

Scottish Government

15-24 Learner Journey Review

Project 3: Access and Application, Common Application Process

This document provides a summary of the work undertaken to understand the need/benefits of a common college application process.

April 2018

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i) What did the evidence tell us?

Full costing implications of possible options will need to be tested as part of any further development of Stage 2 of this Project.

- All colleges in Scotland were asked to complete baseline information templates on existing IT systems and processes for college application. A key objective of this approach was to gather data on the costs of operating and maintaining current application processes, however the information received was very limited.
- The number of returns from colleges was low, (6 colleges responded). Data gathered through this process was also limited and insufficiently consistent to make the information useable in determining the current unit costs of administering existing applications processes.
We also researched the cost of setting up UCAS Progress in Scotland, and the Career Wales CAP project, but could not find any useable data.
- We also sought cost information to inform policy recommendations from other sources but unfortunately no useable information was available.

ii) The approach taken

We:

- Held conversations with key stakeholders (students, college principals, members of the Colleges Scotland data network, Skills Development Scotland, Scottish Funding Council and the NUS) to understand the potential benefits and limitations of the current college application process and options to change the system.
- A separate work stream was undertaken to understand the current practices relating to college application processes in the rest of the UK.
- Three stakeholder engagement sessions took place in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Inverness. The events were well attended and the results of these conversations fed into the analysis of the benefits and implementation considerations of the 3 options listed below:
- **Option 1: Establish minimum national data standards** to support demand planning by ensuring colleges gather the same defined and agreed data about their prospective students during the application process;
- **Option 2: A regional /cross-regional application** portal promoting better linkage between colleges in multi-college regions and between regions where students tend to travel to study;
- **Option 3: A national common college application system.**

These three options were **tested against the following objectives:**

- Improve ease and equity with which young people can apply for college
- Inform the extent of unmet demand for college places in Scotland.

iii) Challenges and opportunities

We noted:

Option 1: Establish minimum national data standards

- The need for improved data to underpin the delivery of all options considered.
- Analysis of student numbers can improve curriculum planning and availability of 'real-time' data could allow Colleges to alert potential applicants to available courses.
- The data will need to be standardised and not become out of date quickly but national analysis could identify regional demand.
- Cost and staffing implications were a concern for colleges. In addition, the system would need to capture all courses so they don't need to manage multiple application systems.
- Centralised collation and analysis of data may require a change to the legislative framework.

Option 2: A regional /cross-regional application

- Variant is being considered already for colleges in Glasgow
- The system would allow students to track all regional applications in one place and could lead to regional clearing system and ready-made regional data-sets.
- It was agreed that common data should be agreed first before committing to more significant change and identifying responsibility for the system and overcoming issues with overlapping regions.
- The system could introduce a potential cost to apply, remove the personal/local touch and present a barrier to students moving courses after term date.

Option 3: A national common college application system

- Thought that a national application process could change perceptions of FE and improve parity of esteem between FE and HE.
- A single on-line application would widen opportunities (including for those outside Scotland) and avoid duplication. Potential for national clearing system.
- Consistent data reporting would be possible as data would be centrally generated. Efficiencies could free up resources to concentrate on student support and service provision.
- Applicants could be faced with an overwhelming choice of courses and online applications could be a barrier to entry for some applicants, for example those with additional support needs. Local support may be lost.
- Significant costs would be involved in implementation of the system, and a unified system could present IT failure and breach risks.

Policy ideas/ proposals which were discussed

- The college sector rejected the idea of a national application process because it was felt radical change isn't required. It was perceived by Colleges that not having ownership would result in a lack of control over the process. Further, there were concerns around losing the local benefits and tailored application process that individual colleges can offer. Ultimately, it was felt the process would be too expensive for the benefit that it would bring.
- It was suggested that course search functionality (on MWow) could allow potential students to see all college courses offered in a particular subject and provide links to college sites to allow them to apply directly to the college.

Students would be able to see all courses in an area and click to find the relevant College offering that course.

- It was also suggested that a standardised data set could be created, which could be collected by colleges through the applications process. This would standardise terminology and ease the application process for candidates applying to more than one institution.
- Standardising the timetable for applications was suggested as an area of development. This could take into account UCAS deadlines for offers. This could also provide students with all their course offers at the same time and reduce students accepting multiple places on courses – colleges can then better plan their timetable and understand capacity constraints.
- Finally, colleges in multi-college regions could work together to provide collective information about course options and potentially create a common portal. This would allow students to see a list of all courses in the multi-college region.