



# **University of Cambridge & University of Oxford (Oxbridge): Applicant Handbook 2018/19**

The Sixth Form – University Applications



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# Why Apply?

Oxford and Cambridge are two of the oldest and most prestigious universities in the world, both of which have long-standing traditions of excellence in teaching and research. They possess unrivalled resources for learning in libraries, museums and laboratories, all set in magnificent surroundings. Oxford and Cambridge are places for students with inquiring minds who want to extend their mastery of an academic discipline and are happy to live in an academic atmosphere with like-minded fellow students.

Oxford University Website

<http://www.ox.ac.uk/>

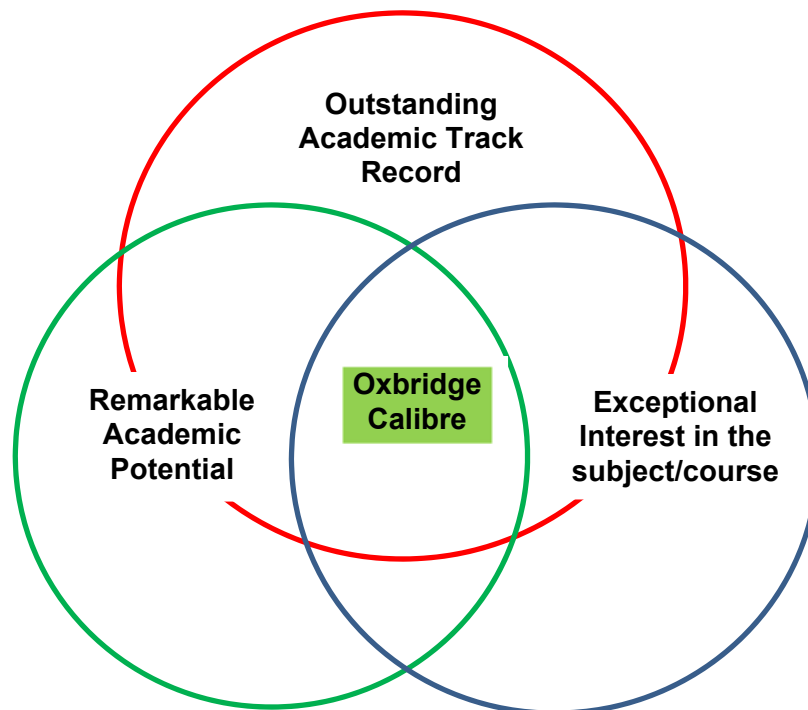
Cambridge University Website

<https://www.cam.ac.uk/>

## The Potential to Apply?

Needless to say Oxford and Cambridge are regularly ranked in the top 5 universities globally and have been, over an extended time period. This means they will be looking to make offers to those candidates who they deem to be the very best; the top 0.5-1% of students globally in your year at school/sixth form who apply. In short, the Universities select the very best of two types of students; superb all-rounders (which British Education System is great at producing) and very high level specialists in one particular area (which the Chinese education system for example, is great at producing). What do you need to demonstrate through the application process?

### *The Oxbridge Calibre Student*



**Table 1: How to find your Competitive Advantage:**

Student Quality	Ways to Demonstrate
<p align="center"><b>Remarkable Academic Potential</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extensive demonstration of initiative and intrinsic motivation through activities well beyond the curriculum</li> <li>• Deep demonstration of mental agility and critical thinking</li> <li>• Intellectual confidence</li> <li>• Strong personal statement/School Reference</li> <li>• 1st decile (top 10%) group in any university assessment tests</li> <li>• Emotional and Social Intelligence gained through a wide range of experiences</li> </ul>
<p align="center"><b>Outstanding Academic Track Record</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Majority A*(9) with possibly one or two A (8) grades at GCSE or equivalent qualification.</li> <li>• Modular A Levels, Minimum 285 UMS at Year 12.</li> <li>• Minimum 2xA* predicted grades and one A predicted grades for end of Year 13</li> </ul>
<p align="center"><b>Exceptional interest in the subject</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very strong personal statement</li> <li>• High quality relevant wider reading</li> <li>• Extra courses and/or distance learning</li> <li>• Ongoing, engagement through relevant work experience and/or internships, visits etc.</li> <li>• Academic competitions and societies participation</li> </ul>

*It's worth noting that the work by the candidate to develop their competitive advantage for the Oxbridge application begins well before Sixth Form, arguably from year 7 or 8 and certainly by the time of GCSE options choices. Years 12 and 13 complete the process.*

## Choosing the right Oxbridge College:

Unlike most universities in the UK both Oxford and Cambridge use a collegiate system, where you apply to a specific college to read a certain subject for your degree. Each college has its own history, ethos, available courses and traditions. The college will be a student's home and their central focus of teaching for much of their time at university. Each college will have a diverse range of students, including both undergraduate and graduate students studying across a range of subject areas. In addition, the colleges may offer differing amounts of student places and the course name and content will differ from other institutions. The key is to research thoroughly and make an informed choice. Some candidates do not really mind which college they attend, so submit an "open application" and if successful get assigned by the University to a college.

**Table 2 Oxbridge College's success rates:**

<b>Oxford University Colleges Success Rates</b>	<a href="https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/facts-and-figures/admissions-statistics?wssl=1">https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/facts-and-figures/admissions-statistics?wssl=1</a> <a href="https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/facts-and-figures/admissions-statistics/undergraduate-students?wssl=1">https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/facts-and-figures/admissions-statistics/undergraduate-students?wssl=1</a>
<b>Cambridge University Colleges Success Rates</b>	<a href="https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/files/publications/undergrad_admissions_statistics_2016_cycle.pdf">https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/files/publications/undergrad_admissions_statistics_2016_cycle.pdf</a>

Different sources may offer differing opinions about how to approach your Oxbridge application; the common three tend to be:

- Do an open application
- Choose the college with the most favorable entrance statistics
- Choose a course with the most favorable places to applicants ratio e.g. Theology

**Later in this document there is further information about the Collegiate System (Page 7)**

## GENERAL ADVICE

**'Facilitating subjects'**: At the best universities, the subjects taught tend to be very traditional, theoretical and academically demanding. A good place to start is Informed Choices by the Russell Group (Top 24 Research Universities in the UK) found at the hyperlink below

<https://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/media/5272/informedchoices-print.pdf>

Individual University colleges at Oxford and Cambridge also supply their own list of preferred subjects. Some examples are hyperlinked below:

<https://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/applying/a-level-subject-combinations/>

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/courses/entrance-requirements/table-entrance-requirements?wssl=1>

**This is something you should research.**

## OXFORD OR CAMBRIDGE – WHICH?

Oxford and Cambridge offer a stimulating environment for both academic study and an enjoyable social life. Both universities have so much in common that they are often referred to collectively as Oxbridge. What binds them together is a unique way of teaching and high standards. Both reach levels of excellence that are respected throughout the world and thus attract very high caliber teaching staff and students. The library and research facilities provided at both are second to none. However there are differences between the two and it is important that you appreciate these before you apply.

Oxford has a reputation for being the University for the Arts and Cambridge for the Sciences. Nowadays however the ratio of Art and Science students in both universities is about 50: 50. Cambridge will point out that whilst it produced both Newton and Darwin, it was also responsible for Byron, and Wordsworth. Oxford, on the other hand, developed penicillin and produced Boyle's Law as well as both Shelley and W.H. Auden. Current ratings show that both universities are at the top of the 'league tables' for teaching and research in almost all areas, Art and Sciences.

Both universities employ a similar approach to teaching – the tutorial system. It is based on the philosophy of individual teaching and individual learning. The nature of the tutorials (or supervisions as they are called at Cambridge) depends on the subject being taught and the tutor involved. At Oxford, every undergraduate has a tutor who will be a Fellow of your college. Generally he/she will take you for weekly tutorials. At Cambridge you will encounter more of a combined system where a Director of Studies will arrange your supervision with a variety of Fellows from your own and other colleges. The differences are cosmetic – wherever you go you will need to be self-reliant and self-motivated to succeed.

It is extremely important that you visit the universities, talk to the tutors and read the prospectuses before making your decision.

## THE COLLEGE SYSTEM

Both Oxford and Cambridge operate their admissions procedure through their colleges. You must apply to be interviewed and admitted by a college, not by the University. Life at university very much revolves around the colleges and it is extremely important that you choose a college carefully.

## CHOICE OF COLLEGE

Unlike almost all other universities, at Oxford and Cambridge you apply to a college, not the university itself (Durham operates a similar system). You must apply to be interviewed and admitted by the College of your choice. Oxford has 35 colleges which admit undergraduates and Cambridge 28. For a brief description of each college see Appendices A & B. There are some colleges which admit graduate students only.

It is extremely important that you choose the right college for you and a great deal of care should go into your choice. You should ask yourself a number of questions and research the answers:

- 1. Does the college accept students to read your particular subject? Not all colleges offer all degree courses particularly at Oxford where Colleges tend to be smaller.*
- 2. What sort of college would you be happy in? Some colleges are very traditional, dating back to the Middle Ages and steeped in history and tradition. Others were founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, whilst some have been founded very recently, e.g. St Catherine's at Oxford and Robinson at Cambridge. Some tend to preserve traditions with formal meals and the wearing of gowns whereas others tend to be very modern and 'unstuffy' – the choice will depend on your own views and values.*
- 3. Which college is 'best' for you subject? All colleges tend to have at least one Fellow for each subject; some have more. Some colleges admit more students for certain subjects than others.*

4. *What is the Junior Common Room like?*
5. *Can I 'live in' college for all three years (cheaper) or do I have to live out in my second year?*
6. *Are the libraries and computer facilities satisfactory?*
7. *Are grants available?*
8. *What is the male/female ratio?*
9. *What are the proportions of state school / public school students at the colleges?*
10. *How large is the college? The smaller colleges have approximately 200 -250 students over three years whilst the larger ones have in the region of 450 – 500. Even the largest colleges are smaller than your present school.*
11. *How good are the music and sporting facilities?*
12. *Is there scope for drama? Does the college have an active political reputation?*

Most students are probably interested in who their tutors will be. The open days provide an extremely good opportunity for you to meet your future tutor. You should try to form an impression of what it would be like to work with him/her. Ask existing students who are helping out on the open days.

Some or all of these factors may be important to you in making your decision. The golden rules are to attend the open days, read university and college prospectuses and the alternative prospectuses produced by the students. The Careers and Higher Education Office has most of the prospectuses



## APPLICATION PROCEDURE

The application, preparation and selection procedure for Oxbridge is challenging, arduous and demanding. It is best if students who go through this process have a fair chance of success otherwise the experience can be demoralizing. We do not want to put people off applying but do not be disappointed if you are advised that it is not suitable for you.

There will be opportunities to visit Oxford and Cambridge in the Summer term. There is considerable research to be done by you on which college to apply to (for open days please see appendices A and B).

**Table 3: Oxbridge Application Timeline:**

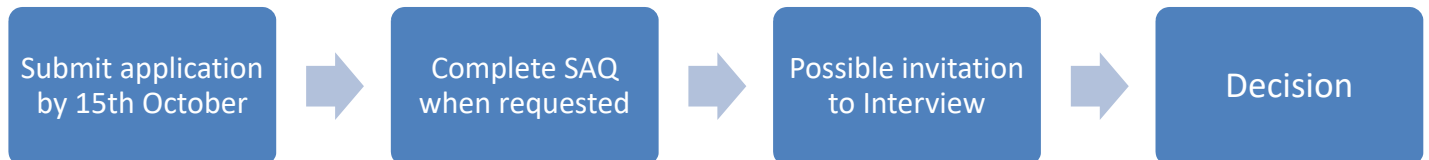
Year 11 All year	Work hard to achieve the best possible GCSEs – you need A/A* grades for Oxbridge
Summer	Finalise your A level options, bearing in mind that you need to achieve high grades and that Oxbridge prefer the facilitating subjects
Year 12 January	Choose your degree course
January onwards	Read extensively about your chosen subject, making notes as you do so
January onwards	For vocational courses in particular, organise relevant work experience
June	Sit AS examinations, or internal end of year 12 examinations
June	Start drafting personal statement
June/July	Attend Oxford and Cambridge Open Days, decide where to apply
August	Start to complete UCAS form
Year 13 September	Finalise personal statement and UCAS form
September	Register for admissions tests
October	Send application
October	<i>Cambridge applicants only:</i> complete supplementary application questionnaire
October/November	Prepare for interviews and entrance tests
November	Receive notification of invitation to interview
November	Submit examples of written work, if required
November	Sit pre-interview admissions tests, if required
December	Attend interview (including sitting at-interview admissions tests, if required)
January	Receive decision from Oxbridge
March	Receive decision from all other universities
May	Respond to universities on UCAS, indicating firm and insurance choices
June	Take A level examinations
August	A level results day

## The differing approaches to the Oxford and Cambridge application processes:

### THE CAMBRIDGE APPLICATION

If you are a UK or EU applicant, you will only need to submit a UCAS application naming Cambridge as one of your choices. After your UCAS application has been received you will be asked to provide additional information through a Supplementary Application Questionnaire (SAQ), in common with applicants to many other universities.

***The Year 13 process of applying will therefore be as follows:***



The Supplementary Application Questionnaire was developed to ensure that Cambridge have complete and consistent information about all applicants. It also enables the university to collect information that is not part of the UCAS application but is helpful when assessing applications. The SAQ will ask for details such as UMS marks obtained on AS and A2 units, information about topics already covered as part of your AS/A level (or equivalent) courses (which helps our interviewers decide which questions to ask), and registration numbers for admissions tests (if applicable).

Cambridge is not alone in asking applicants to complete supplementary questionnaires. A number of other leading universities have developed similar questionnaires.

## USE OF SUMMER HOLIDAYS

What should you be doing?

The summer holiday period is crucial to the application procedure – it is extremely important that you do not allow your brain to vegetate for six/seven weeks. When you return in September the time will pass very quickly and you will have very little opportunity for wider reading.

1. The vast majority of Oxford and Cambridge Colleges provide Summer reading lists to help candidates prepare. This should be part of the preparation process for the application.
2. Get into the habit of reading a good quality newspaper (The Times, The Guardian, The Independent, The Daily Telegraph). Apart from keeping you well informed generally, they frequently look in-depth at the types of issues that affect your subject areas, e.g. medical ethics, legal cases, recent developments in science, engineering, computation etc.
3. Try to do something interesting. The Oxbridge process naturally concentrates on academic quality. However, they frequently look in-depth at the types of issues that affect your subject areas, e.g. medical ethics, legal cases, recent developments in science, engineering, computation etc.

Colleges look for sporting and musical prowess, interesting and relevant work experience, foreign travel, voluntary service and so on. We must stress that these are not the main criteria for selection but they do help to create a better impression.

## AUTUMN TERM PROGRAMME

When you return to school in September you will need to start the application process as soon as possible. **The deadline for applications to both Oxford and Cambridge is 15<sup>th</sup> October.** By early September you should already have decided which subject you want to study and which college you want to apply to.

Most students are called to interview during December. Mr. Khushalbhair – Careers Adviser will arrange for you to attend up to 5 rounds of practice interviews, of a similar standard and structure to what you can expect with personalized feedback to hone your skills. Interviews at Cambridge take place during the first three weeks of December and at Oxford between approximately 4<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> December. You may occasionally be called for a second interview in early January.

## INTERVIEWS

Selection for Oxford and Cambridge is extremely competitive and is based largely on one or more interviews at Oxford or Cambridge in November/December. It is essential that you can communicate clearly and in detail at these interviews. You are expected to be able to answer examination-type questions verbally, to think on your feet, to be able to follow through an argument and to stand your ground on occasion. Interviewers will be interested in your thoughts and opinions. Above all, they are looking for you to display a passion for the subject for which you are applying. The person who interviews you may well be spending a one hour supervision/tutorial with you every week and will want to be sure that it will be an interesting and stimulating time for both of you!

***Once you have submitted your application, BSM will help you to prepare by doing up to 5 rounds of practice interviews with specific improvements and feedback post interview, using internal and external specialists.***

## **SUBMITTED WORK AND INTERVIEWS: OXFORD**

Before your interview you may be asked to send two pieces of your work (normally essays) for the college to look at and these will be discussed at interview. This is much more common at Oxford than at Cambridge. This should not cause you any undue difficulty because the work has to be marked by your teacher and be part of your normal A level workload. (Although naturally you may feel the need to put in a special effort!) You must discuss the choice of essay or coursework with your teacher.

Not all subjects require submitted work. Your teacher will let you know what is required.

**ALL SUBMITTED WORK MUST REACH YOUR COLLEGE BY 11<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER.**

### **THE INTERVIEW**

Oxford interviews will take place between, approximately, 4<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> December depending on your subject. You will normally be required to spend two to three days in the college of your choice, full board, at their expense (You pay for travel.) Most colleges have a sophisticated system for welcoming students and invariably assign a first year student who is studying your subject to look after you. Social events in the J.C.R. are the norm. They will generally do their best to put you at ease at what is a stressful time.

Interviews vary greatly between subjects and between colleges. Typically you should expect to be given at least two interviews.

At Oxford all interviews will be with the subject specialists. The interviews are designed to test your academic ability and ability to think and respond under pressure. Interviews for different subjects vary. Mathematicians are given a short test and asked to reflect, lawyers have a problem or a case study to examine and classicists a language aptitude test. A Physics interview will typically revolve around problem solving whilst English and History tutors will be looking for wide ranging readers. All tutors will want to see your capacity to think and an enjoyment for your subject.

Tutors are invariably friendly and there is nothing to worry about as long as you are well prepared – it should be a challenging yet an interesting experience.

## SUBMITTED WORK AND INTERVIEWS: CAMBRIDGE

Before your interview you may be asked to send essays for the College to look at and these may be discussed at your interview. These are essays which have been written and marked during the course of your A Level studies. You should discuss the choice of essays to send to Cambridge with your teachers. Students applying for law are sometimes sent case studies to read and these are discussed at the interview.

Since October 2005 a number of Cambridge Colleges have used the Thinking Skills Assessment (TSA) test. The test will either be taken on-line or on paper at the interview. The Cambridge Thinking Skills Assessment is an assessment of two kinds of thinking:

- **Problem Solving** – reasoning using numerical and spatial skills  
Many of the problems encountered in academic and professional work are original; No ready 'off the peg solution' is available. The task is to find or create a solution.
- **Critical Thinking** – reasoning using every day written language.  
The skill of Critical Thinking is basic to any academic study and often involves considering an argument put forward to promote or defend a particular point of view. Historians use argument when reasoning about records of events in the past and scientists use argument when reasoning about the evidence from their experiments. Whatever subject of study it is necessary to understand the arguments presented by others and to be able to assess whether the arguments establish their claims.

These are both skills which are considered to be important in Higher Education.

A number of Colleges are currently using the TSA to assess applicants for Computer Science, Economics, Engineering, Land Economy, Natural Sciences and PPS.

More information and examples of TSA questions can be found on the TSA website at:

[www.tsa.cambridgeassessment.org.uk](http://www.tsa.cambridgeassessment.org.uk).

## AFTER INTERVIEW

You will hear in early January whether your application has been successful or not. If you are successful you will be made a conditional offer, usually grades A\*AA or AAA. Some Colleges may ask you to sit a STEP (Sixth Term Examination Paper) paper in addition to A Levels. Mathematics applicants are nearly always expected to sit a STEP paper. These examinations take place at the beginning of July. STEP syllabuses are based on the A level syllabus but the questions are of a more searching nature.

## THE POOL

Some candidates may hear that the college to which they have applied was too heavily subscribed to offer them a place, but has 'pooled' their application for other colleges to consider. The pool is designed to even out imbalances in application levels between colleges so that the best candidates find places. If you are placed in the pool you may be called down to Cambridge again for a further interview or interviews by other colleges in early January. You will hear the result of your pool interview within a week or so.

## ADDITIONAL TESTS AT OXFORD

Oxford University has committed itself rather more than Cambridge to additional testing. The subjects requiring tests in addition to the BMAT and LNAT are History (and any subject in combination with History), Physics, English (or any subject in combination with English except History), PPE and Mathematics, Economics & Management, Experimental Psychology, Psychology, Philosophy and Physiology.

It is vital to stress how important these tests are. Colleges use them to de-summons (i.e. not call for interview) significant numbers of candidates. This varies from subject to subject but it can be as high as 60% in Medicine!

**Remember the application and assessment process is designed to find reasons to eliminate applications from areas of relative (to all the global applications received) weakness.**

**The scope and quality of your preparations is directly correlated with the chances of successful application.**

## Appendix A – Open Days

<b>UCAS</b>	<a href="https://www.ucas.com/ucas/undergraduate/getting-started/entry-requirements/admissions-tests">https://www.ucas.com/ucas/undergraduate/getting-started/entry-requirements/admissions-tests</a>
<b>Oxford University</b>	<a href="https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/graduate/why-oxford/open-days-and-events?wssl=1">https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/graduate/why-oxford/open-days-and-events?wssl=1</a> <a href="https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/visiting-and-outreach/independent-visits/visiting-colleges-and-departments?wssl=1">https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/visiting-and-outreach/independent-visits/visiting-colleges-and-departments?wssl=1</a>
<b>Cambridge University</b>	<a href="https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/events/cambridge-open-days">https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/events/cambridge-open-days</a>

## Appendix B – Admissions Assessments Information

<b>Oxford University</b>	<a href="https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/tests?wssl=1">https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/tests?wssl=1</a> <a href="http://www.admissionstesting.org/for-test-takers/oxford-tests/">http://www.admissionstesting.org/for-test-takers/oxford-tests/</a>
<b>Cambridge University</b>	<a href="http://www.admissionstesting.org/">http://www.admissionstesting.org/</a> <a href="https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/applying/admission-assessments">https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/applying/admission-assessments</a>

## Appendix C – Summer Schools Information

<b>Oxford University</b>	<a href="https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/about/summer-schools">https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/about/summer-schools</a>
<b>Cambridge University</b>	<a href="https://www.ice.cam.ac.uk/courses/international-summer-programmes">https://www.ice.cam.ac.uk/courses/international-summer-programmes</a>