

HE evening - Oxbridge Pathways

This short booklet does not purport to provide a detailed explanation of the Oxbridge Admissions process, nor does it set out all the many and varied nuances of a successful Oxbridge application. It is hoped, however, that it addresses some of the actual questions which parents/guardians have asked in previous years and dispels some of the myths and misunderstandings which can surround an Oxbridge application.

How many A*s at GCSE does a student need in order to apply to Oxbridge?

No fixed number. All universities look at GCSE performance in the context of the school attended. Students do not need to have a certain GCSE profile in order to apply. The average GCSE profile of successful BHASVIC applicants in 2017/18 was 6/7 A*s (9s) + 4/5 As + 1B. The range was from 12A*s to 2A*s + 5As + 5Bs.

These GCSE profiles are 'retrospective' and GCSEs are only one of several factors Oxbridge and other leading universities consider. Oxford probably places a greater weighting on GCSEs than Cambridge, a weighting of about 25-30% when deciding whether to interview.

Students with a GCSE profile which is significantly weaker than the lowest cited above, would probably be better to apply post A-level, having secured A*s and As.

Can a student apply to Oxford and Cambridge and do they have to put it as their first choice on UCAS?

Oxford or Cambridge. There are no 'choices' in the sense of 'order of preference' on the UCAS form. Students can make up to five 'equal' choices. The students' applications to the five universities are not ranked and the universities do not know where else a student has applied.

The deadline for applying to Oxbridge is 15th October (all applications must arrive at both universities by then) and so the BHASVIC deadline is the 24th September 2018. Students can apply to all five universities straightaway or add their other choices up until the UCAS deadline in mid-January.

Should the student apply to Oxford or Cambridge?

The most important factor should be course choice. Students should look closely at the A level subject requirements.

BHASVIC students, state school students in general, are really bad at looking at the full range of courses on offer.

Both Oxford and Cambridge now have pre-interview and at-interview assessments although they use these rather differently. Students should look at these tests (more below) very carefully. Oxford uses the tests, alongside GCSE and other information, to deselect pre-interview with an aim of roughly reducing interviewees to three for each offer place. Cambridge deselects fewer pre-interview.

Students should largely ignore most of the material available on the Web unless it is provided by the two Universities and their constituent Colleges; we live in a 'fake news', 'alternative facts' era.

What's the timescale for Oxbridge applications?

Here are the key dates for an Oxbridge application:

- **27th & 28th June: Oxford Open Days**
- **5th & 6th July: Cambridge Open Days**
- **10th & 11th July: 'Drop-in' Personal Statement Days in the SLC – 'to get started' with the help of ex-students**
- **6th & 10th September: Compulsory Personal Statement Days, working with ex-students in the SLC and Rm63**
- **25th September: completion of all UCAS forms which include an Oxbridge application**
- **1st October: deadline for Medicine applicants to have registered to take the BMAT – students are responsible for this**
- **15th October: absolute deadline for Oxbridge UCAS applications**
- **15th October: deadline for students to book the relevant pre-interview assessments. (LNAT for Oxford Law applicants – cannot be booked or sat at BHASVIC and must be taken 'on a date between 1 September and 20 October')**

- **15th October: deadline for submission of Statement of Extenuating Circumstances (completed by BHASVIC) – if required**
- **22nd October: deadline for completion and submission of online Supplementary Application Questionnaire (SAQ) for Cambridge applicants**
- **31st October: BMAT (Medicine applicants) and pre-interview assessments taken in BHASVIC**
- **Early November: various dates for submission of any required written work**
- **Mid-November: interview invitations**
- **December: The majority of interviews in Oxford and Cambridge take place in the first three weeks of December (some may be a little earlier)**
- **January 2018: Oxbridge application decisions**
- **May 2018: final Firm & Insurance decisions by students**

How should students prepare for the ‘tests’?

All the tests are offered at BHASVIC with the exception of LNAT for Law at Oxford – 31st October

Students can access full information about all the tests on the relevant Oxbridge website. There are many examples of past tests for Oxford courses. Cambridge Assessments only began two years ago and so there are few past papers. The long-standing TSA is a good model for some Cambridge tests and the BMAT for the Cambridge Natural Sciences Assessments.

As with all Tests/Assessments, it is crucial to understand the nature of the exam itself: timings, structure, etc. Students should prepare for the Assessments steadily, thoroughly during the summer break, ensuring that a couple of tests have been attempted within the correct exam timings.

The Assessments should not require any new knowledge material. For most tests, the Universities provide a syllabus which outlines material that may be examined; it is important to look at this and ensure any ‘gaps’ in knowledge are addressed.

What’s the best way to prepare for interviews?

The worst way to prepare for the interview is any form of ‘training’ or pre-prepared answers. The interviewers want flexibility of thought and an intelligent response to the questions asked. If an obviously pre-prepared answer is given then they’ll simply ask a different question.

Ignore the frequent nonsense written in some papers about Oxbridge interviews. There are no ‘trick questions’, silly games about handshakes, where to sit, eye contact etc. It is an academic discussion, nothing more. The interviewers are not after ‘the right answer’ but the flexible application of existing knowledge to a new situation. It is about ~~a~~ working through a problem with the interviewers. It does not matter what the student wears!

Cambridge tends to have two interviews on the same day at the College applied to. Oxford interviews may be spread over 2/3 days and may involve interviews at other Colleges too.

Key qualities for a good interview: a student needs to listen to the question actually being asked and then articulate an informed thoughtful response. Ask for clarification if required. Express your thinking. Interviews mimic the Oxbridge tutorial system; they are a discussion. ‘Right answers’ are not sought but thoughtful answers, which apply and develop existing knowledge to new challenging scenarios, are wanted.

“The final piece of the jigsaw and not the final hurdle.”

How important are extra-curricular activities?

Not at all. A student with a strong slate of extra-curricular activities will not be offered a place over a student with no extra-curricular experiences.

Oxbridge are looking for ‘super-curricular’ – in other words self-motivated academic reading and thinking ‘beyond A Level’ – showing a lively, engaged, thoughtful mind.

A student’s fourth choice, the Portfolio choice in the second year at BHASVIC, may help here. An EPQ will not make the difference between gaining a place or not; but it may create a framework for useful ‘super-curricular’ study.

Which Colleges should students apply to and how should they choose a College?

Oxford and Cambridge argue very strongly that College choice does not impact upon the chances of gaining a place at the Universities. This is almost certainly true. Students obsess over College choice; this is a waste of energy!

It is possible to do an 'open application' – the Universities will then send the application to a College with fewer direct applications for that subject.

Ignore the general or subject-specific 'reputation' of a College. By way of example, Isaac Newton will not be teaching Maths at Trinity Cambridge. The final degree is from the University. The Colleges effectively pool their differing expertise: a student at one College is commonly taught by an expert in another College. Most teaching, especially in the Sciences, is delivered at a University level in lectures and practicals.

Students should apply to the College they think they will feel most 'at home' in. Beautiful architecture tends to fade fairly quickly as a good reason for applying to a particular College.

BHASVIC students have attended every Cambridge College and over half of Oxford's Colleges. There are Colleges which perhaps suit BHASVIC students, 'a good fit'.

Is Oxbridge 'too posh' and public school for BHASVIC students?

Out of all the questions asked about Oxbridge, this is the most irritating. 133 BHASVIC students have gained offers over the past three years, eclipsing almost all public schools in the country.

The gap in terms of socio-economic privilege is, in general, far greater between BHASVIC and what Blair labelled as a 'bog-standard comprehensive' than the gap between BHASVIC and most public schools.

It is a regrettable fact access to the leading universities in the UK is still significantly determined by social class background. Other leading UK universities have a state v public school ratio which is more out of kilter than Oxbridge. So students who pretend this is a reason for not applying to Oxbridge should also not apply to the likes of Bristol, Durham, St Andrew's, Edinburgh.

Some Oxbridge Colleges have significantly higher state school figures: Mansfield Oxford = 96%. Homerton Cambridge made 4 BHASVIC students offers this year. Colleges with 'poor' state v public school statistics may be very keen to receive more state school applications. The single greatest factor in determining the state v public school 'success rate' is probably the course students apply for. Courses such as Classics and Theology are much less likely to be oversubscribed than Economics or Law.

It is worth remembering that Oxford and Cambridge are almost certainly the two cheapest universities to go to, as living costs need to be covered only for the relatively short terms and the Universities have generous bursary schemes and other financial and resource support.

Students have five university choices through UCAS; Oxford or Cambridge will be only one of the five.

When do students make their final university selections?

May 2019. Students keep a Firm and an Insurance offer. If they were made five offers, the student rejects three of these at this point.

The vast majority of students who secure an Oxbridge offer put it as the Firm choice. For Humanities at Oxford this may well be the lowest offer a student receives!

Offers vary: Cambridge Sciences A*A*A*/A*A*A. Oxford Science offers range from A*A*A/A*AA. Oxford Humanities' offers are usually AAA (can be A*AA for Economics) Cambridge Humanities tend to be A*A*A/A*AA. The big exception is Mathematics' offers from Cambridge where A*A*A* is the 'easy bit' – a minimum of two grade 1s in STEP being required as well. These STEP papers are taken at the same time as A level exams.

Students do not have to accept an Oxbridge offer. It is becoming more common for BHASVIC students to reject the Oxbridge offer in favour of such places as Edinburgh. This is perfectly acceptable, 'normalising' Oxbridge. Oxford and Cambridge are not necessarily the best places for every student!

Isn't the whole process of applying just too time-consuming and stressful?

Not if the student is organised and approaches the whole process calmly, with a sense of perspective. The perspective being: Oxford and Cambridge are two outstanding universities but they are certainly not the be all and the end all.

'Yes' – there are other pieces of the Admissions 'jigsaw' to put in place, most notably the Admission Assessments and the interviews. Increasingly, other universities are requiring pre-admission tests and interviews. This year the most challenging interviews were at Imperial, not Oxbridge.

However, getting the whole UCAS form, Personal Statement, Reference etc completed by the end of September alleviates a good deal of pressure. Some students will have three or four offers by the October half term break ... that feels good.

Most applicants now quite enjoy the interview process. No applicants in recent years have found the interview process ridiculously challenging and stressful.

Will a student's Oxbridge experience be too much hard work, leaving no time for extra-curricular activities?

There are so many variables here! These include subject being studied, self-discipline, capacity to 'work hard and play hard' etc. Sometimes students are inconsistent in their standards/judgments, applying much harsher criteria to Oxbridge than other universities.

The range of extra-curricular opportunities at Oxford and Cambridge is enormous. In both the Arts and Sports, students can participate at any level. BHASVIC students seem particularly keen on Ice Hockey at Cambridge!

It is fair to say that students can find the first term very demanding but a sense of balance and realism soon develops.

Three terms of eight weeks does mean that the workload is heavy but the breaks are long. Other stresses such as accommodation, food, transport, academic resources are effectively non-existent at Oxbridge.

In terms of value for money - contact hours, 1:1 tuition, practicals, teaching frequently by experts not solely PhD students and so on – Oxbridge is outstanding. (It is worth students thinking 'what am I getting for my £18-20,000 a year?')

BHASVIC students have joined in some fantastic extra-curricular activities whilst at Oxbridge. Several have secured generous Travel Grants to pursue their studies overseas during the long summer vacation.