



# Eligibility and bad news delivery: How call-takers reject applicants to university

Elliott M. Hoey<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Elizabeth Stokoe<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Loughborough University, United Kingdom

<sup>b</sup> University of Basel, Switzerland

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines how delivering bad news may be avoided in conversations where rejection is common. We collected ~2000 recordings of telephone calls from prospective students to a UK university contact centre during an annual process called ‘Clearing and Adjustment’. Applicants call to secure a place on a degree programme but are often ineligible due to insufficient grades. Based on a sample of 200 calls analyzed using conversation analysis, we show that call-takers determined applicants’ eligibility in two main ways: call-takers could (1) *solicit* applicants’ grades, or (2) *inform* applicants about the course’s entry requirements. Following solicitations, call-takers’ next action was to reject applicants. However, following informings, students deduced their own ineligibility and explicit rejection was avoided. The relationship between method (‘solicit’ v. ‘inform’) and the occurrence of overt rejection was highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). We discuss the implementation of our findings in call-taker training to enable them to avoid giving out rejections.

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper, we focus on a signal moment in the lives of many young people in the UK: a telephone call whose outcome determines whether and where they will be able to go to university. These are ‘clearing and adjustment’ calls, where prospective undergraduate students call universities with the aim of securing a place on a degree programme that may have places available. The majority of applicants are unsuccessful in securing a spot, which means that the call-takers representing the university are often tasked with the delicate business of rejecting applicants. Our interest is in how such rejections are organized, and in particular, the sequential trajectories of two actions—informings and solicitations—that routinely lead to rejections. Both of these actions are recurrently used by call-takers when determining the eligibility of an applicant. However, we show that they are not equivalent in their affordances. With solicitations, the call-taker ends up knowing everything needed to render a decision, whereas with informings, it is the applicant who retains that information. Our findings have implications for training call-takers to inform callers of course requirements, rather than ask what grades callers

achieved, because doing so systematically provides for the avoidance of giving or receiving an explicit rejection. In other words, it prevents call-takers from having to deliver bad news, and callers having to receive it.

### 1.1. Preference organization and institutional settings

Rejection is tricky, not only for the one being rejected but also for the one doing the rejecting. Research on social interaction has described rejections in terms of a ‘preference organization’, with rejections being regularly treated by participants as dispreferred actions (Pillet-Shore, 2017). Preference organization refers to how particular sequential environments structurally favour certain actions or outcomes over their alternatives, typically in service of promoting prosociality and minimizing conflict (Heritage, 1984; Schegloff, 2007). Many dispreferred actions, such as rejections, refusals, and disagreement, are discordant with the desires and wants of others and therefore may undermine solidarity (Clayman, 2002). Actions like these typically exhibit features that index their dispreferred status vis-à-vis actions that are structurally favoured or preferred. Whereas preferred actions like acceptance, agreement, and granting are often promptly produced and straightforwardly designed, dispreferred actions are routinely delayed, accompanied by accounts, and relatively elaborate in their design (Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1987). Parents’ rejections of their

\* Corresponding author at: Maiengasse 51 rm. 211, 4056 Basel, Switzerland.  
E-mail address: [elliottthoey@gmail.com](mailto:elliottthoey@gmail.com) (E.M. Hoey).

children's requests, for instance, often feature mitigation of the rejection, less-than-full granting, and avoidance of outright refusals like *no* (Wootton, 1981).

In this article, we focus on dispreferred actions in an institutional setting. Practices geared towards the organization of preference are often similar in institutional settings like courtrooms (Atkinson & Drew, 1979) and scientific laboratories (Lynch, 1985), but can differ in crucial respects. For example, whereas disagreements in ordinary conversation tend to be delayed and mitigated, disagreements in news interviews are rarely accompanied by these features (Greatbatch, 1992). The modulation of preference organizational features in different institutional contexts is bound up with the particulars of those settings and the types of activities that occur there. Take requests, for instance. An important feature of requests in institutional settings is the client's entitlement to make a request in the first place (Curl & Drew, 2008). Clients may feel relatively more entitled in some situations, like requesting an appointment when calling one's doctor (Sikveland, Stokoe, & Symonds, 2016), or requesting to book a flight when calling an airline service (Lee, 2011). When the client is normatively entitled to service, the rejection or non-granting of a request is often accompanied by accounts, apologies, and offers of alternative solutions (Varcasia, 2007). Conversely, in other situations, client entitlement may be moderated due to contingencies like availability and feasibility of service, legitimacy of the request, and client eligibility for service. Problems may arise when callers and call-takers are misaligned regarding what is due to whom under what conditions (Tracy, 1997). For example, call-takers at emergency and police services may decide that the caller's issue does not merit dispatching their limited resources (Whalen & Zimmerman, 1990; Whalen & Zimmerman, 1998).

### 1.2. Clearing and adjustment calls

This article builds on prior work on the sequential organization of rejections in institutional interactions by focusing on a particular context: telephone calls made to a UK university call centre during the *clearing and adjustment* stage of the undergraduate admissions process. At this stage, there are a number of vacancies in various courses of study for the upcoming year, and a surplus of applicants for these vacancies. The process of clearing and adjustment is addressed to the organizational problem of distributing a limited resource—offers of admission—to qualified applicants (see the Appendix for greater detail about how students arrive at this stage).

The most basic concern in clearing and adjustment calls is determining the applicant's eligibility for an offer. Each course requires that applicants have particular grades on their 'A-level exams' (or simply 'A-levels'). Some have the grades to qualify, but of course not all do. If an applicant's grades render them ineligible for a particular course, they may enquire after another course at that same university, or they may call other universities to see if they qualify for courses there. Applicants are therefore under pressure to locate a course that accepts their grades. In addition to the matter of eligibility, timing is another practical pressure. The telephone lines for clearing and adjustment all open on the same day at the same time, and when they do universities are inundated with calls. There is a collective scramble to call because offers are given to eligible applicants on a first-come-first-served basis. So even if an applicant's grades are good enough to qualify for a particular course, that course may already be at capacity. Clearing and adjustment calls are thus a rushed competition for a limited resource. Applicants are interested in receiving an offer on their desired course at their desired university—getting the best they can with what they've got. And similarly, universities are interested in filling their courses with the most qualified students; if those students commit to enrolling elsewhere, universities may be left with empty seats and less qualified students.

These calls are a kind of gatekeeping interaction (e.g., Erickson, 1975; cf. He, 1998) and as such offer a lens onto the processes that constitute society's educational institutions (see Schegloff, 2006). They show how participants manage access to prized goods (university admission) and navigate categorical shifts in identity (from university applicant to university student). The importance of analyzing such issues is reflected in the worldwide growth in demand for tertiary education. From 2000 to 2014 alone, the number of students in higher education institutions more than doubled, rising from 100 million to 207 million (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2017). The massive industries and organizations implicated in this rapid growth deserve greater scrutiny from social scientists and education researchers. This article contributes to this goal by describing in fine detail the interactional mechanisms whereby applicants to university are determined to be eligible for admission and how participants manage the rejections that are inevitably part of that process.

### 1.3. Eligibility and rejection in clearing and adjustment calls

An example of a typical clearing call appears below.<sup>1</sup> The caller (A, for "Applicant") tells the call-taker (U, for "University representative") that he's *hoping to apply tuh computer science* (lines 4–5).

1.CC-36  
01 U: Morning=Leffingwell university  
02      contact centre.=how can I help?  
03 A: Hello, my name's: u:h Muhammet  
04      Vekilov? I'm hoping to apply tuh  
05      computer science through: clearing?  
06 U: All right? (.) give me a second?  
07              (0.2)  
08 A: No problem.  
09              (3.3)  
10 U: A:nd what are your A level grades?  
11              (0.7)  
12 A: U:h a Bee, a Cee, an' a Dee. in: computing:,  
13      maths, a:nd physics.  
14              (1.6)  
15 U: Unfortunately, the minimum requirement:  
16      for our computer science courses  
17      through clearing, is A A A?  
18 A: O:kay,  
19              (1.4)  
20 U: C'I help you w'anythin' else?  
21              (0.3)  
22 A: .MK=u:h no, that's okay.=thank you very  
23      much.  
24 U: All right then,=have a n[ice day.  
25 A:                                      [buh-bye.

Having been apprised of the student's course of interest (computer science), the representative proceeds to locate it on his computer while the applicant waits (lines 6–9). Locating the course allows him to check the course's availability (open to all, not open, only open to international students, etc.) and its entry requirements (typically three letter grades like AAA, ABB, etc.).<sup>2</sup> After locating the course information, the representative solicits the applicant's A-level grades (line 10). He begins his question with a turn-initial

<sup>1</sup> Transcripts follow Jeffersonian conventions (see Hepburn & Bolden, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> If the applicant has done an "International Baccalaureate", they do not have three letter, but a score up to 45 points.

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