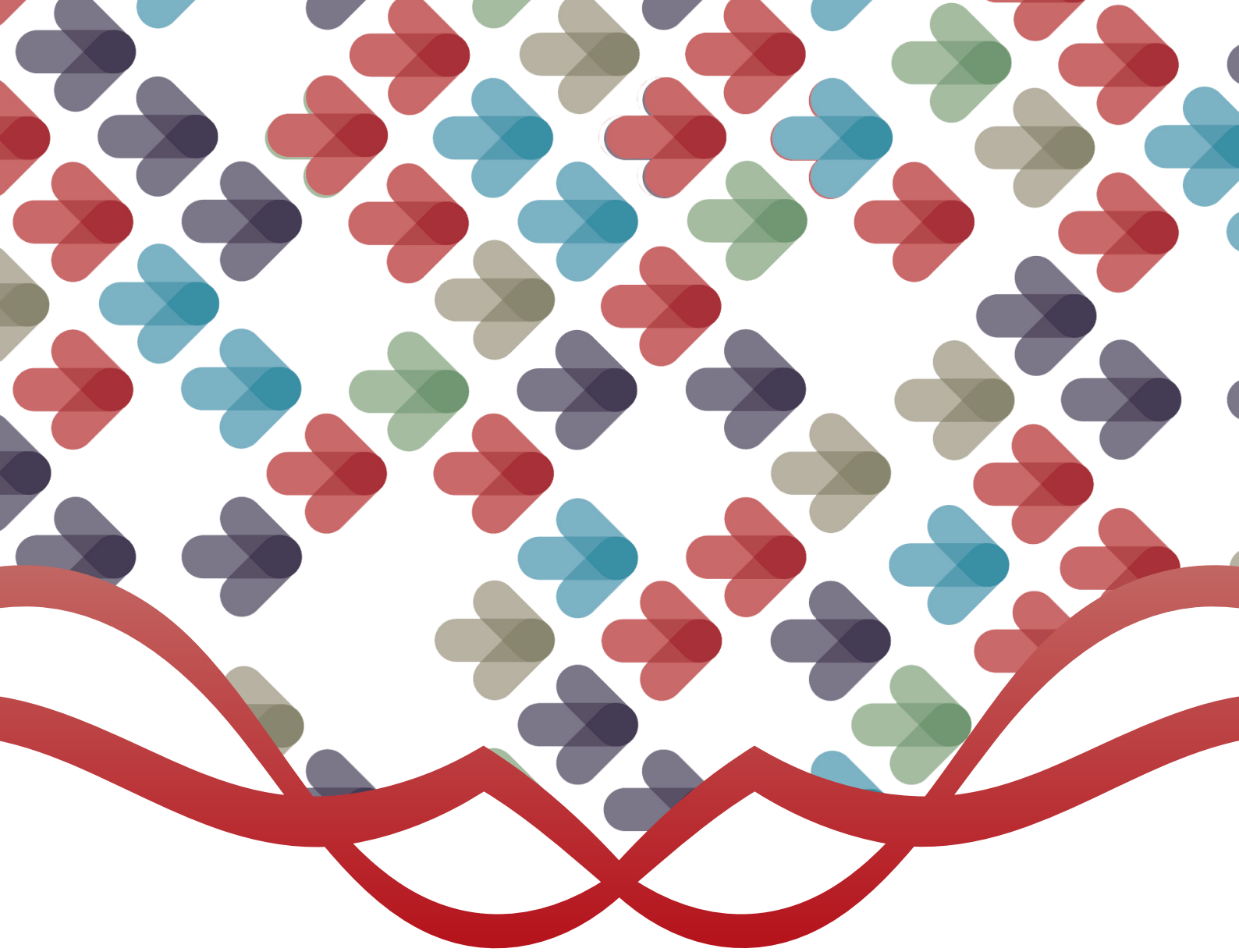




**FHASS Employability  
Resource Hub:**

# **GUIDE TO SPECULATIVE APPLICATIONS**



## What is a Speculative Job Application?

A speculative job application is when you reach out to an organisation without knowing if they have any advertised vacancies. Instead of responding to a specific job posting, you proactively express your interest in working with them. This type of application typically includes a tailored cover letter and CV, showcasing how your skills and experiences align with the organisation's needs, even if those needs aren't formally expressed.

In certain sectors where traditional job openings may be scarce or competitive, speculative applications offer a way to access opportunities that aren't publicly listed. Many organisations in fields like media, creative industries, non-profits, and research rely on informal hiring processes, which makes speculative applications an essential tool in your job search strategy.

## Why Send a Speculative Application?

### 1. Accessing Hidden Job Markets

- Many roles, particularly in creative sectors, are filled through informal recruitment or word of mouth, rather than being publicly advertised. By sending a speculative application, you position yourself as a potential candidate for roles that may not yet exist or are about to become available.

### 2. Building Networks and Demonstrating Initiative

- Speculative applications show that you're proactive and genuinely interested in the organisation. Even if no immediate openings are available, introducing yourself to employers can lead to valuable connections, informational interviews, or the chance to be considered for future roles. It's a powerful way to demonstrate initiative and make yourself stand out.

### 3. Securing Internships, Freelance Work, or Voluntary Roles

- Speculative applications can lead to short-term or project-based opportunities such as internships, freelance work, or voluntary positions. These roles often act as stepping stones to full-time employment, providing valuable experience, skills, and professional networks that can be crucial for future career success.

## Understanding the Job Market

The job market for students in the humanities, arts and social sciences can be both dynamic and challenging. Unlike more traditional fields where roles are clearly defined and regularly advertised, humanities, arts and social sciences graduates often face a competitive landscape where job openings are less formalised and opportunities can vary widely across different sectors.

### Challenges of Finding Advertised Roles

One of the key difficulties in this field is the scarcity of advertised roles. Many positions, particularly in creative industries, non-profits, think tanks, and media, are either never publicly listed or filled

through personal networks and internal recommendations. Additionally, the arts in particular is characterised by freelance or project-based work, where formal job postings are less common.

As a result, relying solely on advertised job openings can severely limit your chances of finding suitable opportunities. Graduates need to be flexible and open to different types of work, from temporary contracts to internships, which are often stepping stones to more permanent positions.

### Where Speculative Applications Work Best

Speculative job applications are particularly effective in industries where job vacancies are not always publicly advertised. Some sectors where this approach can be especially useful include:

- **Creative Industries:** Whether in film, theatre, publishing, or design, speculative applications allow you to connect directly with small production houses, independent publishers, or arts organisations that may not have the resources to regularly post vacancies.
- **Media and Journalism:** Roles in journalism, digital content creation, and broadcasting are often filled through networking and internal recruitment. Speculative applications can open doors to freelance gigs or entry-level positions.
- **Non-Profit Organisations and Charities:** These often operate with tight budgets and may not advertise all available positions. Approaching them directly with a well-targeted application can lead to internships, voluntary work, or paid roles.
- **Museums, Galleries, and Cultural Institutions:** Many cultural organisations rely on volunteers or project-based staff for research, curation, and education programs. Speculative applications can be an effective way to introduce yourself and offer your skills for upcoming projects or exhibitions.
- **Think Tanks and Research Organisations:** Research roles are often tied to specific projects or funding. Sending a speculative application to a think tank or policy research organisation may help you tap into project-based work or research assistant positions.

In these fields, speculative applications allow you to present your skills and passion to organisations that may not be actively hiring but are always on the lookout for enthusiastic and talented individuals. Understanding this job market's nuances—and the importance of persistence and creativity—can help you navigate your career path more effectively.

## Research and Preparation

Before sending a speculative job application, thorough research and preparation are crucial. Speculative applications differ from regular applications because they are unsolicited—this means you must demonstrate a clear understanding of the organisation and show how you can add value.

Here's how to effectively research and prepare to make your speculative applications stand out:

### Identifying Potential Employers

The first step is to identify organisations that align with your interests, values, and skills. To find potential employers:

- **Use LinkedIn:** LinkedIn is a valuable tool for discovering organisations in your field. You can explore company pages, see their recent activity, and identify people working in roles you aspire to.
- **Industry-specific Websites:** Websites like **Arts Council England**, **Creative Access**, or **Prospects** often list organisations and roles relevant.
- **Professional Associations:** Many sectors have professional bodies or associations that list member organisations. For example, **The Museums Association**, **The British Sociological Association**, or **The National Council for Voluntary Organisations**.
- **Networking Events and Conferences:** Attending events, talks, or online webinars can help you discover smaller or lesser-known organisations that might be of interest.

## Researching the Organisation's Needs

Once you've identified potential employers, the next step is to research their work and determine how your skills can fit in. This is key to making your speculative application relevant. Consider the following:

- **What Do They Do?:** Understand their mission, values, and recent projects. This shows that you're genuinely interested in their work and that your application isn't generic.
- **What Challenges Might They Face?:** Research the sector to understand any current challenges or trends they might be facing, such as funding cuts, policy changes, or shifts in audience engagement.
- **What Value Can You Offer?:** Look for areas where your skills and experiences can help solve these challenges or enhance their work. This could be anything from research expertise to creative project management or communication skills.

You should also keep in mind that smaller organisations often work on short-term projects or rely on freelance, voluntary, or temporary staff. Position yourself as someone who can contribute to their ongoing or future work in a meaningful way.

## Tailoring Your Approach

A key part of research and preparation is ensuring that your speculative application is tailored to each organisation you contact. This isn't the time to send a one-size-fits-all CV and cover letter; you need to customise your message to suit the employer.

Here's how to tailor your approach:

- **Personalise Your Cover Letter:** Address your letter to a specific person, such as a hiring manager, department head, or project leader. Avoid generic greetings like "To whom it may concern." If you can't find a specific name, a little LinkedIn or website digging could help.
- **Match Your Skills to Their Work:** Highlight the skills and experiences most relevant to their current or future projects. For instance, if you're applying to a non-profit, emphasise your research, communication, or project management skills. If it's a media company, talk about your writing, editing, or digital production skills.

- **Explain Why You Want to Work with Them:** Show that you've done your homework and are genuinely excited about their work. Mention a recent project or initiative of theirs that caught your attention, and explain why you'd love to be a part of their team.

By carefully researching potential employers and tailoring your application to their needs, you greatly increase your chances of making a strong impression and securing a role that might not have been advertised.

## Writing a Speculative Cover Letter

A speculative cover letter is your chance to introduce yourself to the organisation, highlight your skills, and demonstrate how you can add value, even if they don't have any advertised positions.

Writing a compelling cover letter requires careful attention to detail and a clear understanding of their needs. Here's how to structure and craft a strong speculative cover letter:

### Structure of a Speculative Cover Letter

Your speculative cover letter should be clear, concise, and tailored to the organisation you're approaching. Here is a breakdown of the key components:

#### 1. Introduction

- Start with a professional greeting, ideally addressed to a specific person. Research to find the right contact, whether it's a hiring manager, department head, or project leader.
- Introduce yourself briefly and state your purpose. Mention what role or type of opportunity you're seeking and why you're contacting them. For example: "I am a recent graduate in Sociology from [University], and I am writing to express my interest in any upcoming research or project roles within your organisation."

#### 2. Why This Organisation?

- In this section, demonstrate that you've researched them. Mention specific projects, initiatives, or values that align with your interests or skills.
- Explain why you are passionate about their work and how it connects to your career goals. This shows that your approach isn't generic and that you're genuinely interested in contributing to their mission.

#### 3. Your Skills and Experiences

- Highlight your key skills and experiences that are relevant to the organisation's work. Focus on what you can offer rather than what you want.
- Tailor this section by aligning your strengths with their needs. For example, if applying to a museum, you might emphasise your research skills, experience with public engagement, or project management.
- Mention any previous work, internships, or voluntary experiences that showcase your ability to contribute effectively.

#### 4. Call to Action

- End your letter by inviting the reader to take action. Suggest the possibility of a meeting, an informal chat, or a chance to discuss future opportunities.
- Be polite and professional, thanking them for their time and expressing enthusiasm for the chance to connect. For example:  
“I would be grateful for the opportunity to discuss how my skills could support your upcoming projects. I look forward to hearing from you and am happy to provide further information at your convenience.”

## Tone and Style

- **Keep it Professional Yet Personal:** While you want to maintain a professional tone, speculative applications often require a slightly more personal approach than formal job applications. Show enthusiasm and genuine interest in their work.
- **Be Concise:** Your cover letter should be no longer than one page. Every sentence should add value, so avoid unnecessary detail or overly long explanations.
- **Show Passion and Initiative:** Speculative applications are often successful because they reflect the candidate’s proactive nature and passion for the field. Convey your motivation and excitement for their work.

## Common Mistakes to Avoid

- **Being Too Vague:** A speculative cover letter should not be generic. Avoid using phrases like “I’m interested in any opportunities you might have.” Instead, be specific about what type of role or project you’re seeking.
- **Focusing Too Much on Yourself:** While it’s important to highlight your skills, make sure your letter focuses on what you can offer them, not just what you hope to gain.
- **Sending the Same Letter to Multiple Employers:** Each speculative cover letter should be tailored to the organisation you’re contacting. Sending a one-size-fits-all letter reduces your chances of standing out.

By personalising your speculative cover letter and showing how you can contribute to their goals, you demonstrate that you are a proactive, engaged candidate. This thoughtful approach can make a strong impression, even if no formal vacancies exist at the time.

## Crafting a Targeted CV

A speculative CV is slightly different from a traditional CV because it needs to highlight how your skills and experiences align with an organisation’s potential needs, rather than responding to a specific job description. By crafting a targeted CV, you can make a compelling case for why they should consider you for future opportunities.

### How a Speculative CV Differs from a Regular CV

When applying speculatively, your CV needs to be tailored to showcase skills and experiences that match the organisation’s mission or work. Since you are not responding to a specific job ad, you should anticipate the type of skills they value and highlight these throughout your CV.

The aim is to position yourself as a versatile candidate who can fill potential gaps or contribute to future projects, rather than simply listing past experiences.

## Key Sections to Include

### 1. Personal Profile

- Start with a strong personal profile or summary at the top of your CV. This should be a concise statement (3–4 sentences) highlighting your background, key skills, and enthusiasm for the sector or organisation.
- Tailor this section to the organisation you're applying to, mentioning how your skills align with their work. For example:  
"A recent graduate in Sociology with experience in project management and public engagement. Passionate about curating innovative programs and supporting research within the arts and heritage sector."

### 2. Key Skills and Achievements

- Focus on transferable skills that are likely to be relevant. This could include skills like research, communication, project coordination, critical thinking, or creative problem-solving.
- Include specific examples of achievements, such as successful projects you've led, research papers published, or relevant internships, and quantify these where possible (e.g., "Managed a student art exhibition with over 300 attendees").

### 3. Relevant Experience

- List your work experience, but emphasise roles or projects that align with their focus. If you have limited formal work experience, include voluntary roles, internships, or relevant academic activities.
- Focus on how your experience can meet their future needs. For example, if applying to a think tank, highlight any research or policy work you've done, even if it was academic.

### 4. Education

- Provide details of your degree and any relevant modules, research projects, or dissertations that tie into their area of interest.
- You can also include extra-curricular activities that demonstrate relevant skills, such as leadership roles in student societies or participation in relevant events.

### 5. Additional Sections (Optional)

- If applicable, you can add sections on **Publications**, **Languages**, **IT Skills**, or **Volunteer Work** to show a broader set of capabilities that may be useful to the organisation.

By crafting a CV that highlights your skills and experiences relevant to their work, you make it easier for them to see how you could fit into their future plans.

## Sending and Following Up on Your Application

Once you've tailored your speculative CV and cover letter, it's time to send your application. How you send it, who you send it to, and how you follow up can make a big difference in your chances of getting noticed.

### Who to Contact

It's important to send your speculative application to the right person. A generic application sent to a general inbox may go unnoticed. Instead, try to identify key individuals who are likely to be involved in hiring or managing the kind of work you're interested in. Potential contacts include:

- **Hiring Managers:** If the organisation has a clear HR or recruitment team, reach out directly to them.
- **Department Heads:** For more specialised roles (e.g., in research, cultural institutions, or media), you might want to contact heads of departments or project managers directly.
- **Project Leaders:** If you are aware of specific ongoing projects, contacting the project leader or team members might be more effective.

Use LinkedIn, the organisation's website, or professional networks to identify these contacts.

### Best Practices for Sending Your Application

- **Subject Line:** Your email subject line should clearly state your purpose. Be concise but professional. For example:  
"Enquiry Regarding Potential Opportunities – Media & Cultural Studies Graduate"  
or  
"Speculative Application: Research Assistant with Experience in Social Policy."
- **Email Body:** Include a brief, professional introduction in the body of the email, summarising your purpose and attaching your CV and cover letter. If you prefer, you can also paste the cover letter directly into the email body.
- **Attachments:** Attach your CV and cover letter in a widely accepted format, such as PDF, and label them clearly (e.g., "John\_Smith\_CV.pdf" and "John\_Smith\_Cover\_Letter.pdf").

### Polite Follow-Up

If you don't hear back within a couple of weeks, it's worth following up with a polite, professional email. Keep it brief, express your continued interest, and ask if there are any upcoming opportunities. For example:

*"Dear [Name], I wanted to follow up on my previous email regarding potential opportunities at [Organisation]. I remain very interested in the work you are doing and would love to discuss any ways I could contribute to future projects. Please let me know if there is a suitable time for a brief conversation. Thank you for considering my application."*

Follow-ups can be an effective way to keep your application on their radar without being pushy.

## Conclusion

Sending speculative applications can be a highly effective way to tap into the hidden job market. Although the process may take time and persistence, it allows you to be proactive, build valuable professional connections, and demonstrate initiative—qualities that many employers value.

### Importance of Perseverance

Speculative applications often don't lead to immediate results, so it's important to stay patient and resilient. Some organisations may not have current openings, while others may keep your details on file for future opportunities. Stay positive and continue to send tailored applications, even if you don't hear back right away.

### Final Tips for Success

- **Research Thoroughly:** Understand each organisation's work and tailor your application to show how you can contribute to their mission.
- **Be Professional and Polite:** From your cover letter to your follow-up, maintaining a professional and courteous tone will leave a positive impression.
- **Network Proactively:** Beyond sending applications, attend industry events, connect with professionals on LinkedIn, and engage in relevant discussions to expand your network.

By using speculative applications strategically, you can uncover opportunities that might not be visible through traditional job searches. Whether you're looking to secure a job, internship, or freelance work, taking the initiative to introduce yourself to potential employers can open doors and help you build a meaningful career.



If you would like further support from the FHASS Employability Team you can visit our Blog, book an appointment through Careers Connect or email us at [fhassemployability@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:fhassemployability@lancaster.ac.uk)

Every effort has been made to ensure the information in this resource guide is accurate but we recommend that you check all details carefully.

