

Applying to Oxbridge – things to consider

Oxford and Cambridge are amongst the most prestigious universities in the world and their undergraduates enjoy excellent teaching, high levels of pastoral care in a college-based system and excellent career prospects on graduation. It is however, an intensive learning experience (tutor groups are very small and terms are 8 weeks compared to 10-12 at other UK universities) and, while there is plenty of chance to engage in extra-curricular activities and have a social life, you need to be certain that you are going to cope with such a rigorous academic programme.

Ask yourself.....

- Are you consistently at or near the top of your class?
- Are you on course for A*s and As at A Level or D3, 2, or 1 at Pre-U?
- Have you checked the entry requirements for the course you want to study to see if you are likely to be able to match those?
- Did you get excellent i/GCSE grades – at least 7 at A*/8/9?
- Do you enjoy reading about your chosen degree subject in your own time?
- Do you find yourself going beyond set prep and doing more work than required?
- Would you say that you are ‘hungry’ to learn more about the subject?
- Has what you’ve learnt in the classroom inspired you to do your own research/project?
- Do you often discuss the subject/topics/your views with classmates/parents/teachers?
- Can you imagine yourself working in a career related to your chosen subject?

Oxford or Cambridge?

In reality there is very little difference between Oxford and Cambridge. The most important thing to consider is whether you are inspired by the course content of your chosen degree subject. Do the modules and topics covered throughout the degree interest you? Is there enough flexibility to allow you to choose modules in which you have a particular interest? Are you happy with the style of teaching – tutorials, supervisions, seminars and lectures?

One thing to consider is the admissions test and interview process at Oxford and Cambridge. When applying to Oxford, and your subject requires it, you usually sit an admissions test at the end of October/beginning of November and, depending on your performance, will be invited to interview in December. Cambridge, on the other hand, may ask you to sit any required admissions test either pre-interview or at the same time as you are interviewed. This is dependent on the subject. Both universities may also ask you to submit other written work. Generally, around 75% of applicants to Cambridge are interviewed while fewer candidates are called for interview at Oxford, who use the admissions test to filter out those they wish to interview. Ultimately though, the proportion of offers to applicants is similar for both universities.

Another thing to consider is how you are **assessed** during the course of your degree. At Cambridge, the only exams which count towards your degree are the Tripos exams, which, for the vast majority of undergraduate degree courses, are taken in your final year. Prior to that you have to take Preliminaries, which you have to pass, but which do not count towards your degree.

At Oxford, most courses are assessed by exams at the end of the first and final years. You need to pass the first-year exams, Preliminaries or Moderations, in order to progress to the second year. You may also have to take internal college exams, called Collections, to demonstrate your progress throughout the course.

Which college?

There are many myths surrounding how to choose a college. Some will say that you should look for a college where the tutor has a specialism which interests you. Others say look at the application to offer ratio. However, it is best to research the colleges and find which one suits you based on the following:

- Does the college offer your subject? (Not all Oxbridge colleges teach all subjects.)
- Does the size of the college appeal? Colleges can range in size from around 60 to 200 students in each year group.
- Where is the college located? Oxford and Cambridge are both relatively small cities so you won't be too far away from anything but consider the location in relation to other facilities and transport links.
- Does the college offer accommodation for all years of study? Does that matter to you?
- Is the college old or new? How much does its appearance matter to you?
- How traditional is the college? Does it have formal dinners etc.?
- What facilities does the college have – sports fields, music rooms, chapel? Some may even have their own cinema and/or theatre.
- What are the college's strengths? Is it sporty/musical/social?

If you are invited to interview, you are likely to be interviewed at the college to which you applied. However, on occasion, if the number of strong applications at your chosen college is high, that college may pass your application on to another college where you will be interviewed.

If you are uncertain which college to apply to, you can do an **open application**. This means that on receipt of your application the university will allocate you a college at random. This has no bearing on the likely success of your application.

Preparing for Oxbridge

An application to Oxford or Cambridge requires additional work and you must be prepared to put in the effort. This should include reading widely and in depth around your subject, attending extra lectures as well as events outside school, interview preparation and, depending on your subject, sitting the Thinking Skills Assessment or a subject-specific admissions test. Your chosen college may also ask you to submit written work you have done as part of your schoolwork. Other ideas to demonstrate your interest, independence and understanding include: completing a research project, writing an extended essay, presenting to your peers and teachers. If you apply to Cambridge, shortly after submitting your UCAS application, you will be asked to complete an online Supplementary Application Questionnaire (SAQ) form. You will have only a couple of days to do this. The purpose of the form is to collect comparable information about candidates so that they can be treated on a level playing field.

What happens after you apply?

Cambridge

If your application is successful you will be invited for interview, which is usually at the beginning of December. Interviews are different for each subject; you can find out about these on the relevant college website. Normally, you can expect to have three interviews, each lasting about 20 minutes. There is no such thing as a typical interview, but it is likely that you will be asked to expand on things you have included in your personal statement and that you have studied to date. You could be asked why you chose Cambridge and why a particular degree course. Candidates are often given a short test to complete before or during the interview. You will hear whether you have been successful in January.

Oxford

The process is very similar at Oxford, the main difference being that you do not have to complete an additional information form and that, for most subjects you will have to sit an admissions test (taken at school at the end of October/beginning of November). Your performance in this admissions test can determine whether you are called to interview. Interviews take place in early December and you will hear whether you are successful in January.

You can expect the interview to be challenging, but it is really a chance to show your genuine interest in the subject. Not knowing an answer, or getting it wrong, does not mean that you have failed; similarly knowing all the answers and coming across as confident does not mean that you will be successful. They will be more interested in your potential than your current knowledge.