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Universities should standardize faculty application process

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Building a faculty job application package is a crucial step for academic career advancement, yet early career researchers (ECRs) often face significant time and emotional challenges during this process. The varying application systems across institutions create unnecessary complexity and waste time. Standardizing these procedures would save time, reduce burdens, and enhance fairness in recruitment.

Preparing faculty job applications is an important part of academic career and development [1]. However, it is an exercise that ECRs are often forced to spend a lot of time and emotional energy on. In addition to submitting research and teaching CVs, applicants are required to provide a proposal for their future research program, which requires a well thought-out and crafted pitch. Unfortunately, these tasks are often carried out under pressure, whether due to tight deadlines, competing work obligations, or the impending end of a contract or visa for international scientists. The application timeline often coincides with important phases of ongoing research projects or the revision of papers, adding further stress. This pressure often leads ECRs to work late into the night and on weekends, trying to juggle multiple responsibilities [2]. The situation is even more difficult for those with parental duties, and applying for jobs in different countries only adds to the strain. A key challenge in this process is that applicants must navigate different requirements and formats for each institution they apply to. Institutions could ease this process by implementing a uniform and standardized application system.

I recently started a faculty position in the UK after 6-year postdoctoral training in the USA. During my job search process, I have encountered surprises in the application steps, with most institutions having their own style of the application system. For example, in the UK, some institutions require submission of a full CV, while others have a two or three-page limit. Some institutions ask for a 500-word research statement, while others do not stipulate any. Some institutions required a simple list of publications, while others asked for an 'impact statement' for each publication, focusing on the significance of the work rather than the prestige of the journal. This heterogeneous job application system also applies to submission of Expression of Interest (EoI), for consideration of institutional sponsorship of ECRs for fellowships by major UK funders. Such varied application systems at all academic levels are common worldwide. If other sectors, such as the tech industry and public sector, have a more-or-less uniform application process (often with a single-click on LinkedIn or through a centralized portal), why should academic institutions not also implement a standard application process involving little effort to customize applications to each institution? While adapting such a system may seem challenging, it could greatly streamline the process, allowing applicants to focus on the quality of their materials rather than spending time reformatting them to meet the specific demands of each institution. A more uniform approach could also make the selection process more efficient, enabling institutions to focus on assessing candidates' potential and fit.

In the UK, some institutions have adopted the Résumé for Researchers (R4R)[i], a narrative CV format, but many institutions still have their own format of applications. The R4R is an initiative that offers a flexible and adaptable style of summation of key performance indicators of an applicant. This experimental model by the Royal Society, UK is designed to help ECRs to showcase their skills and achievements more effectively and comprehensively. It aims to provide researchers with the tools they need to develop a compelling and professional CV, with the hope to increase their chances of securing funding, grants, and job opportunities. The R4R model is similar to NIH Biographical sketch (or Biosketch)[ii], a standard format for presenting a researcher's educational and professional achievements, including their publications, research funding, and honours or awards. It is a requirement for NIH and some charity grant applications in the USA. However, the R4R goes further by including a series of 'How have you…?' questions to answer in more of a story-telling format. For example, in the section 'How have you contributed to the wider research community?', the applicants are expected to describe their scholarly activities and commitments such as paper reviewing, meeting and seminar organization, and involvement in diversity, inclusion, and equality initiatives. Fully adapting the narrative CV format through the R4R model could be one way to move forward to standardize the application process.

Standardizing the faculty application process across universities would alleviate many of the challenges faced by ECRs when applying for faculty positions. For example, a centralized application portal, such as those used for college applications, adopted by all universities would act as a single gateway for all applications. In this portal, applicants could submit standardized application materials with minimal effort to customize sections (such as the 'fit with the institution/department'). The rest of the application components would remain more-or-less the same (Table 1 and Figure 1). With a uniform process in

place, ECRs would not have to spend unnecessary time and energy adapting to different application styles and requirements for each university. This would allow them to focus on producing high-quality research and teaching proposals, as well as enhancing their professional skills and expertise. Importantly, this would create a more level playing field for all applicants, regardless of their academic background or the institution they come from. In addition to saving time and reducing stress, a standardized application process would make the hiring process fairer and more equitable, such as by reducing the impact of the hidden curriculum by making requirements explicit and uniform. By hidden curriculum, I mean the unwritten rules, expectations, and knowledge that are often assumed but not explicitly stated in academia, which can disadvantage those without access to informal mentoring networks or institutional knowledge. For instance, some universities explicitly state that applicants should not mention journal impact factors or uncontextualized metrics in their applications, while others provide no guidance on this matter. Although there are several reasons why journal impact factors should not be used to assess

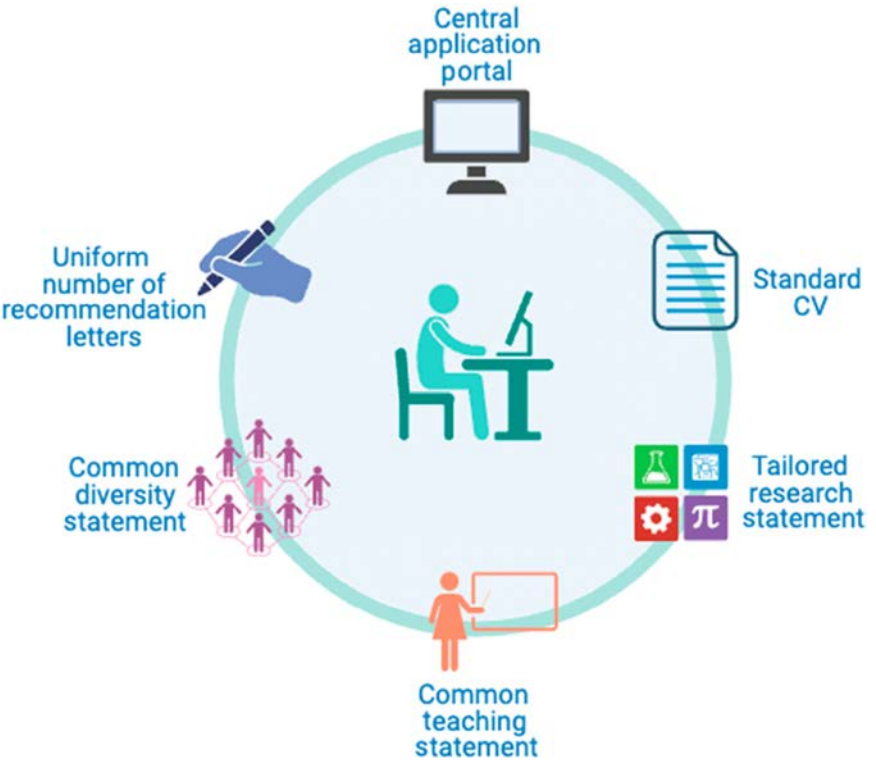

Figure 1. Components of standardized application for the benefit of applicants and institutions. The standardized application materials allow candidates to focus on showcasing their qualifications and experiences without the need to spend time on repeatedly customizing documents for different institutions. This approach also aids institutions to streamline the hiring process by efficiently evaluating a large pool of applicants by ensuring consistency in the documents reviewed. Figure created using BioRender (biorender.com/).

Table 1. Major components and criteria for a standardized application system

Component	Purpose	Benefits
Uniform application portal	Centralized, user-friendly online platform for all faculty applications across all institutions	One gateway for all applications; saves time, makes application process quick, easy, and enjoyable
Standardized application materials (each with standardized length and format)		
Cover letter	Request structured cover letter addressing specific points, such as research interests, teaching philosophy, and fit with the institution	Allows applicants to easily personalize at only required places without rewriting entire document
CV	Require a CV (conventional or narrative) in a standardized format and length, with clear instructions on what to include	Streamlines review process; saves time for both applicants and reviewers by eliminating need to go through CVs formatted in different styles and length
Research statement	Provide guidelines for uniform research statement, outlining past work, future plans, and potential funding sources	Helps applicants present their research clearly and organized, ensuring that all necessary information is communicated effectively
Teaching statement	Require standardized teaching philosophy statement, including teaching experience, methods, and student engagement strategies	Helps applicants to build single document that reflects their experiences and approach to teaching in comprehensive manner
Diversity statement	Ask for statement on contributions to diversity, equity, and inclusion	Helps to articulate their equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) or diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) values and approach, ensuring alignment with academic goals of the institution
Recommendation letters	Set uniform number of recommendation letters with option to select for contacting referees during different stages of application process	Provides flexibility for applicants to manage their references efficiently

research or researcher quality, applicants from academic cultures where citing these metrics is standard practice may be at a disadvantage if it is not clearly communicated in the application guidelines. Moreover, the lack of standardization in application requirements can particularly disadvantage international applicants, who may be less familiar with specific regional academic norms and expectations. This variability in requirements across institutions can create additional barriers for talented researchers from diverse backgrounds, potentially limiting the pool of qualified candidates. A standardized process would help ensure that all applicants, regardless of their geographical or institutional background, have equal opportunity to present their qualifications effectively. Standardization also reduces administrative burden and help implementing efficient feedback mechanisms, allowing applicants to receive constructive feedback on their applications, which can be valuable for future applications.

While institutions strive for excellence in faculty recruitment [3], they should also make an effort to implement a simple and uniform application process. By streamlining this process, ECRs would have more time and energy to focus on their research, while universities would be able to hire the most qualified candidates based on objective and fair evaluation criteria. As with any system, standardization has some drawbacks. A uniform and easy application system might encourage unqualified candidates to apply more broadly, shifting the screening burden from applicants to hiring committees. Some universities could argue that their unique application formats help identify truly committed candidates who will invest time in meeting institution-specific requirements. Nevertheless, these concerns are outweighed by the substantial benefits of a standardized system that promotes efficiency, fairness, and reduced stress for applicants. Therefore, it is time for universities and research institutes to consider implementing a uniform application process with central portal for faculty positions to better serve their academic community and ECRs. It would be a win–win situation for both applicants and institutions.

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Declaration of interests

I declare no competing interests.

Resources

[i]https://royalsociety.org/news-resources/projects/research-culture/tools-for-support/resume-for-researchers/

[ii]https://grants.nih.gov/grants/forms/biosketch.htm

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