

30 September 2011

Dear Parent

UCAS Advice

The school is delighted that last year's leavers achieved great university success with 83% going on to Oxbridge, Russell Group* and 1994 Group universities**. This confirms our tradition for placing our pupils in the world's top universities and our position within the top 100 UK schools identified by the Sutton Trust for consistency in Oxbridge success.

Now that the UCAS process is well under way at the school and our young people are making their final decisions about university applications, it is timely to offer some further advice on the factors to be taken into account when making these important choices.

The First (Firm) Choice University

The demand for university places continues to increase. Even allowing for the peak in last year's applications occasioned by students trying to avoid the increased fees from 2012, there will be around 650,000 applicants chasing 480,000 places in the coming UCAS round. In this competitive environment it is important that PGS pupils chose their universities carefully. It is quite proper that our pupils should have the ambition to study at leading universities, those with the best resources and reputations. Figures from UCAS show, however, that independent school pupils target a rather narrow range of universities; notably, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Exeter, Imperial, KCL, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Southampton, Warwick and York. These universities are significantly over-subscribed and routinely reject, for most courses, well over half of those applying to them; including applicants with strings of A*s at GCSE and high GCE and IB predictions. Last year, 17 universities, including most from the above group, made offers including A* for the most sought after courses, such as Medicine, Law and English. The number this year will increase. Durham has already announced that the A* will be included in all of its offers for mainstream degrees.

Although pupils from independent schools like PGS are far more likely to receive offers for the best courses than their state school counterparts, universities are under some pressure to meet widening access targets. The advice of Mary Curnock Cook, the Chief Executive of UCAS, is that independent school candidates should broaden their horizons. There are twenty universities in the Russell Group, including Liverpool, Sheffield, Glasgow and Queen's, Belfast. The 1994 group includes more than just Durham and York; it includes universities such as East Anglia, Leicester (winner of Sunday Times University of the Year in 2008 and consistently near the head of the student satisfaction survey), Reading and Queen Mary, London. There are, moreover, plenty of fine universities outside of these well known groups. Kent, for example, belongs to neither yet currently stands above Manchester of the Russell Group in the Sunday Times league table. Aston, specialising in business-related courses, stands fifth in this year's table for most leavers in graduate level jobs; Durham is in fifteenth place.

It is important that a wide range of universities is considered. The perceived prestige of a university should be less important than finding the right course at the right university for a particular young person.

The Insurance Choice University

Every step should be taken to avoid missing both firm and insurance offers and being left to the vagaries of the clearing process. Clearing is the process on A Level results day by which candidates who miss offers, or choose to reject offers, at either their first or insurance choice university, attempt to gain a place at another university. Many universities, having little trouble in filling their places, do not enter clearing. This does not apply just to the obviously sought after universities such as UCL and Bristol. Last year, Aberystwyth announced that it would not have any courses on offer in clearing. It is much better to meet an insurance offer at a good, well-established university, such as Aberystwyth, than to be forced into clearing by having been over-ambitious. In clearing, it is highly unlikely to find a better university, or course, than that which could have been secured by a prudent initial UCAS application.

The school will not make UCAS predictions that are wholly unrealistic. This is fair neither to the universities nor candidates. It does, however, make predictions based on the best possible outcome if a pupil works to her, or his, capacity. This enables pupils to make quite ambitious applications. This means that it is not wise to make five applications based on, perhaps, generous predictions. If all applications are made to highly selective universities, there is a danger of several rejections or of all offers being similar, something along the lines of AAA or 36 plus IB points. This does not leave much scope for the selection of a genuine insurance offer.

It is vital that a candidate's overall application sees ambition tempered with realism. Some pupils may be disappointed by their end of Year 12 examination but these do give an indication of what might happen in the public examinations if all does not go well. It is advisable to have a least one application to a university that requires grades and points that are broadly in line with those achieved in the school's examinations. An insurance offer should be significantly lower than that made by the firm choice university.

I apologize for labouring the point, but it is important for our candidates to have a realistic insurance offer. It is much better to select a course and university, when all are available during the initial UCAS process, than run the risk of having to enter clearing.

Overall

A well-balanced UCAS form should have one, no more than two, aspirational choices, where there might be a risk of the application being rejected or, if an offer is made, of it being highly demanding. There should be a core of two or three applications that are highly likely to produce offers, albeit still of a demanding nature. There should be a least one genuine insurance application; to a university that is all but certain to make an offer that is well within the compass of the applicant.

In order to make the UCAS process a successful one for all, pupils are encouraged to seek advice from one of the team of people who can assist them. The best sources of advice are likely to come from myself, as UCAS coordinator, and the people listed below, but all teaching staff are happy to discuss UCAS with pupils.

- Your son/daughter's Subject Specialist Advisor, usually the Head of Department of the subject most closely linked to the university course to be applied for,
- The Careers Department, based in the Library: Mrs Williams and Mr Hogg
- Your child's tutor
- The Sixth Form team: Miss Linnett, Mr Dean or Mr Gallop

Regards
Dr P W Galliver
UCAS Co-ordinator

*The Russell Group defines itself as representing 20 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector.

**The 1994 group of 19 universities was established in that year to promote excellence in research and teaching. To enhance student and staff experience within our universities and to set the agenda for higher education.