Session Title:	Keynote: UCAS
Speaker(s):	Genia Garrety and Ben Jordan
Chair:	Reena Littlehales
Reporter:	Jen Lewis

| Speaker/Institution Bio/Information: | **Ben Jordan: Director of Strategy at UCAS**
Ben has been at UCAS for over a decade and has been described as a 'leading figure of higher education admissions policy', with his knowledge in this area 'second to none'.

During his time at UCAS, Ben has led the response and engagement around every major political event that could impact on student progression, including Brexit, admissions reform, qualification reform, Scottish independence, general elections, and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, which involved forming part of three separate ministerial taskforces.

Ben has also overseen the delivery of UCAS' key policy outputs, including Unpacking Qualification Reform, the first major report on schools' response to qualification reform, Where Next?, a leading piece on student decision making, What happened to the COVID cohort?, the definitive assessment of the impact of the pandemic on student progression, Starting the Conversation, UCAS' landmark piece on student mental health, and most recently, Next Steps, a first of its kind report looking at the sentiment of LGBT+ students as they progress to university or college.

Outside of work, Ben is a school governor and can often be found searching for his ball on the golf course.

Genia Garrety: Director of UCAS Information, Advice and Guidance
Genia Garrity leads UCAS's Information, Advice and Guidance strategy, helping over a million students and their supporters navigate the journey to higher education. |

	She has delivered key initiatives to empower students, including the UCAS Historical Entry Grades tool, the Scholarships search, and a range of communications designed to build confidence and informed choice. *With a background in marketing and digital engagement, Genia has driven personalised communication programmes for applicants and now leads UCAS's personalisation programme. This work focuses on creating tailored pathways to level the playing field and equipping schools, parents, guardians, and carers with the tools to fully support students.*
Overview/Aim of session:	This session provided an update on figures from the 2025 UCAS application cycle, including key data trends, and an overview of the organisation's new strategy: 'UCAS' Next Chapter'.
Workshop Content	The session began with an acknowledgement of the Equal Consideration deadline (14th January 2025) and the submission of approx. 1,000 applications per minute at this time of year. Data about this year's applications will be available from 28th January. **Background** The speakers began the content of their workshop with a key question: what is happening to 18 year olds' demand? Despite the headlines, there was a surge in demand for education from both 18 year olds and mature students during the COVID-19 Pandemic. In particular, more people were applying for key-worker courses, e.g nursing. We then saw a deceleration of demand and return to normal grades, possibly linked to lower birth rates and/pr cost of living concerns. Looking forward, we are likely see a peak 18 year old population in 2030. **UCAS Funnel** Over 1m register with UCAS every year, however there is attrition at every stage, leading to 560K students ending up with a place in HE. Why?

| | - Cost of living
- Mature students- unsure about personal statements, do not know GCSE equivalents

Key question: how can we move more people through the funnel?

The Story of 2025
Headlines:
- Applications were numerically up but proportionally flat.
- 71% of students got their first choice.
- More students actively chose to apply via clearing.

Entry Rates - regional differences remain prevalent. Why?
- L2 attainment
- Ethnicity/Cultural differences
- Local culture and networks
- Availability of apprenticeships

WP
- Growth in entry of young people in receipt of free school meals (waived application fee from UCAS)

Living at Home- are more students living at home? Yes
2016- ⅕ students lived at home
2021- ¼ students lived at home
Today- ⅓ students lived at home
Over half of students in IMD Q1 live at home. Significantly more than those in Q4 or 5.
Regional differences: Welsh most mobile, Scottish least.

Subjects - a story of STEM
IAAO- International Association of Admissions Organisations agree:
- Students are leaving applications later
- Students want the right to revisit decisions
- The world is becoming more STEM focussed (e.g. comp. science)

Computer Science has grown hugely over the last few years, but accepts declined this year. Maybe more people are moving to software engineering or other areas of STEM.

International Market:
- Growth for China
- Record number of applications from the US this year - perhaps influences by elections |

- Turkey continues to grow- UK is cheaper than the US, closer and offers 3 year courses (quicker than international competitors)

Decline My Place:
Transformation of Clearing over the last few years. One of the largest groups who use clearing chose to be there (they declined their place).
Common movement with DMP- tariff band (VERY human)
- I want to live closer to home
- I want to live somewhere more affordable
- I want to live with partner
- I've found a subject I prefer

2025 Cycle sits within a relatively new government, on the cusp of significant changes, e.g. potential removal of extended diploma. Skills White Paper, maturing of higher technical qualifications, etc.

What students are coming with is becoming more diverse, as is what they are exploring. Everything is becoming more complex- this is where we come in.

UCAS Response: The Next Chapter
- Connecting
- Widening Horizons
- Empowerment for All

Connecting
How can we get the right information to the right people?
Over 1m register on UCAS- often driven by the activity of a careers advisor/influence, but uncertainty is very common.
UCAS have created resources to support students who feel uncertain (e.g. career quiz).
UCAS feels like a generic experience.
Students want more relevant info served at the right point. Action: Personalisation.

UCAS is actively investing in personalisation. Evolving from an application form to a space where students feel seen and supported.

Widening Horizons
- ⅕ students miss out on a choice because of an early decision - how do we get info to students at the right time?
- Students feel like they need to save up more before university (need more info about financial support)

	Cost of living- now third most important factor in shortlisting unis (used to be 12th)
	Half of students recorded that they are not receiving cost of living support from their chosen university. How can we adapt communications to address this?

Actions taken by UCAS to address these challenges:
- Scholarships, bursaries and grants tool
  - Used by 100,000 since the end of November
  - Can be updated by teams at any point
- Budget calculator
  - Based on real student data
- Improved course search
  - How can we enhance the discovery journey?
  - Not changing the algorithm
  - Working on new data collection tool- more flexible
- Revised information and advice
  - Continued area of investment
- In event engagements
  - 145,000 students engage in UCAS Discovery events
  - UCAS examining how to better leverage the data from these events
- AI
  - 77% of 13-18 year olds use AI for homework
  - Shapes the way that young people engage
  - How can AI be leveraged to support UCAS challenges?

Empowerment for All
Allocation of funding per student within schools has been slashed by 57% since 2009.

Action: Advisor portal
- Discovery insights to be included from next month
- Useful cohort view for advisors to use
- Will allow careers conversations to be more impactful

How can we support teachers and advisors to talk to students about alternative routes?

Call to Action
MOU review underway. HELOA x UCAS partnership going well. Reciprocal relationship that supports students in their informed decision making.

	Forthcoming consultation- pre-consulation challenges: - October deadline - ECD timing - Number of choices - How students manage choices - Appetite to revisit clearing and make it more suitable for user needs 28th Jan- consultation document to be released
Case Studies/Examples:	**(See above)**
Scenarios/Roundtable discussions:	**N/A**
Questions and Answers:	**Question:** Finance is a huge barrier for students, is there a timeline for when the budget tool will be launched? **Answer:** Hopefully by the opening of the 2027 cycle. Ideally between January and June 2026. **Question:** Negative press about Student Loans and the impact of interest- will this impact 2026 applications? **Answer:** Immediate costs to students impact choice and demand as opposed to longer-term headline tuition fees. 2016 report: Through the Student Lens. 'Cost today not cost tomorrow'. Recommends talking about the 'graduate premium'. **Question:** In the development of the budget tool, how will the differences in students' spends be taken into account? **Answer:** Working with a partner that is an expert and will take a wide sample of student data. **Question:** Can anyone contribute to the UCAS consultation process? How important is it to hear from a range of voices in the sector? **Answer:** UCAS cycle has ripple effects in lots of areas of work within HE. Keen to promote that less than 5 courses close after the January deadline. Keen for all ideas (detailed or blue sky). Tell UCAS if things aren't working, but also if they ARE.
SummaryKey takeaways:	UCAS are constantly reviewing trends in student application data to ensure that they are taking appropriate measures to support informed decision making. UCAS are taking a three-pronged approach to address current

	challenges: - Connecting - Widening Horizons - Empowerment for All