

ApplyBC Usability Report

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Introduction

The ApplyBC team conducted a usability test on November 12th to November 18th with five students to assess the usability of the ApplyBC website.

Objectives

- To identify new usability problems
- To determine if specific goals and requirements have been achieved
- To establish a baseline of usability metrics that can be used to compare and measure future releases

Findings

- Forms/Data Entry: All of the participants successfully filled out their information.
- Edit: Participants understood how to change previously entered information.

- Payment/Submit: Participants successfully submitted and paid for their application.
- Help: Most of the participants noticed the help panel. Half of them referred to the help text when they encountered questions.
- Feedback: The majority noticed the progress bar and was aware of the current state of their application process.
- Launch page was straightforward and easy to navigate. Participants were able to locate their school with ease.
- Landing page received mixed reviews. Most of the participants went straight to the start your application tab and did not notice the other three tabs. All the participants had trouble logging back into their account.

ApplyBC Launch Page

British Columbia's Post-Secondary Application Service

[About](#) [Help](#)

APPLICATION STEPS

1. Select an institution
2. Create an account or log in
3. Fill in application
4. Review and submit application

SELECT AN INSTITUTION

British Columbia Institute of Technology	Northwest Community College
Camosun College	Okanagan College
Capilano University	Royal Roads University
College of New Caledonia	Selkirk College
College of the Rockies	Simon Fraser University
Douglas College	Thompson Rivers University
Emily Carr University of Art + Design	University Canada West
Justice Institute of British Columbia	University of British Columbia
Kwantlen Polytechnic University	University of Northern British Columbia
Langara College	University of the Fraser Valley
Nicola Valley Institute of Technology	University of Victoria
North Island College	Vancouver Community College
Northern Lights College	Vancouver Island University

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Application service by ApplyBC, developed & supported by BCcampus [Privacy](#) | [Terms and Conditions](#)

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Methodology

Participants

The test administrators contacted and recruited participants through Craigslist. To match the expected user population, an effort was made to include a range of users that belonged to the following subcategories: high school students, transfer students and international students. People who identified themselves in one of the three categories were contacted and screened by phone. In total, twenty-two people responded to the Craigslist posting and we narrowed them down to five participants:

- Participant 1: Female, international student
- Participant 2: Female, graduate student
- Participant 3: Male, post-secondary student
- Participant 4: Male, mature student
- Participant 5: Male, high school student in Grade 12

Procedure

Test sessions were conducted with each participant individually and lasted approximately one hour. One moderator and one observer/note-taker were present for every session. The Firefox web browser was used in all the tests. ScreenFlow was used to record the audio, video, and computer screen. The test session contained four sections: two scenarios, A/B testing, and a debriefing. During the scenarios, participants were asked to think aloud – to verbalize their thoughts and actions.

In scenario one, participants were asked to apply to Simon Fraser University. This was a freeform scenario, where participants used their own information to complete their application. In scenario two, participants were asked to apply to Vancouver Island University. This was a scripted scenario, where participants performed a series of hypothetical but realistic tasks.

For the A/B testing, there were two versions of an identical design except for one variation, the placement of the link to the help page. We wanted to see if the link placed in the middle or end of a sentence would impact what users wrote in their message to Helpdesk.

After the completion of the tasks, we debriefed with the participants to discuss their thoughts and actions in more detail.

Evaluation

When we reviewed the video recordings and notes, we looked for points where users encountered any issues that detoured them away from submitting their application. We allocated each issue a severity level depending if the issue was found on a red route, was difficult to resolve, and was persistent. A red route is the key path a user must take to submit an application. This was from a Userfocus article, which had guidelines and definitions that made this process more objective and efficient.

The definitions are much clearer in the article, but in general, the severity levels may be as interpreted:

- Critical: users are unable to complete their task
- Serious: users are able to complete their task, but with difficulty
- Medium: users are able to complete their task, but are annoyed
- Low: cosmetic issue

Because the severity levels follow the article's concrete guidelines, some debriefing issues may be categorized as low, but may contain useful information. Below are 25 issues that we found significant: 1 critical severity issue, 5 serious issues, 9 medium issues, and 10 low issues.

Critical Issues

1. Postal Code / City Field Automatically Changes When Other Two Address Fields Are Matching

Two participants could not change their postal code, when the rest of the address fields are correct. When the user selects another field after entering their own postal code, the system automatically changes it back to its previous value without any popup. The second participant also experienced the same issue when changing the city name first.

Location: Contact Information

Use Pattern: Given there is an existing valid address in Line 1, City and Postal Code, when the user changes

City or Postal Code to another value, then the QAS will change back to the previous address (since two of three fields are correct, the QAS automatically guesses the last one).

Heuristic Violated: User control and freedom. The user is not able to leave the postal code as they had entered it.

User Feedback: A participant would have liked the QAS popup to appear in this situation, as it did for other use patterns.

Serious Issues

2. Tabbing away from mailing address does not work. Tabbing back from completed phone number does not work.

Three participants who used the Tab key (and Shift+Tab) as their method of advancing had several issues with tabbing. One could not tab backwards to change their Canadian / US telephone numbers, and two other participants could not tab to the next field after filling in their mailing addresses (See also PL-1527).

Location: Contact Information

Heuristic Violated: Flexibility and efficiency of use. The current implementations make it slightly harder for experienced users to speed up their application through tabbing.

User Feedback: One participant found that there was an inconsistent experience when using the tab key to advance in the form.

3. The Address Verification Dialog Appeared Multiple Times When Editing Their Existing Addresses.

The popup appeared after changing the first address line, before the user was able to change the city/postal code. Its repetitive behaviour seems to detract the user from reading the popup in the future, and causes them to assume that the verification is unreliable. Because they have to bypass it (via "Use address as entered") for the first time, they will assume that they know what the popup is about and therefore skip it, even though there are mistakes in their typing. One participant experienced the popup again when trying to get to the next page, because she edited a field and directly pressed save and continue, which made it seem to nag at the end of the form.

Location: Contact Information

Heuristic Violated: User control and freedom. There is no control over when the QAS popup appears, and there is no clear exit to leave the popup without having to go through the dialogue.

User Feedback: Three participants appreciated the feature, though not the amount of times it popped up. A suggestion was to retype their addresses instead, similar to retyping email addresses.

Many participants resorted to clicking on “Use address as entered.”

4. The "Set It To Other School" Popup, And The Associated Help Text Are Ignored.

One participant could not find her Germany high school and post-secondary institution. She did not realize she could set her school to other until the popup appeared for the sixth time. Whenever the popup appeared, she ignored it and continued to type in her school unsuccessfully. Before she typed in her high school, she speculated that since she is an international student, the system would not find her school. At the end, she selected her certificate, “Abitur/Zeugnis (German Examinations)” in the suggested matches. She realized she could set her school to other when adding her post-secondary institution. She did not read the help text.

For participant 3, he tried to type in the first three letters of his school to get a list of suggested matches. When

his school was not listed, he tried to type in his full school name, but the system would not let him. He gave up and decided not to add his institution.

Location: Academic History

Heuristic Violated: Visibility. The other school popup and help text was not visible to the two participants.

User Feedback: This participant said she would prefer to have an option to input her own, when a foreign country is selected. Another participant suggested having an override option or a button to click if his institution is not listed. Both would have appreciated the ability to describe their school accurately.

The participants would appreciate the ability to type in their own school.

An attempt to type in “Art Institute”	Only some German institutions are listed.

British Columbia Post-secondary <input type="text" value="Art n"/> <div> Emily Carr University of Art & Design Kootenay School of Arts at Selkirk College Nimbus School of Recording Arts Vancouver Institute of Media Arts Victoria College of Art </div>	
--	--

5. “Save And Continue” Button Does Not Appear At The Start Of The Page.

The “Save and continue” button does not appear until all the required fields have been entered in the Program Choice panel. This caused frustration with one participant when he could not find the “Save and continue” button because he left one of the required fields blank. He assumed there would be a button to proceed to the next page because there had been a button at the start of all the previous pages. Also, this could be due to the lengthy Program Choice help text provided by SFU. The “Save and continue” button appeared once the participant filled out all the required

fields. However, he did not notice it because he did not scroll past the help text to where the button was located.

Location: Program Selection

Heuristic Violated: Consistency. Except for the Program Selection page, the “Save and continue” button appears at the start of the page without the need for an input from the user. If a required field were left blank, an error message would appear to let the user know how to resolve the issue.

6. Forgotten Password And/Or User ID Email Found In Junk Folder.

Participants were surprised to find their reset password email marked as spam. The account creation email was in their inbox and they expected to find the reset password email at the same location. Some did not bother to check their junk folder until we asked them.

Heuristic Violated: Error prevention. The reset password email should be sent to the inbox to prevent

users from thinking they did not receive an email because they did not check their junk folder.

User Feedback: Participant 3 wanted a faster email response time than fifteen minutes. He found the lengthy wait time slowed down his application process. From his experience with other websites, he would receive his reset password and/or user ID email immediately and has come to expect the same from this application.

Medium Issues

7. User IDs are hard to recall.

Four participants did not recall having a User ID, two of which thought that their email addresses were their User ID. The other two participants thought that they had the option to create their own User ID in the form. All five participants could not recall their user ID and went to the reset password page to retrieve their user ID. Two participants returned to the account creation page because they thought they had missed where their user ID was displayed. Both of them wanted to be able to create their own user ID like they had done for the password. One participant thought that their User ID was reset after pressing “Forgot password.”

Location: Landing Page

Heuristic Violated: Error prevention. The “Account created” popup, telling the user their account has been created, is error-prone. The formatting is unclear, and the User ID was easily missed.

User Feedback: Suggest having the ability to create his/her own User ID, or to require the user to access his/her email to confirm their account creation.

An example of participants typing in what they believe is their User ID.

Log into ApplyBC account	Log into ApplyBC account
User ID <input type="text" value="██████@yahoo.ca"/>	User ID <input type="text" value="RN9iDnp8 "/>
Password <input type="password" value="....."/>	Password <input type="password"/>

8. Width of the “Date of birth” dropdown is too narrow.

One participant commented that the “month” default text is not shown in its entirety due to the dropdown width being too narrow.

Location: Personal Information

Heuristic Violated: Visibility

The field does not fit its own text. E.g. “December” does not show completely.

Date of birth*

-- Year
-- Mont
-- Day -

9. IB Diploma is incomprehensible.

Two participants did not understand what IB in IB Diploma meant in the current/completed grade dropdown menu.

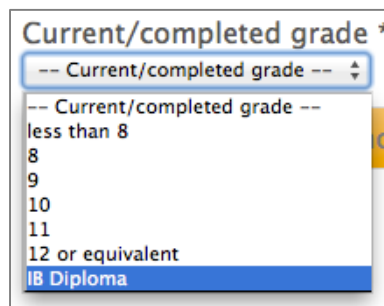
For participant 1, she completed thirteen years of high school in Germany. She decided between “12 or equivalent” and “IB Diploma.” She chose the former one because she was not sure what the latter meant. For participant 3, he guessed IB Diploma meant, “just graduated” and selected that grade.

Location: Academic History

Heuristic Violated: Error prevention. Due to the lack of understanding of the word IB Diploma, the participants were not confident in their selection and might have selected the wrong grade.

User Feedback: Participant 3 suggested the word be printed in its non-abbreviated form to prevent selecting the wrong grade.

There is enough room to fit in “International Baccalaureate.”



10. Editing a school by removing and adding is inconvenient.

All the participants understood the process of editing a school by removing their old entry and adding a new one. However, they found it inconvenient to re-enter everything when they only needed to change one line.

Location: Academic History

Heuristic Violated: User control and freedom. Users often enter something by mistake and need to be able to quickly recover without having to go through any unnecessary steps.

User Feedback: The majority suggested an edit button. Thought it was time consuming to repeat an entire panel.

Most participants noticed the help text in the test task of changing high school information.

Review High Schools	
<p>High school: Burnaby North Secondary Location: British Columbia, Canada Current/completed grade: 12 or equivalent Dates attended: 2004-Sep to 2009-Jun</p>	<p>Remove</p> <p>HELP - Review High Schools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If you have made an error, you must remove the school and re-enter it.

11. No error message appears when school name is blank.

When the high school or post-secondary name is left blank, the save school/institution button is disabled. This is also the case for the country and province/state text box. This caused hesitation for one participant. She filled out everything except her student number and post-secondary institution because she could not find her school in the list of suggested matches. She selected the save institution button and waited for a response from the system. When nothing happened, she was not sure how to proceed. She did not know if it was due to the post-secondary field or the student number field being blank.

Location: Academic History Page

Heuristic Violated: Feedback and consistency. The design should inform users of their actions. The lack of response from the system caused the user to stumble and slow down her application process. As well, the absence of the error message is inconsistent with the other pages. Whenever a required field is left empty, an error message is produced. So this feedback could be expected from their experience with the previous pages.

User Feedback: Participant 1 would like an error message that instructs her to enter a school.

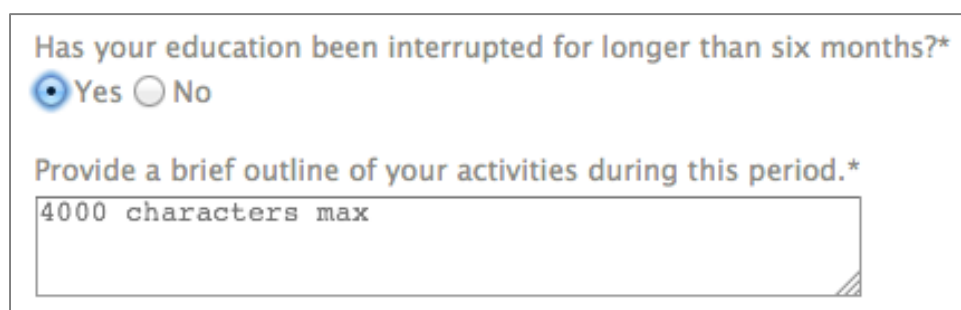
12. “Provide a brief outline of your activities” came as a surprise.

In the education history panel, the line, “Provide a brief outline of your activities during this period” is ambiguous. Users are unsure what kind of activities to include. Those who selected the yes radio button were surprised to see the text field. And one participant switched his radio button from yes to no to avoid completing the text box.

Location: Additional Information Page

Heuristic Violated: Visibility. Because the brief outline field is hidden until the yes radio button is selected, it came as a surprise to the users.

Participants were not expecting a text field to appear.



Has your education been interrupted for longer than six months?*

☒ Yes ☐ No

Provide a brief outline of your activities during this period.*

4000 characters max

13. Asterisk missing in consent body copy.

In the Consent for Information Disclosure and Declaration of Applicant panel, there is no asterisk found at the end of the body copy.

Location: Additional Information

Heuristic Violated: Error prevention. An asterisk indicates a required field but none was found at the end of the consent paragraph, which makes it seem optional.

There is no asterisk in this field.

☐ I consent to the disclosure of information on this form to other educational institutions when necessary to verify my qualifications. If the authenticity of the information I have submitted is not verified, I consent to the notification of this fact to member institutions of the Association of Registrars of the Universities and Colleges of Canada.

I certify that all statements on this application are true and complete.

I understand that failure to disclose attendance at another institution, or any misrepresentation, may result in cancellation of my admission or enrollment status.

14. The five-minute timeout for this page is too short.

When participant 5 read the line, “You have 5 minutes to complete this page”, he panicked and rushed to enter his credit card information because he thought the system would time out before he could enter everything.

Location: Pay and Submit Page

Heuristic Violated: Error prevention. The wording of the sentence makes it seem the application would close if the user does not complete this page in five minutes.

This could make users more prone to errors as they want to complete the page within the time limit. They do not know they would be directed to the payment timed out page and have the option to go back to their application.

User Feedback: Participant 5 found the five-minute time limit pointless and placed unnecessary stress on the user. He thinks the system should be more generous with the time limit.

This phrase may be unnerving when inputting their payment information.

You have 5 minutes to complete this page.

15. Inconsistent placement of asterisks.

The placement of the asterisk is inconsistent.

Sometimes a space separates the label and the asterisk.

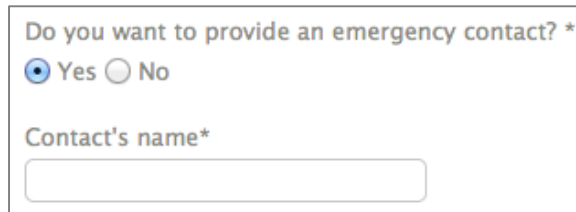
Other times, there is no space between the two elements.

Location: General

Heuristic Violated: Consistency. Location of the asterisk seems arbitrary.

User Feedback: One participant mentioned that when there is not a space between the sentence and the asterisk, it interfered with his scanning of the text.

Some asterisks have enough space, whereas others do not.



The screenshot shows a form with two elements. The first element is a question: "Do you want to provide an emergency contact? *". Below the question are two radio buttons labeled "Yes" and "No". The "Yes" radio button is selected. The second element is a text input field with the label "Contact's name*" positioned directly above the input box without a space. The asterisk in the first question has a space before it, while the asterisk in the second label does not.

Low Issues

16. Users were unsure if they have an ApplyBC account.

Two participants are unsure if they have an ApplyBC account. One participant assumed that they had to put their information in every time for each application, and that her information was not tied under one account.

Location: Landing Page

Heuristic Violated: Visibility of system status. It is unclear for participants to understand the difference

between an account and an application by following only the main path.

User Feedback: After understanding that they had an account, applying to multiple institutions was convenient. Three participants stated that it was faster to complete the applications following and enjoyed the convenience of having their information saved, but one was mildly surprised that their information was there already.

17. Most participants noticed the presence of the tabs.

One thought that the marketing graphic was a part of the first tab. A participant suggested that the tab paradigm would work better with a hover state for quicker access to the information within the tabs.

Location: Landing Page

Heuristic Violated: Consistency and standards. In one case, the difference between the marketing graphic view, and the first tab view was unclear, as the graphic did not have a position in the main tabs.

18. “Is this application for you?” Tab is often overlooked.

During the testing, the “Is this application for you?” tab is noticed, but is often overlooked. Two participants already thought that the application is for them and did not click on the tab. One perceived the tab as unimportant information, and participant 5 felt misled, that the links in this tab would start the application.

Location: Landing Page

Heuristic Violated: Consistency and standards. The meaning of the phrase can mean a lot of things.

User Feedback: An international student felt that the phrasing could be improved because it is not clear about its purpose (e.g. “Start your application” is more direct and understandable). She also noted that many university websites have an international tab up front. Participant 5 later said that the tab was unhelpful and unnecessary for his level of proficiency. Participant 2 did not click on the tab because she had already decided to go to that school.

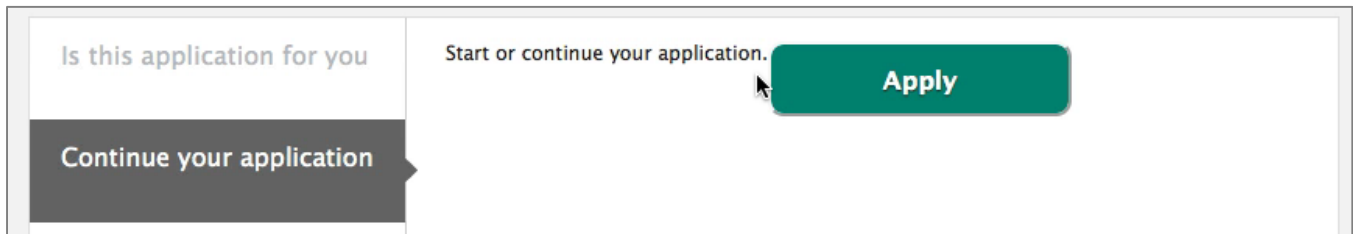
19. The note text in the “Start your application” tab is too close to the Apply button.

One participant mentioned that its close proximity to the Apply button creates a cluttered and uncomfortable feeling for the user.

Location: Landing Page

Heuristic Violated: Aesthetic.

There is no room between both elements.



20. “Terms currently open” tab is ignored.

None of the participants clicked on the terms currently open tab. They wanted to start their application right away and did not pay attention to any tabs that deviated from that path.

Location: Landing Page

Heuristic Violated: Match between system and real world. Information may not be appearing in a natural and logical order.

User Feedback: One participant suggested the tabs be rearranged with the “Start your application” as the last tab. He thinks this could motivate applicants to read all the tabs before they start their application.

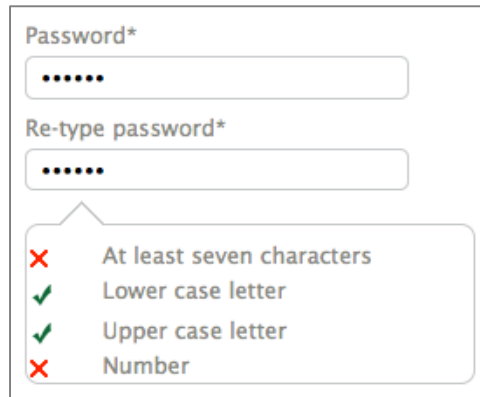
21. Password conditions seem optional.

Two participants did not think the password must fulfill all the four conditions listed. They thought it was a suggestion rather than a requirement. One participant received an error message because he thought he did not have to get all those green checkmarks. Another participant wondered if she could bypass those conditions.

Location: Personal Information

Heuristic Violated: Error prevention. An asterisk indicates a required field but none was found in the password checker, which makes it seem optional.

There are no asterisks in the tooltip.



Form showing password fields and a tooltip:

- Password*
- Re-type password*
- At least seven characters (marked with a red X)
- Lower case letter (marked with a green checkmark)
- Upper case letter (marked with a green checkmark)
- Number (marked with a red X)

22. “Primary*” could be “Primary phone*”.

One participant suggested that the text be more specific in the telephone fieldset.

Location: Contact Information

Suggestion to make the labels even clearer.



Form showing telephone number fields:

- Telephone Number
- PRIMARY *
- Canada/U.S. Other country
- OTHER
- Canada/U.S. Other country

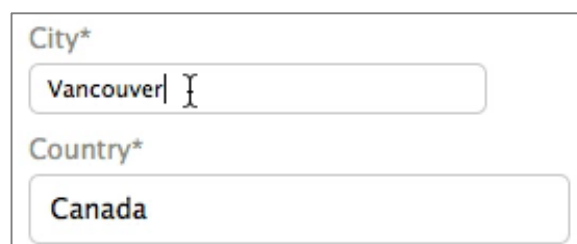
23. Use a drop-down list for cities.

One participant suggested having a drop-down list for cities in addition to provinces and countries.

Location: Contact Information

Heuristic Violated: Recognition rather than recall.

A dropdown list similar to the country field.



Form showing city and country fields:

- City*
- Vancouver
- Country*
- Canada

24. Credential awarded does not allow for unlisted credentials.

In the credential awarded dropdown, one participant could not find her credentials from the list so she chose the closest, which is “Certificate General.”

The list provides many general/well-known credentials, but none of the specialized ones.

Location: Academic History

25. All participants noticed the help panel itself.

One participant took a little bit to realize that the panel actually contained help text. One did not use it. Three participants looked at the help panels only when they needed help. It is interesting to acknowledge that one participant did not notice the “HELP” headings, but understood that it was help text through visual clues (i.e. bullet points). However, another participant took some time to realize the panels’ purpose, and suggested that they should be bolded or emphasized in some way.

Location: Help Panel

Heuristic Violated: Help and documentation.

User Feedback: It was appreciated that the user did not have to go to another link to look up help.

Conclusion

The majority of the participants found ApplyBC to be straightforward, clean, and easy to use. In general, participants were able to complete their application quickly and with few issues. They liked how they could apply to more than one institution without the need to re-

enter their information for most of the pages. To end, we would like to encourage the ApplyBC team to address these usability issues that will improve the experience for the people who use ApplyBC.