

## PRACTICE PAPER

# Online digital portfolio for student applications to Art and Design programmes

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## Abstract

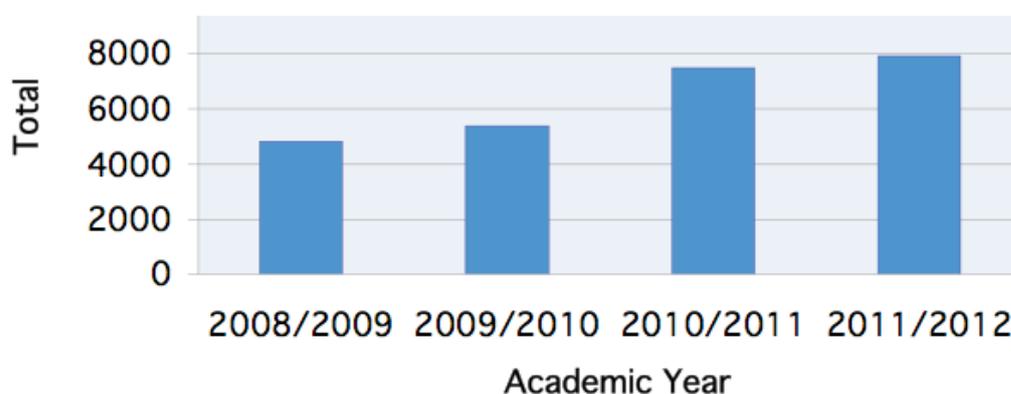
Following a significant change to the UCAS admissions systems for art and design degree programmes, potential challenges were identified to the admissions processes in a university faculty of art and design. In particular, an increase in the number of applications threatened to make it difficult to manage interview processes and maintain fairness and diversity. A method of filtering applications was deemed necessary. This paper outlines the trial of an online digital portfolio designed to streamline the new UCAS admissions process and address equality and diversity issues raised by an increase in applications.

## Introduction

Prior to 2010, UCAS operated a two routes system for admissions to art and design degree courses. Route A, like the rest of the university sector, was primarily aimed at 'A' level applicants and took place early in the year, followed by route B later in the year. Most students recruited onto art and design practice-based degree programmes completed a Foundation in Art and Design course (FAD) and came through route B. Students listed their first, second and third choice of courses on the application form. Popular programmes could fill up on route B first choice applications with no need to offer any second choice interviews or offers. This system required student

applicants and their tutors to be strategic in their choices, selecting programmes and institutions where they had a good chance of being accepted onto programmes. Almost all students who applied through route B and were accepted on a course took up the place. The institutions were able to control numbers and manage their own admissions processes.

In 2010, however, there was a change to the UCAS application system for art and design institutions, from a two-route system to a single route. The new system, gave prospective students up to five equal choices and, potentially, five offers of a place. This meant that the Faculty of Art and Design had a substantial increase in applications to process. It also meant that it was difficult to predict the number of students taking up a place. This new UCAS admissions system challenged the Faculty of Art and Design to look at the way current practice could be modified or improved within this new system.



*Figure 1: Total number of applicants in to the Faculty of Art and Design from 2008 to 2011*

## **Alternatives to panel interviews**

In 2009, Burke and McManus published a report that identified poor interview procedures in art and design higher education institutions. One of the reports major conclusions was that the interview itself did not suit all candidates and that alternatives to the traditional panel interviews might be a better indicator of a student's potential to be successful on the programme.

Prior to 2010, individual undergraduate programme teams in the Faculty of Art and Design had managed their own admissions process; there was no single method of interviewing or selecting, criteria for selection was varied and the calendar of interviews varied from programme to programme. An admissions tutor group was set up in September 2009 to develop a more co-ordinated approach to the Faculty of Art and Design admissions process.

A project to implement positive change was carried out with intake years 2010-11 and 2011-12 aimed at addressing the following issues:

- Student applicants with an increased range of choices were likely to increase the number of applications received by the institution.
- A method of filtering applicants to reduce or at least maintain the number of interviews was necessary. Staff resources required to undertake interviews was already high.
- Any system adopted had to be fair to candidates and continue to support and increase diversity amongst the student population.

### **A potential way forward**

An online digital portfolio was introduced for practice-based programmes, which would serve as an application filter to help programme teams select students for interview. The aim was to use an open source blogging tool to reduce, or maintain, the number of interviews undertaken. The new system would also maintain the position of the applicants' artwork in the application process and ensure that the best students were selected for the programmes. Alternatives to the blog were considered, such as submitting work on CDs, asking for hard copies of artwork or e-mailing files of work. These suggestions were, however, rejected for the following reasons: e-mails could get 'lost in the system' and would prevent applicants sending the large files that might be generated from high-resolution images; CDs and artwork were too easily separated from application forms; processing e-mails, CDs and artwork would incur costs to applicants and place administrative burdens on the university central admissions service.

Filtering students on qualification or tariff was considered to be inappropriate for practice based art and design programmes. Prior to the introduction of the new UCAS administration system in 2010, some programmes with high applications were filtering out 'A' Level and BTEC candidates in favour of students who had undertaken FAD programmes. This disadvantaged some candidates who came through less traditional routes or from areas of the country where there is no FAD provision. It was felt that a blog would help to include a greater diversity of candidates in the Faculty of Art and Design.

### **How have we done it?**

After investigating the possibility of using the university's web site, purchasing server space or using emails with attachments, it was decided to use open source software for a number of reasons. Blogger ([www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)) is an open source blogging site that can support image upload and text and is widely available, easy to use and free. Blogger was selected because applicants could use the blog for more than one purpose; as an application folder, to showcase work to a wider audience on line and successful students'

blogs could act as a transition tool into undergraduate study. The blog could also be secure or open to selected or any visitors.

Blogger was tested by asking a range of tutors, undergraduates and FAD students in the art school to follow the online instructions to open a Blogger account. Based on their responses, instructions for candidates were developed. Instructions for use were then published on the institution web site and mail-outs were also sent to students asking them to construct their blogs after they had applied.

Applicants were asked to upload a set number of images together with a short statement. In year one of the project proxy email accounts were set up for the programmes, and students sent an email with their hyperlinked blog address, their UCAS ID number and name. Admissions tutors could then construct shortlists for interview based on the UCAS form and the blog. A school-wide admissions tutor group, led by Directors of Studies and the Principal Lecturer responsible for Widening Participation, was established to coordinate and agree policy on art and design admissions criteria for interview selection.

In year two of the project the system was linked alphabetically to students applications and to data uploaded from the university data collection system, which provided up to date status reports on individual applications as well as an overview of total applications, conversion and withdrawals. This helped significantly in managing applications.

## **So What?**

### **Access and inclusivity**

As programme teams became accustomed to using blogs, often the first part of the decision making process was to look at the blog first without the UCAS application form. This led to, in some areas, students being selected for interview and places being offered to candidates who might have previously been rejected. This led to some questioning of the traditional idea of 'good' students. The shift from the dual route A/B system has placed the student candidates in a position to make their choices from a number of offers. This has required programme admissions teams to increase the offers they make and to consider applicants from a wider range of feeder routes.

### **Other developments**

Programme teams elected to explore alternative ways to select and convert applicants. For example, one programme piloted a Special Applicant Day where the top 10% of applicants were invited to a conversion event knowing that they were to be offered a place. Students identified as high quality applicants from their Blog and UCAS form were asked to attend a conversion

event to secure their places. The event was very successful in year one of the blog scheme. When this was adopted more widely in year two, reports back from programmes were not always so positive. It was felt by staff that this was partly because the need to attend the day was removed, with the advice of the University Admissions Section, from the letter sent to special candidates. This perhaps, sent out a misleading message to candidates that it was too easy to secure a place. Some programmes were still behaving as though they were interviewing (selecting) students rather than converting them on the special day. It was clearly a challenge for programme admissions teams to change their behaviour. Some programme teams were unconvinced that there needs to be alternatives to the established system. However, the some programmes reported, after their first year in the scheme, that the special day had led to significantly increased conversion rates.

Given the data on applicants taking up places (Figure 2) and the introduction of higher fees it is likely that in future **all** candidates that come through the first blog selection will be treated as 'special' to ensure that enough offers are made to meet targets at the 09/10, 10/11 conversion rates.

### **Selecting from Blogs alone**

So far there has been little selection from blogs alone other than for the special day and on occasion where it has been necessary to manage numbers late in the application cycle to meet revised targets.

### **Overseas students**

The benefit of a blog system for overseas applications is that artwork from students at great distance can be viewed in the same way as home students, bringing them more in line with home student applications. There are, however, regions where access to blogs and authorship of on line material is restricted, which mitigates against a universal system.

### **Interview procedures**

The blog system encouraged programmes to look at alternatives to the traditional interview. In the Faculty of Art and Design prior to the blog, the established method of interviewing was for two or more academic members of staff to see a candidate with their portfolio. Some programmes with large numbers of applications moved to other methods, mostly to rationalise the resources required to interview large numbers of qualified candidates. One programme adopted a group interview where student candidates show work to an audience of other candidates, academics and enrolled students. This was adopted in part because it was efficient. It allowed staff to observe how well students engage socially, it encouraged conversation and follow-on discussion between candidates, staff and enrolled students and it replicated a

tutorial situation, which is the primary learning and teaching method in that area of study. The programme leader said about the blog system:

...this way of interviewing has been very successful; it provides enough of a hurdle to let students know that they have had to work to get their place...the decision about the student has largely been made on the blog as to the likelihood of their gaining a place so the interview is a confirmation event and in one or two instances we have offered places to students who we might otherwise have turned down because of the way they behaved in the group.

Post interview questionnaires were conducted but this data has yet to be analysed. Anecdotally, feedback from candidates interviewed this way has been good.

## Students selecting us

The conversion rates (the number of students who accept offers from the total number of offers made) from 2008-09, the last year of the dual route system, compared to 2009-10, makes for very interesting reading (see Figure 2). As previously indicated, programmes that had routinely expected a high rate of conversions from a route B first choice candidate pool suddenly found themselves not quite as first choice as they had previously thought.

Programme	Conversion 08/09 %	Conversion 09/10 %
Textiles in Practice *	73	54
Fashion	91	59
3DD	70	52
IWA	75	62
Graphics	77	61
Interior Design	51	46
Fine Art	65	59
Interactive	84	66
CFV	75	66
Photography	66	47
Film and Media Studies	38	36
Acting	81	80

**Figure 2:** Conversion numbers 2008 to 2009 (Textiles in Practice is a new programme for 11-12 but is made up of the previous textiles programmes – Embroidery, Textiles and Textiles Design for Fashion).

The new UCAS system clearly advantaged students who might receive multiple offers from competing institutions. Previously many of our programmes had been the first choice in route B programmes. In the new scheme it became clear that good applicants with more than one offer were not always selecting us as first choice. For example, in Fashion Design, where places were only offered to route B first choice applicants in the last

year of the dual route system, 91% of applicants took up a place compared with 59% in the new system.

The market had changed quite significantly. Now that students had a number of offers, fewer of them were selecting the institution as their destination than in the pre- 09-10 era. Some programmes were largely unaffected by the changes to the system as they were already in a multiple-choice system recruiting from. The strongest candidates had a number of choices. Promoting the Faculty of Art and Design programmes and convincing them that 'here' was where they should come was a challenge for us, which has only been exacerbated by the introduction of higher fees in 2012.

## **What next?**

- ***Further adoption***

A blog scheme is proposed for the School of Architecture undergraduate programmes, and BA (Hons) Contemporary Art History have used a blog scheme this year (2011/2012).

- ***Transition tool***

Programmes have been looking at ways in which the blog can be used to keep candidates 'warm' after they have been offered a place by encouraging them to keep uploading their recent work. Discussion has also taken place about the possibility of establishing the cohort community through sharing blog addresses prior to enrolment.

- ***Moodle applications***

Now that the University has adopted Moodle as its Managed Learning Environment, programme teams will need to explore the potential of Moodle to host the blog. As the University Central Admissions System becomes digital, its relationship with Moodle needs to be carefully monitored so that admissions strategies can be planned for the future.

- ***2012 fees***

The introduction of full fees for 2012 has resulted in the expected decline in application to HE. Up to 25% fewer candidates applied through the UCAS system than in the previous year. This downturn, however, has not affected all programmes in the Faculty of Art and Design equally. Some programmes, such as Fashion and Graphic Design, remain popular. Although they have received fewer applications, these courses are still over subscribed. Others courses have fared less well. The need for the blog in all programmes is now being questioned. It is still a useful tool in the selection process for

programmes with high applications but programmes with manageable levels of applications, combined with the need to make offers as early as possible in the cycle may find a blog no longer meets their needs.

## **References**

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