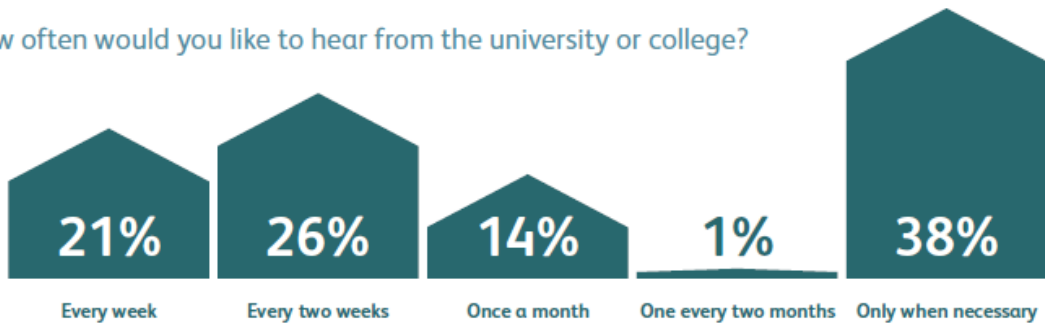
A few
(regarding the current progress of my application)



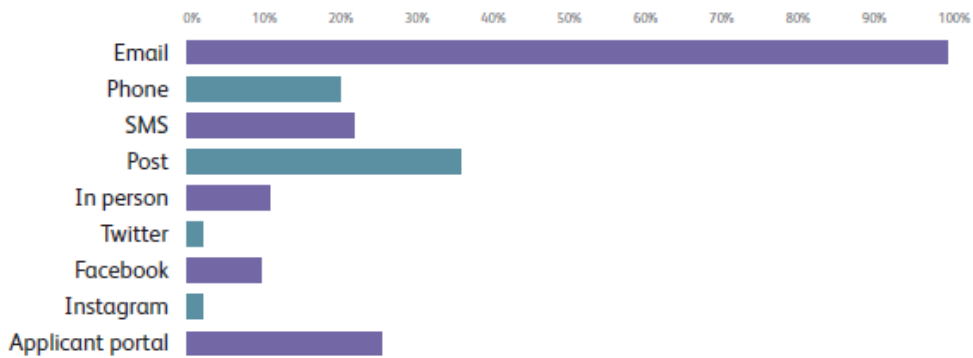
More
(including general information about the university/college)



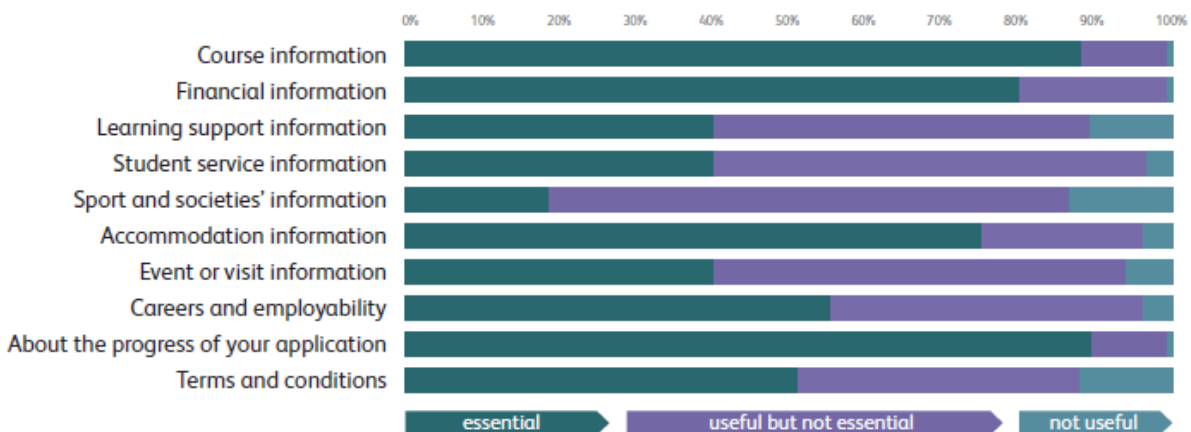
Q2: How often would you like to hear from the university or college?



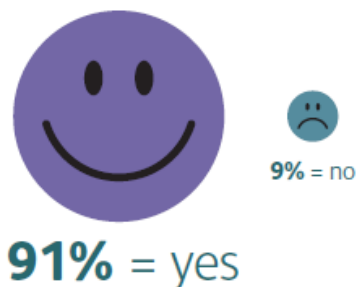
Q3: How do you prefer to be communicated with?



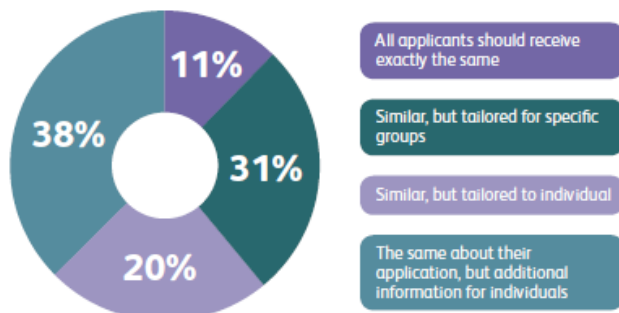
Q4: What information is most useful to you apart from the decision on your application?



Q5: Do you feel that the communications were informative and supportive to your individual needs?



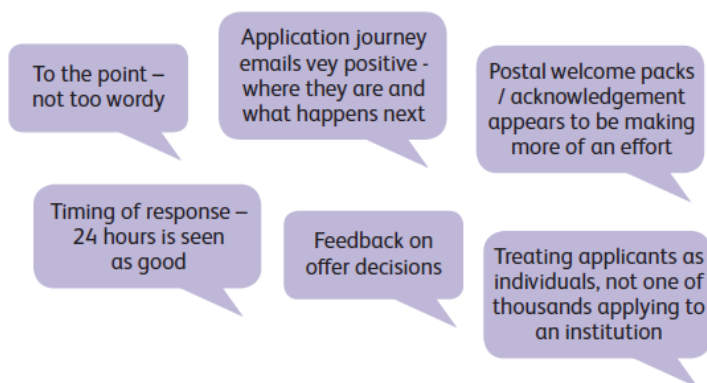
Q6: In your opinion, which of the below options is the fairest for communicating with applicants?



Free text responses: examples that had a negative impact on your experience of applying



Free text responses: examples that had a positive impact on your experience of applying



You may get some fascinating comments



A pdf handout of these survey findings is also available on the NETT section of the SPA website www.spa.ac.uk/resources/fair-admissions-nett.

2. Survey template

A template for the questions used in the NETT survey is provided below. You may wish to adapt these questions to conduct a similar survey of your applicants, tailoring terminology and style to fit your own.

You should decide whether or not to include questions that identify personal or course choice information. There are advantages to being able to scrutinise responses by more detailed groupings. However, it may be counterproductive to ask too many questions, pre-suppose which characteristics are more important than others, or break down analysis into groupings that elicit small response numbers that could skew results. Have a very clear plan of the intended purpose behind any information before deciding to include it. It would be advisable to request advice from your equality and diversity staff if you are considering requesting details of personal characteristics.

You should also consider the timing of your survey. The questions should reflect the stage of admission the relevant applicants are at (e.g. if asking any questions about the offer, ensure it only goes out after your decision-making deadlines). It should also be mindful of any times of year that may influence the response rate (e.g. if wishing to send it between offer and acceptance, take note of when Easter holidays fall, especially if large numbers of applicants have school email addresses).

Finally, ensure the survey only goes out to valid, current applicants.

We would recommend including the below questions, as they will allow you to compare/benchmark your responses to the findings above.

Q1: How many communications do you feel is appropriate for you to receive between making an application and receiving an offer?	
Only one, i.e. offer only	
A few, regarding the current progress of my application	
More, including general information about the university/college	

Q2: How often would you like to hear from the university/college during the entire application process?	
Every week	
Every two weeks	
Once a month	
Once every two months	
Only when it is necessary (e.g. information about accommodation; fees; confirmation of your place)	

Q3: How do you prefer to be communicated with? (Please tick all that apply.)	
Applicant portal	
Email	
In person	
Phone	
Post	
SMS text	

Facebook	
Twitter	
WhatsApp	
Other (please specify)	

Q4: What information is most useful to you apart from the decision on your application?	
Course information	
Financial information	
Accessing study support	
Student welfare support	
Sports and societies information	
Accommodation information	
Event or visit information	
Future careers and employability	
Updates about the progress of your application	
University/college regulations, terms & conditions	

Q5: Do you feel that the communications were supportive and informative to your specific, individual needs?	
Yes	
No	

Q6: In your opinion, which of the below options is the fairest for communicating with applicants?	
All applicants should receive exactly the same.	
All applicants should receive exactly the same communications concerning the state of their application, but any additional information relevant to the individual may also be sent separately.	
All applicants should receive similar information, but it should be tailored for a few specific groups who may require amendments to the standard communication (e.g. disabled applicants; mature applicants; care leavers).	
Applicants should receive very individual communications and it doesn't matter if it's different to what others get.	

Q7: Can you give us any examples of our communications that have had a positive or negative impact on your experience

Q8: Thinking more generally about the other universities and colleges you have applied to, can you give us any examples of communications that have had a positive or negative impact on your experience of applying?

<Thank you for completing this survey>

3. Case study

UWE, Bristol analysed the findings from their applicants' responses to this survey to identify areas to further develop the effectiveness of their communications. They have developed a plan to review the timings, frequency, content and customisation of their applicant communications. The expected outcome is to ensure applicants receive the right information at the right time, and do not feel bombarded by unnecessary or irrelevant information.

The case study action plan is available as an appendix below.

If you choose to conduct your own survey and wish to add a case study, please contact enquiries@spa.ac.uk.

4. Key reflective questions

As part of an applicant communications review you may wish to consider the following reflective questions to help you ensure your communications remain as effective as possible.

- △ Does it contain essential information? If not, do you need to send at all/now/to everyone?
- △ Does the content fit with all audiences? If not, can it be tailored for different audiences?
- △ Are you communicating in a fair way? Does the communication/content/method disadvantage any groups?
- △ Have you used plain English? If you use a language other than English, is this also plain?
- △ Who is reviewing/proof-reading your messages? Are they all admissions staff or do you have people involved who aren't familiar with the terminology, including students, who are sense-checking the communication?
- △ Is the delivery method right? How do you know this group wants to receive information via that particular medium?
- △ Is the timing within the applicant journey right?
- △ Have you planned to ensure you have the right permissions, advance notice and people to deliver the communication when you want it?
- △ Have you taken the necessary steps to ensure that it is compliant with legislation? (e.g. Equality Act; Consumer Protection; Data Protection; UKVI)
- △ Who else, other than Admissions, is communicating with your applicants? Do you know when these communications occur? Are they accurate and CMA compliant?

- △ Do you have a process for coordinating all communications across the institution throughout the year to ensure they are consistent, not duplicating, timely, and not bombarding the applicant? Is everyone aware of any embargo periods when communications should not happen?
- △ Are you able to measure the effectiveness of any communications you send? If not, how do you know whether to continue sending or suspend it?
- △ Have you looked at other resources available to help you communicate effectively?

5. SWOT analyses

There are clear advantages for using a diverse range of media to communicate with applicants, and in varying the volume and frequency of their use. Many HE providers will have developed approaches for evaluating the effectiveness of their media in reaching their main target audience. However, in order to support fair admissions and fair access, HE providers will also wish to ensure other key groups, particularly those currently underrepresented in their institutions, are also effectively targeted. Indeed, effective communication may be seen as a critical tool for taking positive action to encourage participation.

A SWOT analysis tool has been developed by the NETT as a starting point for HE providers wishing to consider the impact of communications on fair admissions and fair access. It looks at the potential impact of a range of different communication channels on some disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. We strongly recommend HE providers use this tool to further their own internal analysis, and add their own considerations, including any of their own target groups.

Once identified via the SWOT analysis, HE providers will need to ensure they can measure, evaluate and review the impact of their communications on these groups, especially if any new initiatives are introduced.

www.spa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Template-NETT-SWOT-Communications.xlsx

UWE, Bristol case study reviewing our applicant communications

What we did

Following analysis of the communications survey responses we have created a plan of our proposed actions which will allow us to review the timings, frequency, content and customisation of our applicant communications. The expected outcome is to ensure applicants are receiving the right information at the right time, and do not feel bombarded by unnecessary or irrelevant information. This will improve the applicant journey and seek to minimise barriers to application, particularly for underrepresented groups. It will also enhance the professionalism of our service and ensure our communications are underpinned by accurate knowledge of our applicant needs.

What we found

Survey question number	What the survey told us	What we're going to do
1	96% of applicants wanted to receive more than just their offer communication between application and offer.	Review how often we communicate with applicants between application and offer, with a view to increasing this a little.
1	43% of applicants wanted to receive general information about the university or college between application and offer.	Look at the information we send between application and offer and provide more information about the university, but without going overboard as we don't want to annoy the 57% who did not select this option. We will also consider customisation of our applicant portal to provide more detail for those who want it at this stage.
2 (and linked to free text responses)	Most applicants wanted information more often than once a month, but the majority also wanted to receive information only when necessary to the point in the application journey that they were at.	Review timeline of when communications are sent in relation to the stage of the journey the applicant is at. Ensure communications are sent at a time when there will be staff available to respond to any subsequent queries. Consideration of customising communications by asking for their preferences when they first apply – setting up of communication tracks for different applicant profiles. Coordinate your communications with other areas e.g. Accommodation to ensure most relevant information is sent at the right time.
3	Email was the most popular communication type, with post, applicant portal and SMS also having high popularity. Social media was low in popularity.	Review the types of communications sent, with a view to identifying suitable communications to be sent by post/SMS, however majority of communications will still be sent via email/portal.

Survey question number	What the survey told us	What we're going to do
4	Applicants want a variety of information in addition to their application decision. They saw course, finance, accommodation and application progress as essential information with all other types as useful but not essential.	Review the content of our communications to guarantee we are sending information the majority of applicants viewed as essential. Building in customisation for other content so that applicants are able to choose which content they wish to receive.
5 (and linked to free text responses)	The overwhelming majority said they were satisfied that communications met their needs.	Review communications to ensure that there is nothing within them that might be putting off any of the lower-represented groups of applicants e.g. mature.
6	89% of respondents said they felt some level of tailoring of communication to individual/specific group needs was the fairest approach to communications.	As part of the communications review, look at building in tailored communications at appropriate steps in the applicant journey without creating inconsistencies or risk of disadvantaging particular groups by tailoring communications too much. Liaise with other departments (including Recruitment and Outreach and WP in Community Engagement Manager) to ensure a joined up approach to communications and allow for formative feedback from their experiences.
Free text responses	24 hours is seen as a good response time	As part of our project looking at enquiry management, consider response times and ensure resources are allocated appropriately. Manage expectations where it may not be possible to respond within this timescale, which is especially important if there might be a significant wait for the applicant between application and offer e.g. courses requiring interview.
Free text responses	Applicants want communications that are to the point – not too wordy	Continue to use colleagues in Marketing as copywriters/reviewers to ensure content is plain English. Consider working with SU to include student reviewers of communications.
-	-	Review our communications, timings and content on an annual basis.