

EDUCATION

With A-level results out tomorrow, **Elyssa Campbell-Barr** tells how she got to university despite her poor grades

If at first you don't succeed...

Picture: MARTIN POPE



Elyssa Campbell-Barr: 'The results slip that should have been my ticket to university told me I was a failure'

in exams that I had never considered the possibility of getting a really good degree. "Elyssa Campbell-Barr — First Class" were the last words I had been expecting to see on the results board. I could hardly believe my eyes. At long last I had a set of exam results I could be proud of.

If you don't make the grade, here is my advice:

Be prepared to spend hours, even days, hitting the "last number redial" button on your telephone. Put your work and holiday commitments on hold.

Plague the admissions officers with phone calls, faxes and e-mail. Impress them with your determination and dedication to your chosen course.

Ask your school/college to help you. If your grades are genuinely worse than expected, your teachers may be prepared to fax copies of your coursework/mock exams to your chosen universities to demonstrate your usual high standards.

Read through the lists of course vacancies in newspapers and on Ceefax/Teletext. You may find that there are places available on courses very similar to the ones to which you originally applied.

Alternatively, you may discover interesting options you had not previously considered.

Investigate back-routes to reach your chosen course. Some universities run foundation-year courses; others will allow you to enrol on a similar programme with less rigorous entry requirements.

Don't rush into signing on for another year at your old school or college. Staying in the same place when all your friends move on can be very demoralising. If retakes look like the only answer, find out whether a local college will let you take the exams at Christmas, or re-do the course part-time. A repeated year will seem less of a waste if you can combine your studies with travelling or paid work.

THE mood was optimistic as my sixth form friends and I congregated outside the gates of our comprehensive school one hot Thursday in mid-August four years ago.

At midday, we were handed the flimsy slips of paper that would determine our academic futures. But when I saw my results, it was not a smile of satisfaction that crossed my face but a look of horror. The slip that should have been my ticket to reading English and French at university told me I was a failure. I had missed the requisite grades, not by a narrow margin, but by a massive six points.

For several minutes, I watched dozens of friends read their results and then flee the room in tears. But I felt too numb to cry. Anyway, what good would it do? I knew I had to be practical and pull myself together, so I joined the long line of students queuing for readmittance to school that September.

The teachers urged me to contact my chosen universities just in case there was any chance of finding a place through clearing. I nodded in silent agreement, but felt there was little chance. Who, I thought, would want an academic

failure like me? A little reflection (and some encouragement from my mother) persuaded me that ringing the institutions I had been hoping to attend was not such a bad idea.

After all, I had nothing to lose. The admissions officers had obviously been impressed enough to give me a conditional offer in the first place.

I quickly discovered that telephoning universities on A-level results day is easier said than done. After four hours of an engaged tone, I eventually reached the admissions office of my first-choice university — only to be told that my application was still being considered. Could I ring back the following day? An hour and a half later, I received the same response from my second-choice institution. It was extremely frustrating, but at least they had not turned me down flat.

During the next week, I spent an average of six hours a day redialling the numbers of the two admissions offices, and receiving the same dispiriting reply: no decision had yet been made. It was not until the following Friday, eight days after the results had been issued, that I was offered a place on the French and English course at my second choice uni-

versity, Reading. The following four years made all the stress, frustration and hours on the telephone worthwhile.

Not only did I form the kind of friendships at university that will undoubtedly last a lifetime, but I was able to take advantage of opportunities I hadn't even realised would be open to me.

As part of my course, I spent a year working in France. Formerly computer illiterate, I became an

IT whiz, profiting from the university's free access to e-mail, the Internet and computer training courses.

Thanks to the students' union and various academic departments, I was able to act in plays and films, dance and write for the weekly student newspaper.

Of course, the main purpose of being a student is to study, and the extra-curricular fun sometimes had to make way for slogging and

cramming, particularly in my final year. All too soon, it seemed, I had to face the impending horror of another results day.

Haunted by my experience four years before, I found myself having recurring nightmares featuring the distraught, tear-stained faces of my disappointed A-level colleagues. And the feeling of nausea that had begun at the start of the finals revision period grew steadily worse as judgment day

approached. This time, I had imagined every possible scenario. I would be ecstatic to get a 2:1, but I knew any other result would not be the end of the world. After all, I had bounced back from my A-level disappointment, and I could do it again.

There was one outcome that had never crossed my mind.

After the shock of my poor A-level results, I was so convinced that I was incapable of doing well