21 February 2019

Dear Student and Parent/Carers

You may be aware of the concerns expressed in recent press reports of the increase in unconditional offers being made by universities to students before they have completed their A Levels. This is confirmed by UCAS who reported that in 2018, the number of unconditional offers increased by 32 per cent, compared to 2017, which meant that 23% of 18-year old applicants to university received at least one unconditional offer in 2018. A relatively small number of universities are mostly responsible for the unconditional offers made to students and the criteria for receiving an unconditional offer varies across universities.

An unconditional offer means that there are no conditions imposed and the student will be accepted irrespective of their final grades. In some cases, the unconditional offer is made directly to the student, or it will be given if the student indicates the university as their firm choice when their final decision is made once all the offers from their university choices have been received. The deadline for responding to the offers made by universities is 2nd May 2019 and hence this time should be used to fully reflect on the decision rather than rushing to accept.

We may ask what has prompted this rise in unconditional offers? In recent years the restrictions on how universities recruit students have been lifted, meaning universities are competing to entice students, especially very able students or those with an aptitude for specific courses as evidenced by a portfolio of work or auditions. Therefore, this could be viewed as one of the approaches universities use to attract and retain interest from students in a competitive marketplace.

From the university perspective, they would argue that they are choosing students with the best academic profile in terms of achieved GCSE results and predicted A Level grades whom they are confident will make a significant contribution to the academic life of the university. They also feel that it demonstrates their confidence that the student has the necessary qualities to excel on one of their degree programmes. In addition, it can alleviate some of the pressure students feel in preparing for A Level examinations to achieve the necessary entry requirements for courses as they have a confirmed place. This can enable the student to fully focus on achieving excellent grades that will then form part of their CV.

Whilst there are undoubted attractions to receiving an unconditional offer, it is important to point out the potential risks which need to be taken into consideration before making a final decision as to whether to accept it. One key risk is that students can relax their efforts in preparing for examinations and then do not receive the grades they can achieve. In 2018 at HGS, a higher percentage of students holding unconditional offers missed their predicted grades by two or more grades compared to those students who received conditional offers.

Therefore, the temptation to ‘take their foot of the revision pedal’ is a real risk. Although, in the short term, students achieved a place on their unconditional course, this clearly has longer term implications for their CV and future job applications.
What should students do if they receive an unconditional offer?

1. Do not rush the decision and wait until they have received all the responses/offers from their university choices.
2. Do not be over-influenced by the offer, especially if it is not the preferred course or university choice.
3. Review all the offers made and take time to revisit their course and university options. This could mean revisiting the university to ask specific questions before deciding on their final choice.
4. Talk to parents, teachers, career advisors to obtain a different perspective that they may need to consider.
5. Continue to fully prepare for A Level examinations to achieve the highest possible grades they can be proud of and which may also entitle them to university scholarships. It will also ensure that they have developed the study skills and habits which will be required on their chosen university course and show a future employer their true potential.

We hope that this provides some additional information and wider perspective regarding unconditional offers.

Students have been briefed about accepting their confirmed and insurance places, they have until 2 May to make these decisions, regardless of this being a conditional or unconditional offer. If you wish to discuss this further, please do not hesitate to contact the school.

Following on from the mock examinations, we would like to invite you to an Advisory Evening where we will outline post-results strategies to raise performance and other arrangements for the final weeks of Year 13. This presentation will take place on Wednesday 6 March at 7pm in the Forum.

We would like to take this opportunity to wish students a very well-deserved February break.

Yours sincerely

Neil Renton
Associate Headteacher