**HELOA National Conference & AGM – 2019**

**Clearing Panel**

**Chair: Elliot Newstead, University of Leicester**

**Reporter: Jamie Graney, University of Liverpool**

* Session Start – 16:03
* Students introduced themselves
  + Catherine, 2nd year student at Warwick doing Life Sciences
  + James 3rd year student from Liverpool doing Business
  + Nora history first year at city London
  + Reema from Aston final year
  + Fatima, 3rd year accounting from Leicester
  + Lois, 4th year pharmacy student
* Chris and Boris from GeckoEngage opened the session with a description of what their company does
  + Gecko work with close to 100 H.E. Institutions across the world, more than half the UK institutions use it, especially around Clearing e.g. data capture forms, live chats etc.
* **How did you choose the institution you’re now at? What were the factors, did you already have a list?**
  + Catherine didn’t apply for Warwick, it was suggested to her on Results Day by one of her teachers, so she went through the courses and looked at what they offered. Agreed that the steer came from her teacher.
  + James based his decision on the accreditation of the institution, wanted to stay in the Russell Group universities. It was the first one he called and he got in early.
  + Nora wanted a London based university who I started to call, looked at the structure of the course and the module outline was fresh and different, that’s the final decision for me really.
  + Reema didn’t actually come through clearing but she’s worked it; her sister came through clearing. She convinced her to go to Aston who told her they were quite small, got the family vibe, central campus and renowned for Business. Her cousins also went there.
  + Fatima wanted to be away from home so London was no good, couldn’t afford it. She had to be somewhere still able to travel to and from London, so the Midlands was a key area as it wasn’t too far. Had an offer for Aston but kept changing courses, that was her main issue and she couldn’t decide on a single thing. She decided based on her friendship group going to Leicester, she’d have a base of people she’d know.
  + Lois initially applied for Medicine, didn’t get any offers so had the option to take a gap year. However, Pharmacy had the same content as Medicine, friends talked her out of Durham as she enjoyed the city, also talked to graduates of Pharmacy.
* **Were you more adjustment, did you get better results?**
  + Catherine disagreed, saying she missed her offer by a grade; her deputy head said she’d been to Warwick so encouraged her to have a look on UCAS.
* **Did you jump straight to Clearing?**
  + - (All) No
* **Do you know anyone who did?**
  + - James didn’t know that was a thing.
    - One of the panel members had a friend who did that who just rejected all of her offers and went straight to Clearing.
* **How much did your course choice change?**
  + James applied for straight Management but the Clearing officer suggested adding Politics on to be able to be accepted at Liverpool.
  + Fatima changed from Pharmacy, then Psychology, then Pure Maths, in her own words “putting a bunch of degrees into a hat”
* **We worry a lot about what we put on our websites, you’ve said it was a recommendation from family and friends and teachers, what would you advise us about what we put on?**
  + Lois said university marketing is still really valuable as students are very social media conscious, so they like to see those things.
  + Nora agreed that it was really important that she had that rough outlook, she hadn’t been to any of these universities! She liked the virtual tours, in detail information – “I loved this, online resources are extremely important.”
  + Catherine saw on a website that Warwick had an open day after results day and then accepted the offer after she’d visited.
* **Did any of you attend any visits to universities during the Clearing period, or was your decision made on the day?**
  + James had already been as it was his second option, they offered it but he didn’t need it.
  + Lois said Birmingham isn’t far from London so didn’t feel like she needed to go again.
  + Fatima didn’t go.
* **Was there anything chucked your way in terms of incentives (e.g. iPads, free accommodation) or just talking to students?**
  + James had never heard of this before; free accommodation would have swayed him! He’d only heard of the offer of guaranteed first year accommodation if he chose Liverpool as a firm choice.
  + Fatima pointed out that students are money conscious, bursaries help e.g. Loughborough’s £2000 Bursary
* **If a non-Russell Group offered you a place, would you take it?**
  + James wouldn’t, it was a key area for him due to the demands of his grad scheme that required a degree from a Russell Group university.
* **Did you find the incentives different before and after Clearing?**
  + Catherine wasn’t offered any incentives.
  + James explained that his firm was his first choice and he’d get accommodation, so no.
  + All – No
  + Seems incentives are a relatively new concept.
* **Did you use any particular types of media, and if so which ones?**
  + Lois explained how UCAS is the obvious one, then going to university sites but didn’t use any social media.
  + Fatima stuck to only using the UCAS site.
  + Reema’s sister took the same approach but also asked cousins and family members, looked at the virtual tour and the Aston twitter through Q&A. Never went through a Clearing hotline, itself.
* **Did the Clearing system waiting time act as a barrier?**
  + All – yes.
  + Norma knew her results in spring which affected her offer from UCL to reject me, as she was left waiting hours on the phone before results day. There were some universities who told me her can’t enter clearing before results day. She was given many wrong phone numbers and being from overseas, had to pay for it!
  + James considers himself lucky, as he rang Liverpool and they picked up after around 30mins. He was happy with the whole process.
* **Would you have a preference on how universities communicated with you?**
  + Catherine definitely liked talking on the phone, she got straight through to the person from the department she applied to and they were very informative, they sent a useful email out after as well.
  + James suggests universities keep it to phone calls, explaining that he doesn’t use social media for anything but friends (panel agreed with this).
  + Lois prefers social media as she gets faster responses – Snapchat is actually strange though.
  + Fatima suggested universities should call potential students before Clearing because many students can be swayed in that time.
* **How do you feel about advertising, like adverts down the sides of the webpage?**
  + James confessed that he’s ‘pre-programmed’ to ignore those advertisements, to which the panel agreed. Half the time they’re not relevant for him. A lot of students who phone up ask about the city, get swayed by this and like the peer to peer.
  + Reema – I’d personally use the live chat, more universities should incorporate it. I don’t have a preference who is answering me, especially in a state of panic.
* **What’s more important, getting the offer on the phone or speaking to an academic despite it taking longer?**
  + James – Liverpool works well, you start with a student then get passed to an academic, it’s good.
  + Fatima – I think it would be very useful, you don’t understand the modules from the website so it’s good to have a quick conversation and explore what kind of study you would get.
* **There are some universities that don’t involve academics in Clearing, would this be a deterrent?**
  + Lois – for some people, yes. If the question can’t be answered, they’ll just find somewhere else. (Panel agrees with her)
  + Catherine – I wanted to know first of all if I had the grades AND THEN learn more about it. I wouldn’t have liked just being told I’m in, and then left there, my course needs a bit more explaining.
  + Lois – a lot of students are changing their courses, time is of the essence and they’re losing their place in the queue. My brother spoke to an academic and that was what convinced him to get in, they accepted him there.
  + Fatima – I wasn’t too bothered (James agreed)
  + Norma – those on the Clearing hotline didn’t know that my grades were equivalent to those I needed, if you’re from a different country you want to know “can I get in?”
* **(To the room) Are there any quick systems you use to speed up processing International qualifications?**
  + Liverpool Hope – our system maps out qualifications, it’s really useful to use and everyone has access. We copy common ones and put them on Google Doc.
* **(Back to the panel) Did any of you receive a welcome email after getting your offer?**
  + James – yes, straight away including all the supporting documentation and what to do from there. It was useful to get next steps.
  + Catherine – I did, went to the Open Day and met who would become my personal tutor – I already knew who he was.
  + Lois – we had an e-mentoring system but didn’t meet who made me my offer.
* **Can GeckoEngage provide any insight into this?**
  + Chris from Gecko – yes, we have a call centre solution that Southampton use, a plugged-in chat system and making offers through that system which cut down on call times. It was really successful last year, 75% increase.
  + Fatima – they’re all really good but universities don’t push their methods enough, you don’t want to wait in a phone queue.
  + Chris – the software also goes into Facebook and Twitter etc. direct messaging
* **What sort of decision turnaround time would you expect?**
  + James – there and then, it’s a very stressful period. Even waiting an hour is daunting. My college released my results later than others, so I was already behind and I had to go get them in.
* **Had you looked at courses that may be available in Clearing before going getting your results, or did you think about it the night before?**
  + James – I was a bit cocky, I hadn’t done any preparation.
  + Fatima – I did, I looked at the UCAS site but there was loads of courses available.
  + Lois – No I didn’t.
  + Fatima – I didn’t call until 3pm or 4pm after getting my results at 10am, there was still a lot of spaces, even on the second day. People feel like if you didn’t get a place straight away, you won’t get one at all.
  + Catherine – I didn’t call until the second day as I wanted to check if my firm choice would accept.
* **Does it out you off a university if they’re in Clearing for a long time?**
  + James – yes, that would influence my choice, the longer it’s open it looks more desperate.
  + Norma – for me, not really.
  + Catherine – I didn’t realise institutions stayed open for different amounts of time.
  + Reema – my sister knew her course wasn’t popular, so it would be open longer. My course, Business, would go really quick. It’s about “I just want to get there, it doesn’t really matter, I’ll see what they have”.
  + Lois – some people are institution focused, some are course focused. For me, it was the nature of the course.
  + James – Clearing operators need to know the specific procedure, I was mis told information and false promises.
* **Thinking back to that day, what do you wish you could tell yourself or what do you wish someone would tell you?**
  + James – I wish someone would tell me to take my time more, maybe looked around a bit more.
  + Catherine – I thought I would have to go through Clearing, I didn’t look as it would make me feel more anxious. Someone should have told me that I should have a look around – anyone could have told me!
  + Panel said colleges didn’t offer any guidance with Clearing etc., they should talk you through the process.
  + Fatima – at college someone did come in to speak with us about Clearing, but no one paid attention as Clearing was a taboo. We had 2 or 3 sessions through the year. On results day, someone should have told me “With my grades, I can still go to university and do the subjects that you like”. My college just gave out our results. If I had different options explained to me I would
* **Did any universities come into your schools or colleges to talk about Clearing?**
  + Panel – no
  + James – it would have been nice but not sure how feasible that would be
  + Some members of the room explained that it would work
  + Ali from Dundee explained their system, sent to schools with good relationships
  + Steven from Birmingham City said their activity is based on the applications they get
  + One university sends out ambassadors to schools offering advice at the schools
  + Reema – universities need to enhance the idea that Clearing isn’t bad, it’s about getting yourself sorted and going from there. A degree through Clearing isn’t a bad degree.
* **Were you aware that you could get lots of offers and ability to shop around?**
  + James – I thought you could only have 1 or 2 offers.
  + Lois and Fatima – I got a lot of offers and shopped around, as they explained that on the phone.
  + Norma – some deadlines to accept were different, either on the spot or 3 days later. I prefer having time to wait.
  + Lois – I feel like my hands were forced with the time constraints, especially when needing to be released.
* **Who influenced you to think Clearing is bad?**
  + Reema – my peers, although I could advise my sister otherwise. If you’re the first going, it’s the peer pressure thing. Universities and schools should do more to explained that they’re not the only one going through Clearing. It’s mainly peers that cause this.
  + Fatima – it’s the school that had the biggest influence, they don’t want to bring up Clearing to make sure people work towards doing well. They gave everyone ridiculously high predicted grades to make you work harder.
  + James – my school would put your predicted grades up to help you get offers from universities. All it would take is talking about it and creating more awareness, more talks!
  + Lois – I agree, I felt like this through coming through college. When I got to university, no one asked about my grades, so why care?
* **How far out were your predicted grades?**
  + James – very far out, A\*A\*A\* but I got ABB. It’s important to manage expectations.
  + Catherine – only out by one, by only half a percent, in fact.
  + Lois – my teachers just said “this is where I think you’re going, that’s it”
* **Thinking about post-Clearing, you’ve got a shorter time between accepting your offer and starting university. What did we (as universities) do well and what could we have done to support you?**
  + Fatima – I was put through to a bursary scheme, registration took me about 30mins, timetable was online in the next couple of days. You are left with the last few accommodation places by this time though, I had to go private and made it hard to socialise, universities should keep some accommodation reserved for Clearing.
  + James – we have a big problem with accommodation numbers, mainly due to misinformation with our guarantee.
  + Reema – the university used to keep a block reserved for Clearing, but then Unite moved onto campus to use those. Students used to be relaxed and knew there wasn’t any worries but not anymore.
  + Catherine – Warwick guarantees accommodation for all first years, although you can end up in places people don’t want to be but it’s fine because everyone’s in the same boat and are going through the same process. They sent me all the information about accommodation and an email about their wellbeing resources, really useful e.g. homesickness etc.
  + Lois – Aston had a good e-mentoring system, really useful.
  + Fatima – tutor in my first year was good to have. Sometimes there is accommodation provided for you, just not necessarily what you want.
  + James – receiving timetables could have been better, didn’t receive my timetable until the morning I arrived so communicate what happens before you arrive! Have a clear communication between the university and the prospective student.
* **Wouldn’t we just spam you?**
  + Norma – I liked that straight after Clearing I’d have my department sending me stuff
  + James – condense it all down into fewer emails but be selective about what you’re including. What’s forgotten about is student experience e.g. social life, what happens when I arrive?
  + Fatima – font matters, keep it clear to read!
* **Did you feel like you were treated differently coming through Clearing?**
  + Panel – no.
  + Catherine – I was just glad to be going to university.
  + Fatima – university has so many different routes of entry, no one discussed it that much.
* **Did you receive any emails you didn’t need?**
  + Lois – yes, some information was repetitive. They don’t talk about budgeting and finance, which would be useful.
  + James – I think you should budget yourself, feels like you’re being parented by the university if they’re advising you on that.
  + Fatima – I received a budgeting email, really concise and useful. Took me less than 2 minutes to read!
* **Is budgeting and social life more relevant before or after Clearing?**
  + All – after.
  + Reema – Aston work hand in hand with the SU, advice on budgeting and best social packages to get etc. students were happy with this pack, especially not being highlighted as being a Clearing student.
* **Did parents really influence your application?**
  + James – they made me apply through Clearing, instead of just sitting there head in hands about my results.
  + Catherine – parents encouraged me to do an apprenticeship, actually.
  + Fatima – my mum let me do whatever route I wanted to do.
  + Reema – I was the first person out of my sisters to go to university, if I hadn’t gone, I wouldn’t be able to tell my sister everything I knew. You should reassure parents about what to say and expect.
  + Catherine – when I moved into Warwick, there was talks for parents of students who had come through Clearing, I remember those students who gave that talk the most.
* **If you could give your Y13 self a bit of advice for results day, what would it be?**
  + Lois – calm down, despite it being really hard. It’s okay that you’re going through Clearing.
  + Fatima – take your time, maybe even take a year out? You don’t have to go to university right there and then.
  + Reema – be patient and have hope, it’s not the end of your life.
  + Norma – make the best out of it that you can, think it through logically.
  + James – familiarise yourself more with the whole process.
  + Catherine – try and not feel so much like a failure, look on the positive side.
* Elliott finished the session and thanked the students.