Introduction:

Gov.uk is the official UK public sector information website. The site was launched on 31st January,2012 by the Government Digital Services. The main aim was to provide a single point of access to all of the Government services. It was made in order to facilitate digital delivery of public services. An article written in The Guardian about 8 years ago, talks about the main need for this website. There are so many departments of the UK government along with several sub-departments and interrelated services with different websites. This would lead to an “angry, frustrated and confused user”. Thus there was a need to identify and filter the “real needs” of users.

Basing my research question on this need to identify real needs for users- I looked at one of the Gov.uk ‘s most used page- Visas and Immigration. Having used this website several time on my own as an international student, the motivation to research and recommend on this page came very naturally.

As stated on the page “” UK Visa and Immigration is responsible for making millions of decisions every year about who has the right to visit or stay in the UK. It also talks about a firm emphasis on national security and a culture of customer satisfaction for those that come here legally.

However, the prevailing opinion is quite contradictory as far as customer satisfaction goes. In this paper, I look at 2 distinct users with extremely different personal situations who might want to /have to travel to the UK with varying motivations and aspirations. This report does not make remarks on the immigration policy of the UK but rather focuses on trying to suggest a user-friendly, efficient, and reliable visa application process for users of different types.

Research Question:

How could an understanding of user profiles (and by understanding the need to look at each user case by case) and implementing these insights into their website benefit the gov.uk visa and immigration department.

Background:

1)Why is the UK visas and immigration department important?

The Cambridge dictionary defines a visa as an official mark, usually made in a passport, that allow you to enter or leave a particular country. Acting as the main permission to visit, stay,study,work or live in a country-the visa is crucial for most people looking to travel to another country for any purpose. The Uk visas and immigrant department hosts a range of services and interrelated webpages that help people decide the kind of visa a person would need to travel to the UK.

2)Current status of the website

The first step in the process of going to another country like the UK is the visa and immigration application form that one must digitally fill up and submit along with a list of other documents as requested by the website. For countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and others- it is necessary for applicants to submit not just digital versions of the required documents but also hard-copies at the visa application centre. The process for the visa can take from 1 month to 6 months depending on the kind of application and documents. The next step is the Biometric fingerprints and photographs which are done both digitally on the new gov.uk visa and immigration app but also required in person for certain countries.

3)What do typical users look like.

While many different people from different backgrounds and living situations can apply for visas- for the purpose of this report I have chosen two distict users of the website:

1)Students looking to study in the UK

2)Asylum seekers from any part of the world

In both these cases, the visa application process is quite different and requires a lengthy study of the website to prepare and make the application.

A typical student would access this website after receiving a confirmation to their university for a course (could be of varying lengths). After paying their initial deposit to the university and receiving their confirmation of application number-they can make a visa application and appointment.

For an asylum seeker, the situation is very different. As some people first travel to the UK and then make a visa application and some apply from their home country and then arrive in the UK. The situation with asylum seekers is quite sensitive as each case would be different and having a single process is very stringent and prove useless.

4)Current website-the good and the bad.

Looking at the gov.uk website, I first researched the Visa and Immigrants page and chose to select the “study in the UK” tab. The page that opens is a list of options for you to look at-from student visas, child student visas, studying English in the UK or other short-term visas. There is also a link to the visa and immigration operational guidelines.

The website lays out the requirements for each type of visa-with several links to the definition of terms used within the website. This is quite helpful and helps clear any doubts. There is clear information on applying from within the UK, outside the UK and duration of visas and extensions. However, costs of any kind of visas are not given. For a student looking to study here, it is important to secure financial aid or sort of their own personal finances to make a decision and having to search of each payment requirement is cumbersome. The costs that are given are only in GBP and there is no conversion rate or calculator that one can access. This is inefficient as students can come from any part of the world. Another obscure piece of information is regarding the health surcharge. To make the application, the health surcharge is a requirement. There is no clear indication of what it covers for a student and how much must be paid. You must fill out another form to know how much has to be paid and id due when. This can significantly delay the process for many students. Under the “Money you need” tab-there is some information regarding the process but is quite subjective and might change for users. Overall, while the website seems loaded with information, it is a mishmash of trying to find relevant information to you. The language is of a high standard-and no translations available. For students looking for easy, quick, and reliable information the website comes secondary to visa consultancies in many countries who help you fill the forms and prepare documents. This is because the website cautions and over-cautions users about the punishments or rejection possibilities time and again.

Under the Asylum seekers tab- there is again a list of options for users to read about. From claiming asylum, settlement for refugees, support and helplines to loans, adviser and appeals. However, if we consider the kind of change that asylum seekers and refugees undergo-it seems like the information is structured in the way one makes travel plans- durations, deadlines and required documents flood the pages which seems insensitive and lacks an understanding of the large refugee and asylum crisis.

A pattern that exists throughout these pages in the caution of visa rejection in case one waits to make an application. For a person, displaced from his home and sometimes even family, the only hope is to settle and start life in a new country. The constant reminder of being considered an illegal immigrant- causes several users to try to remain unnoticed. A point that even a lot of personal research couldn’t answer was- the definition of a safe third country. As per the website, a visa claim will be denied if the person can be placed in a safe third country. This is quite confusing and there is no way to check what is a safe third country for an individual with their own personal thoughts, beliefs, practises etc. For the sake of this report, I even tried to google a specific case for an Indian Christian looking to claim asylum in the UK and what would a safe third country be, but to no success. The list is decided by the governments of each country in consultation with the UNHCR and there is no clear website to access it. For an asylum seeker-this confusion and lack of clarity could add to another reason to remain illegally. The positive for this page is the information regarding the asylum helplines, appointment making and information regarding interview and screening.

User Journeys:

1)A master’s student from India studying at UAL University

1)After receiving the CAS statement, a student looking to complete their Master’s study in the United kingdom will go to the gov.uk website and select the visas and immigration section.

2)He will then research website to make a list of documents he needs for the application as well as the process he needs to undergo.

3)As Indian currency is different to GBP he will make calculations and reconfirm this with the website to check of total funds he will need to make the application and other steps that are involved in it like the heath surcharge, Tuberculosis and covid tests.

4)As the earliest you can apply for a visa is 6 months before your course date, the student will have to prepare financial statements to be submitted in the application. In a country as populated as India, bank functions take long and are a lengthy process. Therefore finding out at the last moment about the balance required to be shown as well as the extra money needed to be paid is a very frustrating process.

5)He will then book an appointment for his TB test, which is accepted by the UK visa department only from specific hospitals in specific countries. With travel restrictions within India currently, the student will find it chaotic and difficult to find one in his state especially if he comes from a smaller city. The test takes up to 2 days to deliver results and this can be difficult as you have to physically collect the form on your own. The information regarding these tests and hospitals is not on the website so the student will have to search for it separately, call and confirm with them for it.

6)After tests, the student will make an appointment for his application eve through he has submitted these documents online already. He will travel to the centre, submit these physical copies and his passport. He will not have access to his passport for as long as the Visa department takes to come to a decision. There in no information regarding how long it would take and there is no tracking system.

7)If taken longer than usual, he would try to check the website again for information regarding timelines and tracking but have none. There is no option to call and ask about the status either.

8)As you have to submit the travel tickets at the time of application, if the visa takes longer to come than your date-you might not always get a refund from your travel bookings and this can cause further stress to the student.

9)On receiving the final visa approval, you can finally travel to the UK.

2)An asylum seeker from Myanmar

For a Rohingya refugee from the state of Myanmar-displacement and statelessness are commonplace. Having grown up in a state plagued with violence and fear for the Rohingya community, she seeks to live elsewhere. Having taken shelter in Bangladesh’s refugee camp for several months, this asylum seeker now wants to travel to the UK to join a cousin to lead a normal life.

1)Having decided to travel to the UK on a visit visa, she arrives and lives with her cousin in London.

2)As the crisis worsens in her home of Myanmar and atrocities against Rohingya women rise in Bangladesh-she decided to seek asylum in UK.

3)Visiting the asylum seeker application information on the gov.uk website-she is immediately filled with fear after the first page reading “you can only apply if you have failed to get protection from authorities in your own country.” For a country where corruption is vastly prevalent and asking for protection from authorities can lead to further persecution- proving you have asked for help is next to impossible.

4)She decides to make an application even then with her passport and identity card.

5)The application process is quite confusing and as the level of language is so high, she finds It difficult to interpret and understand as English is not her first language.

6)She has to book several appointments, all while not working and trying to prove threat to her life in her home country.

7)A safe third country is also dangerous in and around the states of Bangladesh due to her exceptional circumstance. However, if removed from the UK she would have to return home or be detained.

8)She returns to the website for help regarding the status of her application-but there is no information.

9)Even if she received permission, she has to refer to the website several times if she wants to help get her family to the UK, work, study further and thus the loop of constantly checking terms and conditions on a varied list of pages will continue.

Recommended personalization strategy

Drawing from the design justice principles- there are several changes that need to be made to better the experience for both these above users.

“We prioritize design’s impact on the community over the intentions of the designer,” this principle needs to be implemented all through the website for the Visa and Immigration department. The current website serves the designers way more than the users and it made keeping in mind the authorities understanding, language and skill to interpret. For a common user-this is difficult. Any major website, that serves larger international communities is written in two or more languages. If the user was using a screenreader, the information would be completed incoherent if the software read English in another default setting without context and change based on linguistics. While business websites have included several languages, government websites have made little to no progress on this front.

The impact on users like asylum seekers is very large, however the language on the website is lacking any clarity, keeping in mind the asylum seeker. “We seek the role of the designer as a facilitator rather than an expert” is contradictory to the website. The designer is not only the expert but also the authority capable of punishing and reprimanding the user.

Steps to personalize the website:

Case 1: For students

1)Having a dedicated country/region page for each different country. Include national language translations to foster better understanding.

2)Ask for personal situation information and help calculate funds/provide conversions in currency as well as an overall estimate for all steps of the process.

3)Build cultural sensitivity through language of the website.

4) Provide tracking and “after-application” information to students.

Case 2: For asylum seekers

1)Re-think the current structure of website.

2)Allow for a case-by-case information gathering and advice to applicants.

3)Build sensitivity to these applicants through language.

4)Have dedicated helpline/chat options for timely help as these cases could be time sensitive.

In both these cases, a personalised approach can significantly help users by making the process a part of their travel rather than the scariest last step in their journey. A single personalisation strategy applied across the Visa and Immigration department can significantly enhance all aspects of this website.

Methodology:

1)identified webpages based on personal experience.

2)read through the websites-noted down issues I found as well as researched some common problems people faced while using the website

3)Developed user journeys abased on personal experience as well as a case from what people from different countries might face.

4)Researched the importance of language and structure in websites.

5)Arrived at recommendations based on the above understanding.

Results

The results pf these recommendations would be a far more stress-free application process. Studying in the Uk or seeking asylum here are both major changes for a person. The process will be made more human through the personalization strategy mentioned above and give it the much-needed revamp. Currently, the website runs the risk of several ethical and social issues as well as embarrassment. The language used comes off as preaching, the tone is too direct and while trying to be professional the overall feel of the page is indifferent. By looking at users as actual people with different situations, the website can build a far more uplifting experience rather than one that makes you question every move. As refugee crisis grow in several parts of the world, the website needs to acknowledge the need to restructure their information in a more digestible fashion. Anthropologists have been intensely critical of the forms of law applied to both asylum seekers and potential immigrants, drawing attention to its ‘patchy’ and ‘paradoxical’ character (Andersson 2008). Drawing from this, the website needs to involve more personalization options and information pertaining to different individuals rather than a single ideal user they are currently catering to.

References:

(Have not taken direct information but based my report on my understanding from these sites)

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