

Clearing Episode Transcript

So we're joined now by Alice. Thank you so much for joining us, Alice, and joining us to talk all about clearing and admissions. But before we start on clearing, could you tell us a bit about your own educational journey, please?

Sure. So hi, everyone. Nice to be here. I went to sixth form at a school in South Cumbria called Queen Elizabeth School. So I'd actually been there since I was 11. I studied geography, English literature, religious studies, and chemistry as A-levels, which is quite a broad range of subjects. So I initially didn't quite know what I wanted to follow that with. After sort of talking to my family and my teachers, I decided that a geography degree was for me. I got a place to study at Newcastle University, but then decided partway through the summer after I'd finished school that I didn't want to travel too far from home. So I spoke to Lancaster and then I studied geography here for three years and had a wonderful time.

Fantastic. So you're now working as an undergraduate admissions officer at Lancaster University. So can you tell us a bit more about your role?

Sure. So I am part of the undergraduate admissions team. We have a number of admissions officers like myself who work across different subject areas. to try and ensure that students are able to access the right course and the right degree programme for them at Lancaster. So while we work as a big team, each admissions officer might work in more detail with a particular academic department. So for me at the minute, it's engineering, biomedical and life sciences amongst others.

So Alice, can you tell us a bit about what like a normal year cycle is like? Because I'm sure some of our listeners are probably thinking about their own experiences, so writing their own personal statements and applying to university. But what's it like being an admissions officer?

Typically, we start to receive UCAS applications from school leavers, mature students and anybody who wants to apply to a Lancaster needs to apply via UCAS, but you can submit an application from early September onwards. So we start working with our departments on what their admissions criteria will be, what they're looking for in personal statements, much earlier than that. So we're able to get back to applicants with decisions relatively quickly. As UCAS do, we advise that applicants apply between that September start date and the end of January. It's a soft deadline really. So if students apply between that period, they're guaranteed equal consideration. So while it is still possible to apply after that point, it might be that certain courses will close or certain criteria will be amended. Once we've made offers and decisions on all applications. It's then a little bit of a move over to the academic departments who invite all the students to come and visit to make sure that Lancaster will be a good fit for them. And then students are asked to make choices as to whether they want to put a particular university as their firm or insurance choice. Throughout that period, we're there to support students with any questions they have. That sort of covers the first round of

the application system in UCAS, but there are further ways in which people can apply. There's a system called UCAS Extra, which is for applicants who have perhaps used all their initial five UCAS choices and decided that they want to change subject area or university, or perhaps they didn't receive offers on the their programs of choice. So via UCAS Extra, you're able to apply for a single course at a time, and you can apply again and again until you find the right one for you. So that sort of takes us through to the summer, which is when UCAS Clearing opens. So it actually opens in early July, but most students in the UK taking A levels and Beta courses will be able to apply via UCAS if they want to, sorry UCAS Clearing if they want to from mid-August onwards.

Wonderful, so you're quite involved in Clearing and you mentioned that that opens around middle of July?

Yes that's right, it opens around the middle of July and continues through to August, but most UK-based students will participate in the middle of August.

And so we have people who are listening who will be getting their results or already have their results. So can you tell us a bit more about that clearing process?

Clearing is sort of another round of application, but it works quite differently to earlier on in the year. In one sense, it's really clear and straightforward. A university will tell you exactly what courses they have vacancies on and exactly what grades they will accept. You can contact as many universities as you like, or you can ask about as many courses as you like at a single university. And then you receive verbal and or written offers. It's you then get a period of time as dictated by UCAS that allows you to think over the options that you've been given. Are they the right one for you? And then you can choose any offer you've received in Clearing to sort of refer yourself through to that institution and claim your place. Not everybody will use UCAS Clearing. Some people will be happy with their sort of their awarded place that they may have obtained earlier in the UCAS cycle but lots of people will decide to change, change subject areas, change locations and other people might just wait to start the application process until clearing starts because for some people it's a more straightforward route of application so we see a mix of the two really Year on year really. I would say really the majority of universities will have vacancies in clearing, but it may be for a very reduced profile of courses or at particularly high academic entry requirements. So they may not also know until their A-level results have been released in mid-August. as to exactly what vacancies and grades they will have. But it's really easy to check. If you are familiar with the UCAS website and you have submitted an application and you are eligible for clearing, you can actually check UCAS's database on results day, I believe from 8am onwards, which will list every university vacancy available in clearing. and then give direction either there onto exactly what a university requires academic wise, or it might direct you through to that university's website. At Lancaster, as an example, we will have a full list of our courses available. You can search them alphabetically or by subject area, and then against each of those courses, a full academic profile in terms of what we require.

Wonderful. And something new that I'm learning is that where in the UCAS application there is a limit of five universities that you can apply to, for UCAS Clearing there's no limit, so you can apply to as many institutions and programmes as you like.

Yeah, so if you are in UCAS Clearing or you want to use UCAS Clearing, you can submit inquiries or a record of interest to as many universities and as many courses as you want. That's typically done direct with the university. So this is sort of the first stage of clearing. You're inquiring as to whether a university has a vacancy on a course that you're interested in and whether you meet that academic entry requirement. So that could be four or five courses perhaps in a sort of a business management area at Lancaster. You could check in with the University of Manchester, Durham, Birmingham, and then you sort of take stock of what offers you've been made. And then at that point you can pick your favourite and then refer yourself through to that university actually via UCAS. So you are able to have conversations with many, many different universities. And as that initial stage is outside UCAS, no other university would know whether you're talking to another university about a different course or not. So it's clearing is set up to really be for the benefit of the students. in one sense that the power is in your hands to find the right vacancy and place for you. So most universities will be really, really keen to hear from potential students in Clearing.

Thank you, Alice. You explain that very clearly. Thank you.

Alice, something I wanted to sort of learn a bit more about was I remember when I was in my A-levels and Clearing was something that you tended to go into if you didn't get the A-level grades that you needed. So if you didn't make your offer, And who's clearing for now? Is it still the case?

That's a great question. And I am getting on a bit now. And it was sort of the same when I was at school and college. And in a way, I think years and years ago, clearing used to be a bit of a dirty word, but it's completely changed dynamic in the past few years. So while it is a great opportunity for people who perhaps didn't make the academic requirements of their firm and insurance choice, lots of people use it as an opportunity to shop around really. So if earlier on in the application cycle, people have had nerves over what their predicted grades will be, will they reach that attainment level that a particular university needs? And as a result, they had been perhaps more cautious in what they applied to and where they applied. it gives them an opportunity to see that a particular course at what was a really attractive university for them is available, has vacancies and would accept the grades that they had achieved. So it's an opportunity to upcycle from what you had at that results day to perhaps where you see yourself going forward. So lots of different people use UCAS Clearing It's not just for people who perhaps didn't receive offers at a particular university choice. It's for anyone really who wants to think about a change.

And do you need to have applied to a university to apply? So either you've got an offer or you've not met an offer. If you've not applied to any university, maybe you're just focusing on your exams that year or you hadn't thought you wanted to go to university and then results day comes around and

you think, wow, I've done really well, I'd actually like to go to university now. Can you use Clearing to get an offer that way?

Yes, you can. That's a really good point, one I'm glad you raised. So you don't have to have study UCAS application any earlier in the year so if on results day you think oh actually I've done really well and I think I'd like to move straight on to a university education it's really simple to complete a UCAS application at that point so you definitely don't need to have held offers or applied before August so Certainly not. If you make that decision on results day, you should go for it.

Thank you, Alice. So we've talked about the results day. So, you know, that's a huge day for students who've done A-levels or BTECs and similar qualifications. And it could be the case that they've not done as well as they'd expected or maybe done better than what they'd expected and may have a change of heart as to where they want to go or maybe what degree they want to study. So in order to make sure that students make the most of the whole clearing process that's offered by UCAS, what advice would you give to students on results day?

My top piece of advice would be to make sure you know your UCAS personal ID number. That's often the first thing a university will ask for if you are speaking to them. It's typically 10 digits long and should be included in correspondence from UCAS and or university choices if you had applied previously. Secondly, I think it's important to make sure you've got the time on sort of results morning, A level and BTEC results, just to make sure that you've got the headspace to take in what information you've been given on that day, because you'll likely be receiving academic results from your school or college. but also decisions from any university choices that you had previously made. It's quite difficult to have those conversations if you are at work or you're on holiday internationally. So if you can sort of take a little time on that morning to make sure you know what's happened, what your options are, and it gives you a good base to sort of start that contact with universities if you are at all unsure about the course perhaps you've been offered, why your offer perhaps is maybe still conditional, or if you have decided that you want to look at clearing and any particular university or course choice. And also make sure you have your mobile phone charged or be near a landline to make sure you can get in touch with the universities.

Wonderful. And parents, guardians and families are obviously a big source of support for young people on that day. So what advice would you give to them? Because there may be people listening who have members of the family or people in the circle of friends who are awaiting their results and want to support them on the day. What advice would you give to them?

Yeah, it's a really important group of people you've summarised there that I know are of massive support to the majority of applicants. So I think regardless of the outcome of the A-level results and any sort of university applications, don't panic. There are always options. There are lots of options for each individual that will fit their interests, needs and sort of academic attainment that the key is to start those conversations with universities about possible places if they haven't been awarded the place they originally applied for, but also with schools if there are, if anybody wants to sort of go for a

remark. And again, for those who are considering degree apprenticeships or other routes of entry to higher education, it's starting those conversations on that day and it's a day that can be quite overwhelming for students so having support around them to help make those initial calls and to talk over plans it is a huge benefit to each applicant I think.

And I know like no matter how hard students have worked you know sometimes things just go wrong on the day and sometimes like you know you just don't get the results that you want. And it might be that you've not got the results that you want and it's quite bad and you've not passed something. Or it might be that you just, you know, you wanted something higher to go to a certain university. What advice would you have for students who just haven't got the results that they wanted or needed? And obviously results day has become very stressful for them.

It can really depend on an individual situation, but some people may wish or are able to talk to a university perhaps about a different but related course at that university that they may be able to access with their academic attainment. It might be an opportunity for them to look at universities that they perhaps not thought about in the sort of the first round of application. who will offer very similar course to perhaps one that they had applied to previously, just in a different location. Some students, and we've certainly seen this over the last three or four years where students have had a really, really tricky time, have decided to take a further year of study at school or college to try again and bump up the grades that they know they are capable of achieving. And certainly at Lancaster University, outside of medicine and surgery degree, where there are slightly different requirements, we're absolutely happy to receive applications from students who've completed their A-level or BTEC IB schooling over a period of three years rather than two. So that's not at all to their detriment.

Thank you, Alice. I'm sure that's quite a relief for some people. I have friends I know who did their A-levels in three years and they felt much better about doing it in over three years and taking a little bit of the pressure because they retook a certain grade that they wanted. You mentioned, you know, you might go to a university that you hadn't previously thought of and you get an offer during clearing. Is there a way of visiting that university before you make the final decision?

I can only really, really speak on behalf of Lancaster, but I'm sure that the rest of the sector will operate in a similar way. But over the sort of the few days following A-Level Results Day, well, and BTEC Results Day, so that this year, that's the Thursday, the 17th of August, I believe, we will have a number of campus tours available with sort of department drop-in sessions. So people are welcome, in fact, encouraged to visit if they can, so they can get to see the campus environment that they're potentially studying in for the next three to five years, depending on their course of interest. And again, it's an opportunity to meet with their academic department of choice to sort of grill them on what the courses that they offer, what are the study abroad or industry work placements, what career support is offered from the university, but also within the department. So it's not something that you have to go into with a leap of faith. There should be plenty of opportunities for students to visit a university and to make sure that that's the right place of study for them. in terms of how we let students know this as part of our offer process we will contact students to let them know of

opportunities to visit us and these opportunities will always be before any given deadline that may have been set in terms of making a referral to a university so there should always be sufficient time to visit, to discuss that, to think it over with family and friends and then make an informed decision.

And I guess part of that will also be information on admissions as well, because if you're applying to a university through the clearing process and you're wanting to stay in the university or around the university, there will be consideration of accommodation involved as well. So having the opportunity to go and visit the university and get to see what the accommodation is.

Yes. Yes. We're at Lancaster. We're we're really lucky. We have a large number of on-campus accommodation rooms of sort of a variety of types and sorts. And all of our accommodation for undergraduate students is set within what we call college system. So the college system is sort of a pastoral social setting aside from academic work. And it means that all our students mix with a variety of other students from different subjects, areas and disciplines and years of study. So it's that great environment alongside the academic study. but as you mentioned you're going to be living in a place for a number of years so you've got to make sure that you're comfortable. You can come and see the different types of accommodation available and that can help then inform your accommodation application so you are able to select preferences of colleges and accommodation types so if you wish to have your own sort of bathroom facilities you can select on suite accommodation. If you want to be in sort of a single-sex area, you can select that. We may be able to make certain guarantees about accommodation, but it's not something that we know quite at this stage, but all information would be given at the point of making an offer to a student.

Brilliant. And Alice, if a student has already made a firm choice, could they still be released into clearing if they've had a change of heart?

Yes and in fact in the past couple of years it's become a lot easier to do that. So it used to be that you needed to ask the university at which you hold a firm offer to release you and that could be a bit of a lengthy process but now students are able to do that themselves via their UCAS application. So there's a an area on their UCAS application, sort of the website where you can self-release into clearing. So it's really quick and simple process. You don't need to speak to anybody at the university where you had previously held an offer. It's something that UCAS have worked on recently, again, for the benefit of the student to make sure that their path to the right place of study for them is as easy and smooth as possible.

Thank you, Alice. You mentioned briefly about students that might want to retake an A-level or a B-level. But what about students who want to take a gap year? What do admissions staff think when they see an application of somebody who's had a gap year or maybe two gap years?

That's wonderful. We have no negative feelings at all towards gap years. A lot of people choose to work to further understand their knowledge of particular subject areas and businesses to help fund future studies. Some people choose to travel or to take time away for caring responsibilities. We don't treat people who've had a gap year any differently to those who are coming straight from school. In fact, quite a lot of people would argue that it only adds sort of different benefits to that person and their education journey. So if you've had a gap year or you're considering a gap year or two or more, as you said, we wouldn't want that to discourage anyone from applying to study at Lancaster.

Brilliant. So Alice, we've got quite a lot of ground in terms of the admissions process, which you articulated at the start of the interview, which was brilliant. And then we focused on clearing, which happens after June. And you've given lots of tips about supporting somebody through that process. And also, if you are somebody who's expecting their results, in August what you can do ahead of the exam results day to prepare yourself in terms of you know if you do meet the grades making sure that you're aware of where you will find that information and if it's a case of you're not meeting the expectations of where you've applied what else you know, what the options are available to you. And I think talking to your family and friends about that Plan B ahead of the date would be useful so that on the day when you have all of these lists of universities and all the degree programmes, you know, and you're having to move quite quickly in terms of contacting that university, making them aware of your interests, but it'd be good to have those conversations ahead of the day itself. So know there's lots there that you've given us Alice in terms of really good advice about clearing. Is there anything else that you know you'd like our audience to know which can help them through the clearing process?

I think don't be afraid to get in touch with universities regardless of your position and again I can only speak about Lancaster and I'm probably a little biased but we're a really friendly group of people who are keen to help students get to the right course of study at the right institution for them. So no question is too silly or too irrelevant. If you're considering switching courses, get in touch. We're happy to help you do that. If you're considering deferring your year of entry, again, get in touch. We're happy to help you. I think you can feel as a student on what can be quite a stressful day that you feel it's possible to feel a little bit isolated that you might be the only person having these sort of thoughts about, is this the right course? Do I want to start this year or next year? And I can reassure people that that's not the case. We're having lots of conversations with lots of students to tweak their sort of route to higher education with us to make sure it's absolutely the best fit for them. So if you've got a question or you've got a worry, please get in touch with us and we'd be happy to help you.

Thank you so much. I completely agree with that advice and just to sort of reiterate about getting in contact through Clearing, When you call up or if you email in, Alice will be one of the people that you'll be speaking to or who will be reading your emails. I'm also going to be working on the phone line, so you might hear a voice you recognise. So just to reiterate that there's no such thing as a bad question and we want to help students. That's one of the main aims of Clearing, is to help students find the right course and university for them. So thank you so much for joining us, Alice. so much

information. I thought I knew a lot about clearing and I've learned so much. That was really, really useful. So thank you again for joining us. Thank you for having me.