



British International School Riyadh

Top A Level grades fail to secure university places

Even with a string of A and A* grades under their belts, some teenagers failed to secure a university place in what was arguably the toughest year yet for A-level students.

Ben Dawson achieved two A* and an A in maths, further maths and history, but received no offers.

The 18-year-old pupil at Northampton School for Boys, an academy, had an exemplary record: he had been head boy, captain of the rugby team and had 10 A*s at GCSE.

But he had applied for one of the most competitive degree courses – law – at top universities. He was interviewed, but rejected by Oxford and failed to receive offers from the London School of Economics, University College London, King's College London and Durham University.

He has decided to apply again next year, but realises that tuition fees will have almost trebled by that time.

Next year, fees will rise from £3,375 a year to up to £9,000. However, students will only start paying back their loans for the fees once they graduate and are earning £21,000 or more.

"It's so frustrating that I wasn't able to avoid the fee hike," Dawson said. "I am trying not to see it all as failure, but instead as a chance to take a gap year and go travelling."

He said he had been surprised that he had not received any offers and that his attempts to find out why had so far been fruitless. "The universities just said they were incredibly busy and couldn't tell me," he said.

Others, such as Zahra, missed their offers by a whisker and were immediately told they had been unsuccessful.

The 17-year-old, from Harrow in north-west London, did not want to give her full name. She achieved two A*s and two As, including an A for further maths.

The University of Warwick – her top choice – had offered her a place to study pure maths on condition that she achieved A*s in maths and further maths and an A in her other subjects.

Zahra – like thousands of others – spent a frantic day phoning universities only to be told they were full.

By midday on Thursday, more than five students were competing for each spare university place, figures from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (Ucas) showed.

Ucas said 282,487 applicants were eligible for clearing – the process which matches students to vacant university places. At the same time last year, the figure was 281,154.

Zahra is hoping King's College London will phone her back on Friday and squeeze her in.

Next year's fee rise is "really frightening and puts me off taking a gap year", she said. "It is going to be expensive."

Others, meanwhile, were celebrating. Umair Gondal, who moved with his family from his native Germany three years ago, secured a place at Manchester University to study medicine.

The 19-year-old, from Parrs Wood High in Manchester, had to write his essays in German and translate them when he first came to this country.

"During the application process another university got me mixed up, sent me a rejection and invited the wrong person for interview. Until I saw the paper with my own eyes I couldn't be sure," he said. Gondal achieved straight As in chemistry, physics and maths and is the first in his family to go to university.

Steven Jackson, who wants to be an army officer and go to Sandhurst, achieved the grades he needed to take war studies at Canterbury Christ Church University. "I really felt that this was our chance because next year the fees are going up and you don't want to be saddled with £50,000 of debt before you start work," the 18-year-old from Manchester said. "The government has no idea what this will be like. It was a real do or die feeling."