

REPRESENTATIVE. INDEPENDENT. INSIGHTFUL.

Say hello to the National Clearing Survey.



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About the National Clearing Survey

The National Clearing Survey was launched to better understand the student journey through Clearing. It is representative, independent and the biggest of its kind. This is the fifth edition of the report since launching in 2015.

The National Clearing Survey is a major research initiative and is the only one of its kind that analyses the Clearing journey from the point of view of the student. Partnering with three in five Russell Group institutions and one in four Post-92 HEIs, plus public and specialist institutions, this year's research analysed over 500,000 different data points and includes 3,800+ deep-dive qualitative surveys with students. The results have been benchmarked against the findings from the previous four years of research to identify short and long-term trends and present the most insightful National Clearing Survey ever.

The 2019 cycle is the biggest yet, with an increase of 9.8% (YoY) in students placed during Clearing - a new record high. This, compared with the modest increase in total placements of 1.5%, shows that Clearing is becoming an increasingly popular route into higher education. Once again, there has been a rise in the number of direct applicants (19,640, a 12% increase).

Clearing has traditionally been seen as a route into higher education for students who didn't achieve the grades they needed. Yet increasingly, it is becoming an active choice for applicants to secure

About the National Clearing Survey

their place at university in a way that suits them. So, it's no surprise that the behaviours and profile of what makes a 'typical' Clearing student have rapidly evolved over the five years that this research has been conducted.

The National Clearing Survey enables decision-makers, marketers, recruiters, admissions advisers and senior leaders from the higher education sector to gain a more detailed understanding of students' actions before, during and after A-level Results Day. The report looks at the students' main influences and their motivations when selecting a place.

This report offers insights, defines target audiences and behavioural trends, and presents a timeline with key dates. It equips you with the information you need to target prospective students through the right channels, at the right time and with the right message. And it allows you to move beyond assumptions about Clearing and focus on data-driven insights, to help with long-term planning and marketing decisions that will give you the edge.

2015 2016 2017 2018 7019

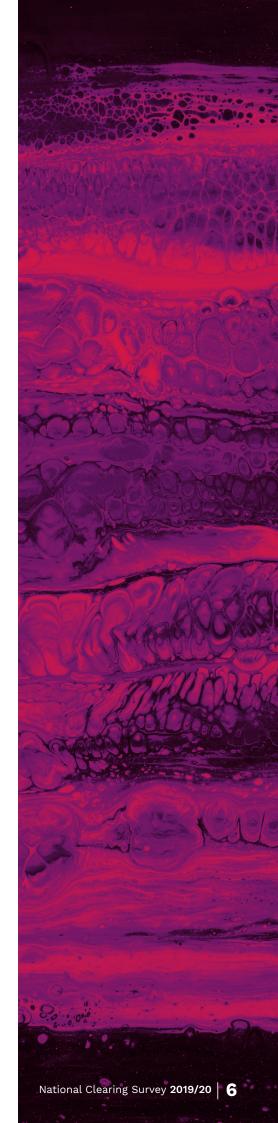
Methodology

The National Clearing Survey 2019/20 was open to all students who applied to university through Clearing for the 2019/20 academic year.

Every HEI in the UK was invited to collaborate on the survey by the Research Division at Natives, the student specialist marketing group. In total, we analysed over 500,000 pieces of data and conducted over 3,800 deep-dive qualitative surveys, with students participating from 153 different UK institutions. In total, 40 institutions partnered in this year's survey.

The survey was open from 15 August 2019 until midnight on 31 October 2019.

Equal weighting was given to each participant's response.



IEN FINDING at a glance





Applying through UCAS as a direct applicant is now an active choice, with direct applicants increasing their market share.

Students are becoming increasingly proactive about early Clearing research. Clearing planning needs to start earlier, with your pre-Clearing campaigns and content live in Spring.

Students continue to use a huge variety of social media daily, but Facebook continues its trend of losing relative market share.

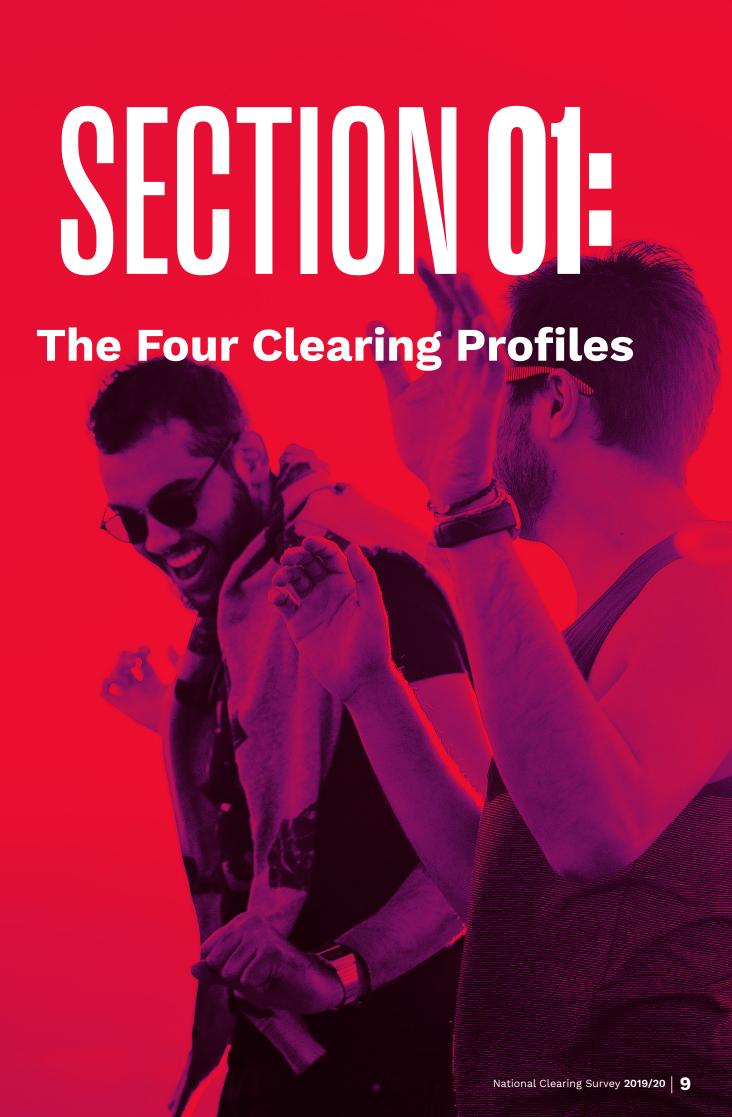
For the first time, mobile has overtaken desktop as the primary device for research. You must have a mobile-first strategy.

Students are more empowered and decisive than ever before. Clearing students are more likely to enrol at the first institution they contact, and fewer are contacting their original choices.

A substantial number of students will completely change the subject area they were going to study.

The Clearing process is a highly emotional experience for students. With pre-Clearing being a 'stressful', 'anxious' and 'nervous' time and post-Clearing being 'happy', 'exciting' and 'relieving'.

Don't neglect the personal and traditional routes to enrolment in Clearing. Four in five students do not want to secure their place using live chat.

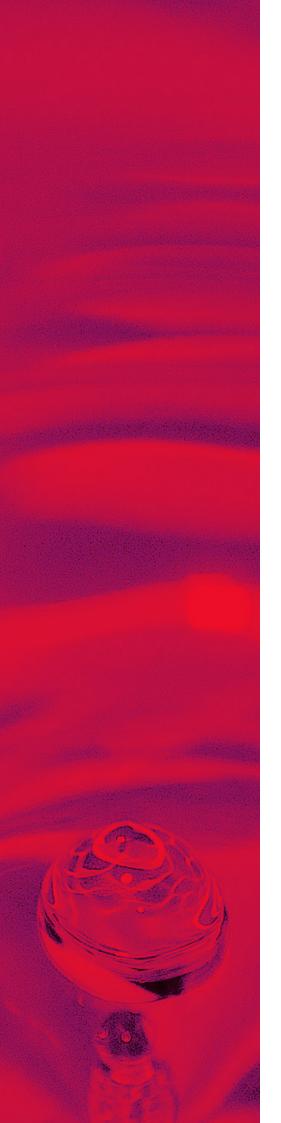


SECTION 01: The Four Clearing Profiles

The National Clearing Survey revealed four distinct personas who accessed higher education through Clearing.

Each profile has been developed using data from the survey responses, and their identities have been measured and presented using demographics, education, destination, motivation, influencers and the top social platforms used daily. This year, we have added more information to each persona, and we have included barriers to enrolment, the likelihood of being first generation higher-education students, and the prevalent emotions that they feel pre- and post-Clearing.

This segmentation portrays the different characteristics beyond what might be considered a 'traditional' Clearing student. It illustrates the opportunities for smart targeting within an institution's strategy that might not have been previously understood or considered.





THE TRADITIONAL CLEARING STUDENT

The Traditional Clearing Student represents the largest group in Clearing. Typically, they will enter the Clearing process, having not secured one of their original UCAS choices and will have got lower-than-expected grades on A-level Results Day.

THE ADJUSTMENT STUDENT

The Adjustment Student has entered Clearing because they received better grades than expected and are looking for an institution with higher grade boundaries.



>>> THE DIRECT APPLICANT

Older than the other groups and the hardest to track and measure, the Direct Applicant will often have received their results in previous years and will be applying for a place for the first time through Clearing.



THE MIND CHANGER

The Mind Changers are going through Clearing for reasons other than their grades, linked to social or environmental factors, which have influenced them to change their mind on their institution, location or course.

THE TRADITIONAL CLEARING STUDENT





36%

POST-92

36%

RUSSELL GROUP

STRESSED

ANXIOUS

RELIEVED

EXCITED

NERVOUS

HAPPY

CALM

RUSSELL GROUP ACCOMMODATION

SOCIAL,









PARENTS











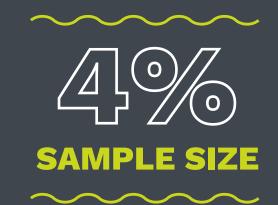








THE ADJUSTMENT STUDENT





GENDER:

1ST-GEN:

TYPE OF INSTITUTION:

RUSSELL GROUP

POST-92

AVG. UCAS POINTS

EMOTIONS:

AFTER CLEARING

EXCITED

PROUD

NERVOUS

ANXIOUS

EXCITED

HAPPY

RELIEVED

COURSE RANKINGS RUSSELL GROUP

MOST LIKELY TO STUDY:

BUSINESS



BEHAVIOUR:



FLUENCES:



PARENTS







SIBLINGS

SOCIAL MEDIA:







BARRIERS:







THE DIRECT APPLICANT







GENDER:

FEMALE

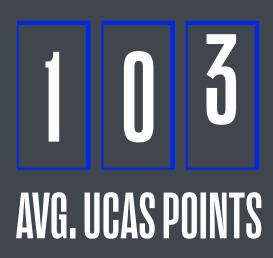
1ST-GEN:

YPE OF INSTITUTION:

POST-92

14%

RUSSELL GROUP



EMOTIONS:

BEFORE CLEARING

AFTER CLEARING

EXCITED

PROUD

NERVOUS

ANXIOUS

EXCITED

HAPPY

RELIEVED

CLOSE TO HOME FUNDING

MOST LIKELY TO STUDY:

BUSINESS

SUBJECTS

SOCIAL,

BEHAVIOUR:



INFLUENCES:







FRIENDS



UNI STAFF

TOP SOCIAL MEDIA:







BARRIERS:







THE MIND CHANGER







DER:

36%

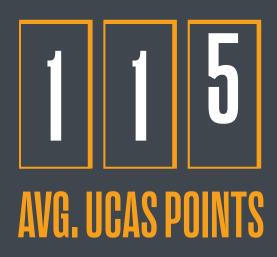
1ST-GEN:

TYPE OF INSTITUTION:

26%

POST-92

RUSSELL GROUP



EMOTIONS:

AFTER CLEARING

EXCITED

CALM

NERVOUS

ANXIOUS

STRESSED

HAPPY

RELIEVED

LOCATION **KNOWING OTHERS**

MOST LIKELY TO STUDY:

BUSINESS



BEHAVIOUR:





PARENTS







UNI STAFF







BARRIERS:



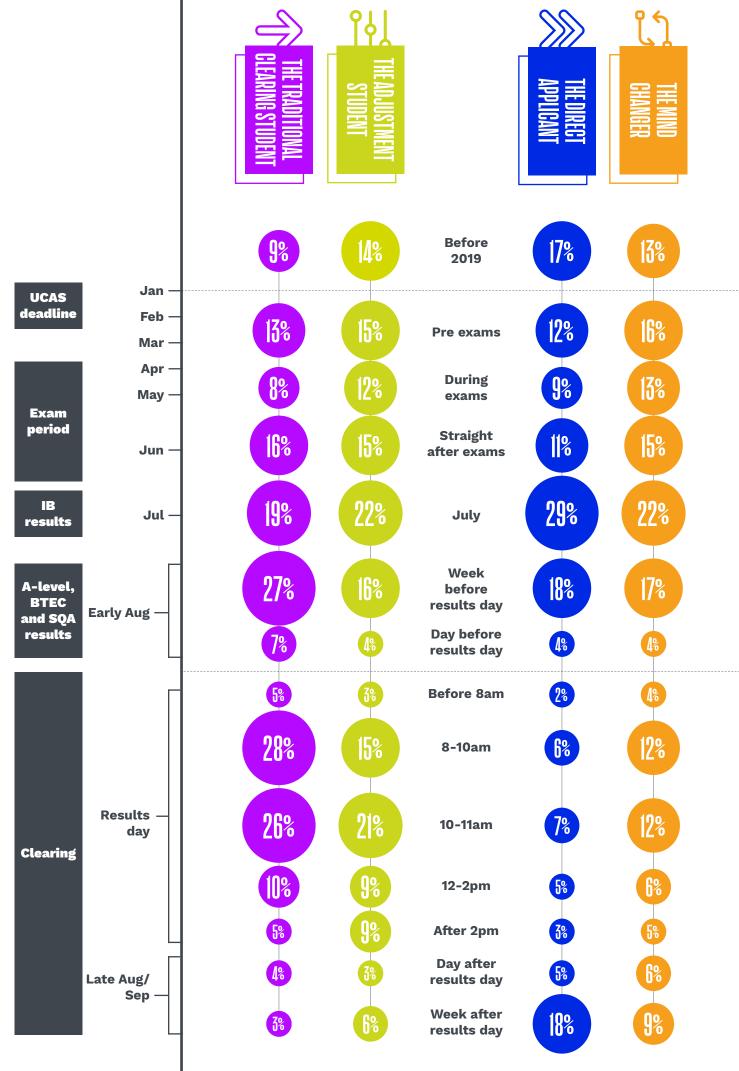




SECTION 02:

The Clearing Timeline





SECTION OF

Key Findings



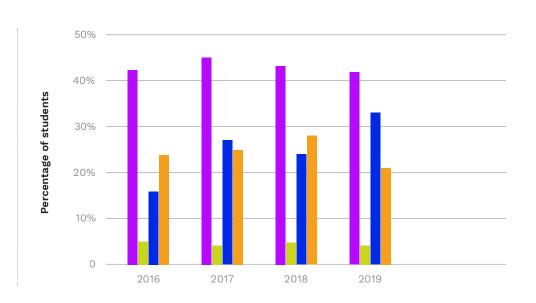
1. Applying through UCAS as a direct applicant is now an active choice.

In line with trends from UCAS' end-of-cycle report, the NCS finds that direct applicants are increasing their market share. In this 2019/20 report, one in three respondents fall into the Direct Applicant group. Looking back at trends over the past four years, each group has shrunk in terms of market share, apart from the Direct Applicant group.

What category do you fall into?







If you're not already doing so, prepare your website for this audience and capitalise on a growing market. Remind yourself what the Direct Applicant looks like, including their unique influences and barriers, using the persona on pages 16-17.

Conduct audits to look at your site traffic and understand where, how, and why your audience is visiting and using your site. This will allow you to identify what content is (or isn't) working and ensure that all your Clearing landing pages have

clear messaging aimed at the Direct Applicant, with best-practice contact forms. Collecting data is vital, as you can use it in early campaigns to maximise your chance of influencing their decisions.

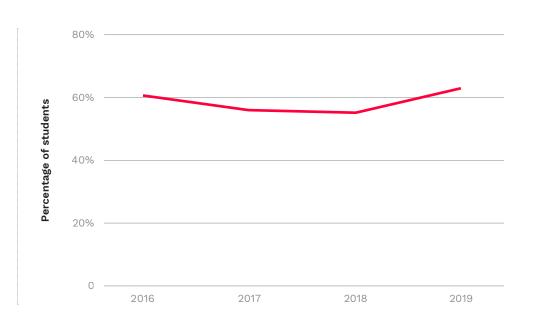
Focus on creating and implementing a long-term content strategy targeted at the Direct Applicant group and, using the insights in the report, address the unique concerns, barriers, and influencing factors for your target market.

2. Students are becoming increasingly proactive about early Clearing research.

Students have been more proactive in 2019 than ever before in researching their Clearing options:

Did you conduct any research about **Clearing prior to** A-level Results Day?

Percentage of students who responded yes



When broken down by persona, we get a clearer picture of which profile is most likely to conduct early research, and how this is a significant trend in 2019.

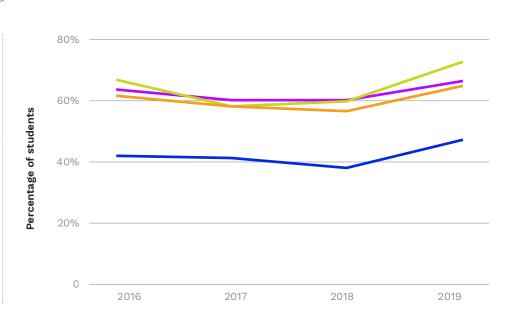
Did you conduct any research about **Clearing prior to** A-level Results Day?





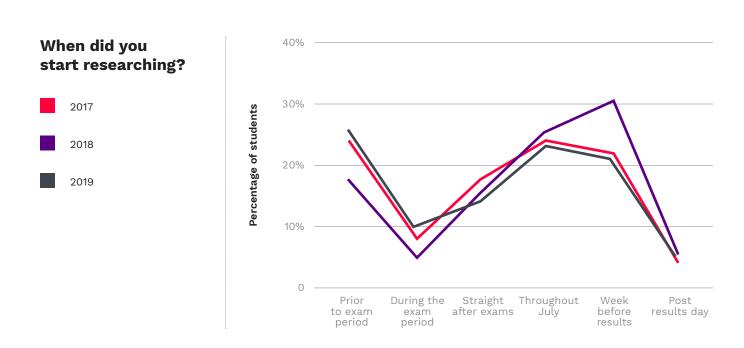






2. Students are becoming increasingly proactive about early Clearing research.

Students are also starting to research much earlier than ever before.

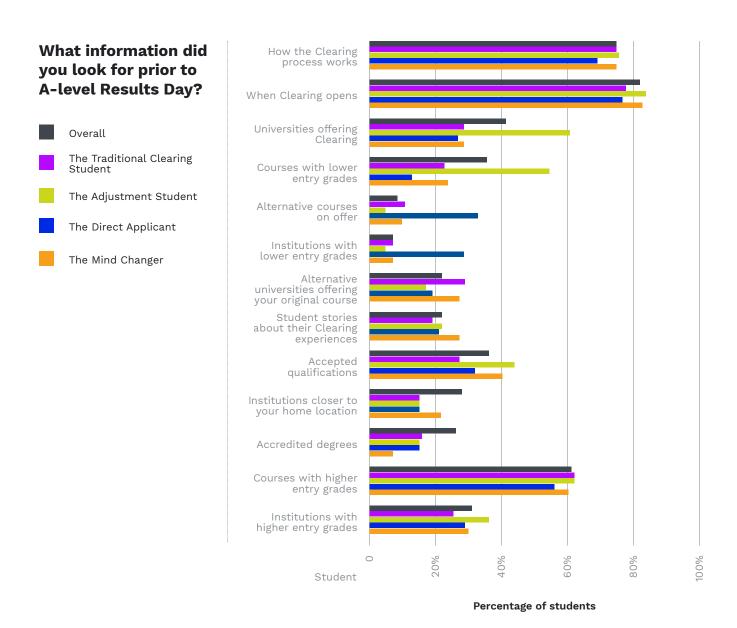


We also asked what respondents would most like to tell students in the future about how best to prepare. The most common response, from 37% of respondents, was that 'students should be well prepared and research early so that they can start the Clearing process as soon as possible'.

With the majority of students starting their research early, institutions will need a strong brand presence and early awareness strategy aimed specifically at prospective Clearing applicants. Clearing planning needs to start earlier, with your Pre-Clearing campaigns and content ideally going live in Spring.

SECTION 03. Key Findings

The below information indicates that marketers will need to focus both on a long-term content and SEO strategy, as well as focused advertising at key moments to ensure that prospective students are moving down the funnel from the awareness stage. Capturing prospect data is more important than ever before. It'll help you to market and remarket to students throughout their Clearing application journey and drive key activities that lead to conversions, such as Open Day events.

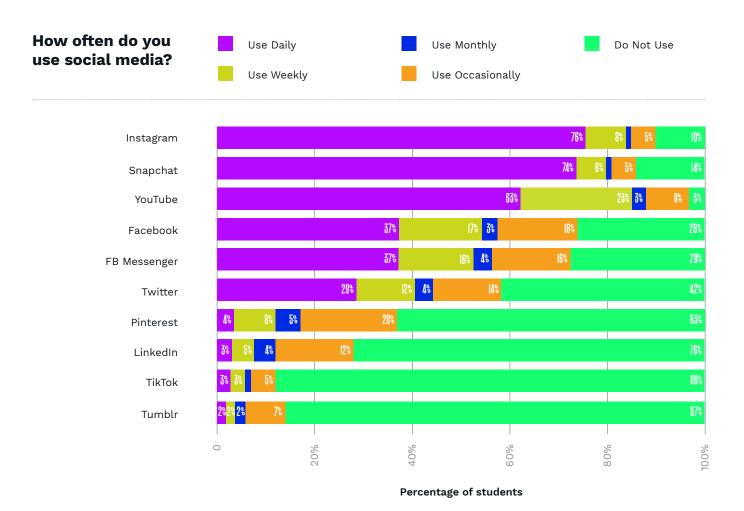


This information can be used to determine both the timing and content of your campaigns. Savvy marketers can position their institutions as Clearing experts, providing information not only on their courses and institution entry requirements, but also on the key processes and timeframes that students need to know to successfully and painlessly navigate Clearing.

3. Students continue to use a huge variety of social media daily, but Facebook maintains its trend of losing market share.

The way students use social media, and the apps they consume content on, continues to shift at a rapid pace.

Facebook continues its trend of losing relative market share among the Clearing student audience, with just 37% of respondents using the platform every day, compared with 51% in 2018/19 and 66% in 2016/17. Instagram gets the most daily use from students, at 76% (down two percentiles on 2018/19), followed by Snapchat at 74% (the same as last year). YouTube makes up the top three, with 63% of students using it every day.



SECTION 07. Key Findings

This year's findings highlight the importance of being across all platforms but also being aware of which platforms students are using on a daily basis to communicate with friends. Again we see Facebook Messenger losing relative market share, at 64% (down two percentiles from 2018/19 and down 37.5% from 2016/17), but increases for WhatsApp (70%, up from 62% in 2018/19) and Instagram at 50% (up 65% since 2016/17). Snapchat remains the most popular platform overall at 70%, a slight decrease from 74% in 2018/19.

How have trends changed since 2016?

Which platform do you use daily?

Instagram



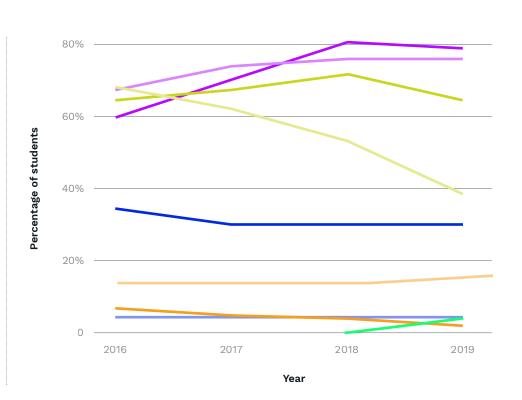












Recommendations

As Clearing students shift their platform preference, remember there will be differences in what works. dependent on audience profile and what type of instituion you are. Use your own audience and web analytics to understand where your web traffic is coming from. Use a social benchmark tool like Edurank to understand what content is working, what cuts through, and how your institution compares to similar institutions. When it comes to your marketing and influencer plans, ensure you have a solid cross-platform strategy at its core.

4. For the first time, mobile has overtaken desktop as the primary device for research. You must have a mobile-first strategy.

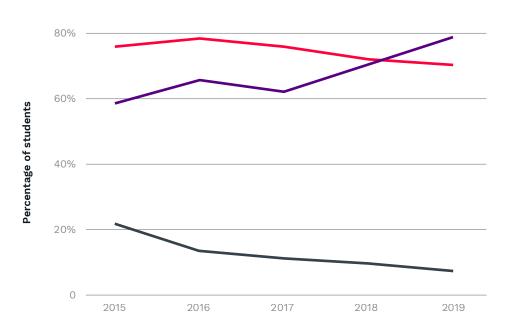
Mobile's march towards device dominance continues at pace, and it has become the primary device used in Clearing research for the first time. While it is key that every strategy, content and creative, should include mobile-specific tactics, don't neglect desktop and tablet, as Clearing students still use a range of devices.

Which blend of device(s) did you use when searching for a **Clearing Place?**

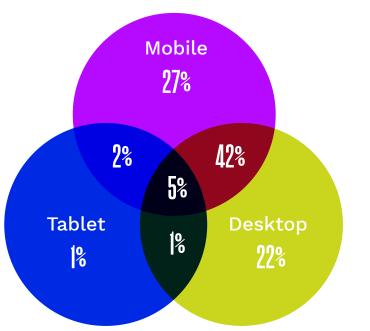
Desktop

Mobile

Tablet



Which device did you use?



Recommendations

Start by understanding your own data. A deep-dive analysis of your web analytics, to highlight what your data means and how you can use it, will equip you with the information you need to make data-driven decisions. A website UX audit will help you understand how your site and key landing pages function on different devices to maximise conversions and ensure functionality.

A comprehensive, multi-channel strategy, with content and creative to support all phases of the student journey, delivered across a range of channels and devices to help drive enrolments at all stages of the funnel, is imperative to reflect the behaviours of a Clearing student in 2020.

5. Students are more empowered and decisive than ever before.

The 2019/20 survey has found that students going through Clearing are more empowered - and decisive than ever before.

The majority of Clearing students (62%) went to the first institution they contacted. This continues a longterm upward trend, with the figure having stood at 55% in 2017/18, and indicates that institutions are also improving conversions on A-level Results Day.



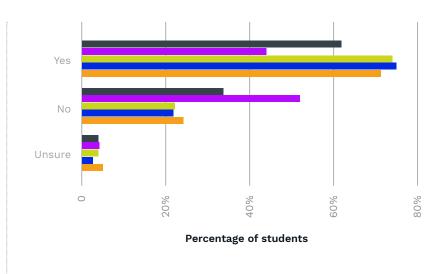


The Traditional Clearing

The Adjustment Student

The Direct Applicant

The Mind Changer



As in previous years, students are most likely to contact more than one institution, with 58% doing so. This is the first time since our research began that there has been a slight decrease in this number. While not statistically relevant enough to mark an industry decline, it is nonetheless a notable trend we will continue to monitor in future research.



Contacted on average 3.9 institutions.

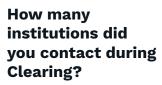


Contacted on average 2.2 institutions.

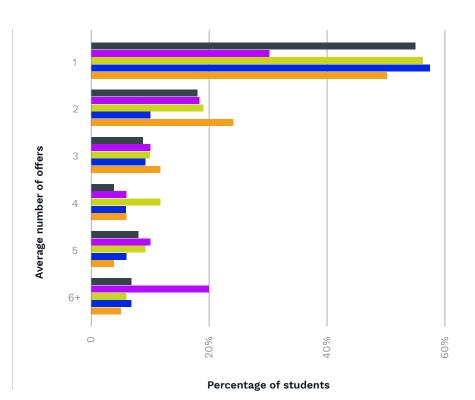




SECTION 03: Key Findings







Typically, the Traditional Clearing Student will contact far more institutions than any other group, at 3.9 compared to the overall average of 2.9.

This year's research also found that fewer students are recontacting their original choices. Five in ten respondents got in touch with their firm choice (down from six in ten in 2018/19) and four in ten recontacted their insurance choice (down from five in ten in 2018/19).

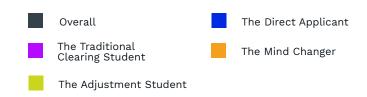
For the first time, we asked respondents whether they used the UCAS 'decline your place' option. The Adjustment Student is by far the most likely to use this option, with 77% of respondents from this segment doing so, while the Traditional Clearing

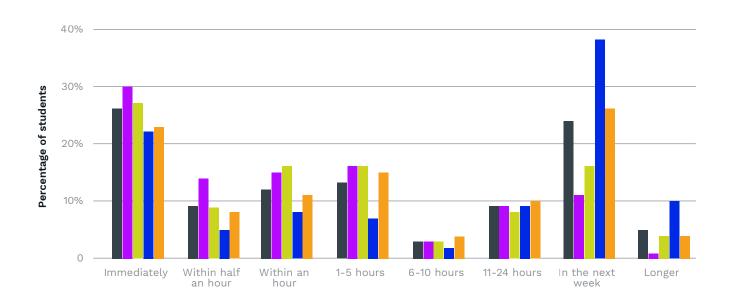
Student is least likely, with 30% taking the option. Clearing students expect institutions to get back to them quickly, and require a greater level of detail and information than what is currently being supplied when they speak to someone at one of their choices.

Just under half of Clearing students (47%) would expect a decision within one hour of contacting an institution. Expectations differ depending on the persona. Just under two-thirds of Traditional Clearing Students (59%) expect a decision within the first hour, while the Direct Applicant is happy to wait. As many as four in ten would be happy to wait for over a week for a decision.

SECTION 03. Key Findings

How soon after contacting an institution do you expect to receive a decision?





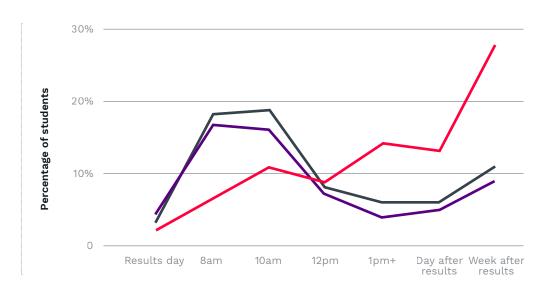
Bear in mind that 34% of our respondents had secured their place on A-level Results Day by midday (an increase from 25% in 2018/19). So there is a narrow window of opportunity where the optimum conversion opportunity exists.

When did you:





Clearing place



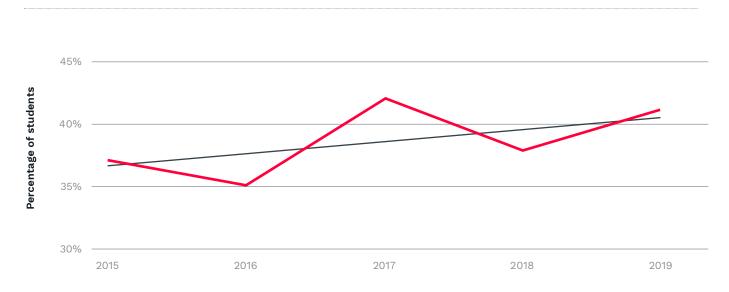
6. A substantial number of students will completely change the subject area they were going to study.

Students are increasingly enrolling (41% in 2019) on a different course from the one they intended to study, and of these students, 74% completely change their subject area. 65% of those who chose Medicine as their original subject changed to a different field of study when they went through Clearing.









The most common subjects that students changed from were:*

Medicine	65%
Physical Sciences	45%
Mathematics	37%

The least common subjects that students changed from were:*

Engineering	19%
Architecture and Building	18%
Computer Science	58%

The most common subject areas that people changed to were:**

Humanities	14%
Subjects allied to Medicine	13%
Biological Sciences	13%

^{*%} here refers to % of students who originally chose the subject. So 19% of students who chose Engineering as their original subject changed to a different subject area when they went through Clearing. 65% of students who chose Medicine as their original subject changed to a different subject when they went through Clearing.

^{**%} here refer to % of all students who changed subject when they went through Clearing. So of all those who changed subject through the Clearing process, 14% changed to the Humanities, 13% to Subjects allied to Medicine and 13% to Biological Sciences.

7. The Clearing process is a highly emotional experience for students.

We have examined what the emotional experience is like for students going through Clearing. And we have attempted to quantify it so that institutions can tailor their marketing and admissions support to make Clearing a better experience for students.

Top 10 feelings

Key

Positive

When you compare this to our student personas, we see the Direct Applicant appears to have the most positive emotions associated with Clearing and the Traditional Clearing Student the least positive.

	THE TRADITIONAL CLEARING STUDENT	THE ADJUSTMENT Student	THE DIRECT Applicant	THE MIND Changer
1	Stressed	Nervous	Excited	Nervous
2	Nervous	Excited	Nervous	Stressed
3	Anxious	Stressed	Stressed	Anxious
4	Worried	Anxious	Anxious	Excited
5	Relieved	Worried	Нарру	Worried
6	Scared	Relieved	Easy	Relieved
7	Excited	Нарру	Relieved	Нарру
8	Upset	Scared	Worried	Hopeful
9	Hopeful	Hopeful	Hopeful	Calm
10	Disappointed	Calm	Calm	Scared

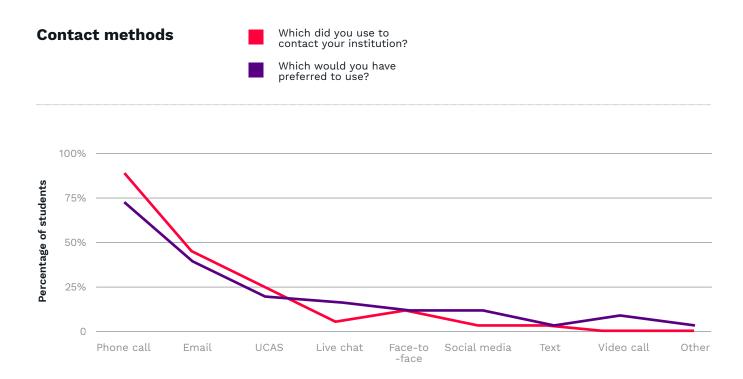
Don't forget to give prospective students an empathic customer experience during what is predominantly a stressful time. Consider a strategy aimed at the heart rather than the head. Analyse the wealth of data obtained across the two-year

Negative

student recruitment cycle to discover the key mood states, and devise a creative marketing plan that uses the latest in AI and personalisation to deliver mood-enhancing comms at the right time.

8. Don't neglect the personal and traditional routes to enrolment in Clearing. Four in five students do not want to secure their place using live chat.

The research has found that despite the prevalence of chatbots and live chat being used by institutions, students prefer personal and traditional routes to enrolment.



Phone calls remain the most popular method (88% of respondents) for contacting institutions and the most preferred method (73%) for students. But, as in last year's report, respondents said they would prefer a wider mix of contact methods - including online forms, face-to-face and text.

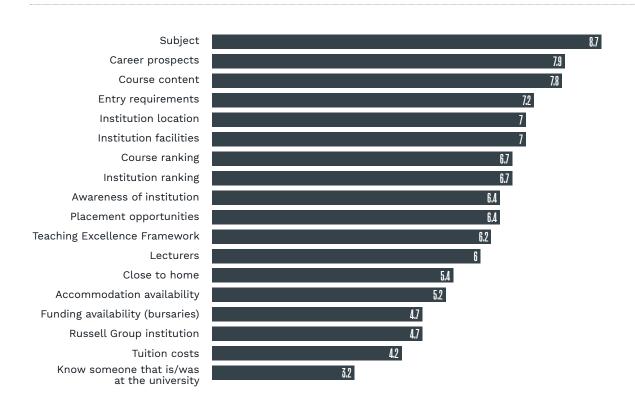
As well as traditional methods, students express a preference for more personal options. Respondents told us that they would prefer to contact institutions face-to-face but many were unable to do so.

Once students are in contact with an institution, they are most interested in subject availability, career prospects, entry requirements, location and facilities. These findings can be used to indicate which benefits institutions need to emphasise more to prospective students.

SECTION 03: Key Findings







Largely, students found staff were knowledgeable and able to answer their questions. When asked to rate Clearing staff, with 10 being fully informed and 0 being not informed at all, students rated staff 8.1 overall.

There is a notable difference when we break this down by institution type:

Specialist institution	8.3
Russell Group	8.1
Post-92	8
HE in FE	7.5

For FE institutions active in Clearing, there are some lessons that can be learned from the 'best-in-class' display by specialist institutions.



Conclusion

This is the fifth and most insightful edition of the annual National Clearing Survey, providing year-on-year benchmarks and long-term trends. The content of this report arms higher education marketers with the data, trends and insights they need to successfully fill their Clearing places. It enables them to clearly segment their own Clearing applicants into four profiles and personas, and benchmark findings against the national average by institution type. The results will form the backbone of a cross-channel, cross-platform marketing strategy that addresses the needs of their prospective students.

Since 2015, the Traditional Clearing Student, the Direct Applicant, the Adjustment Student and the Mind Changer have become the industry standard for segmentation during Clearing, and used in hundreds of marketing strategies. With the student market evolving during this time, we wanted to examine whether these four profiles are still relevant going into 2020.

The good news is - they are. While it would be easy to present new personas to attract some headlines, the rigour with which the personas have stood up to scrutiny and analysis shows that they are fit for purpose and, while they are evolving, they have not changed. Each segment has a different journey, and this report helps you understand and shape your strategies against the national picture. The key is to understand which segments are key to your institution, and tailor your content and timings to them. Journeys need to be personalised against each segment.

Clearing has traditionally been seen as a route into higher education for students who have not yet achieved the grades required. But over the past five years there have been record rises in students applying through Clearing as direct applicants.

At the time of writing, there is a year-on-year increase of 9.4% in direct applicants (Source: UCAS Media) from 2018 to 2019, and our own research reflects this: one in three respondents went through Clearing as a direct applicant.

Conclusion

While overall acceptances via the main scheme have plateaued, and there being fewer 18-yearolds nationally, there are opportunities for institutions to attract more direct applications and older students entering higher education. Don't miss the chance to grow and focus on a long-term content-led strategy targeted at direct applicants. Using the insights contained here, and armed with the knowledge of which platforms and devices they are using and when, you have the opportunity to address the unique concerns, barriers and influencing factors of this group.

As is the long-term trend, Clearing is starting even earlier for students. They are researching sooner and taking affirmative actions earlier in the process. The good news - early planning is where the greatest value can be found for institutions to grow. Early brand-building campaigns will give you the edge, allowing you to collect more data to use later in the season and help move your prospective students down the funnel.

While we have presented the national findings, note that when we drill down to specific institutions, we did find quite varied results. This highlights the importance of understanding your own Clearing students and benchmarking them against the national findings. Each of our partnering institutions will have received their own data with which to do so. Partnering with the National Clearing Survey is free and open to all HEIs who have open vacancies during Clearing 2020.

These findings offer a fascinating insight into the rapidly evolving behaviours of Clearing students and how they consume media. Students are using the Clearing process to their advantage and higher education institutions need to adapt their strategies each year if they are to attract students and maximise conversions during this period.

To reflect the changing attitudes, methods, and technology adoption, the National Clearing Survey will be updated and repeated in 2020.



Take part in the National Clearing Survey 2020/21

To reflect the changing attitudes, methods and technology, the National Clearing Survey will be updated later this year. The Research Division at Natives are registering institutions who wish to take part and collaborate in the National Clearing Survey 2020/21. There are a number of benefits to your institution if you choose to participate:

- You'll receive a survey to share with your 2020 Clearing students
- You'll be the first to receive a copy of the full report before non-participating institutions
- You can access your institution's raw data which will allow you to benchmark the actions of your students with the national findings
- Your students who take part will automatically be entered into a prize draw to win a high-value prize to help with their ongoing studies
- You get to make the life of a Clearing student easier

Register to take part in the National Clearing Survey. www.nationalclearingsurvey.com/take-part

