



## HE Guidance - Oxbridge Pathways

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In previous years, the Specialist HE Evening held in May, has aimed to provide parents/guardians with an introduction to applications to Oxford and Cambridge Universities. The short booklet provided at that Event has been edited to reflect the impact of the 'lockdown'; at the moment it is assumed that the Oxbridge, and UCAS, application process will be unchanged. BHASVIC will be alert should any changes which take place to the university application process and will guide students appropriately.

These notes do not purport to provide a detailed explanation of the Oxbridge Admissions process, nor do they 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.

Each section below is a response to questions which have been asked at past Specialist HE Evening Sessions. You will understand that answers can, perhaps, be more nuanced when spoken, and points developed further and clarified. **If you have need any further clarification or have specific interest in a topic – don't hesitate to contact Neil using email: [n.commin@bhasvic.ac.uk](mailto:n.commin@bhasvic.ac.uk)**

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

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No fixed number. All universities look at GCSE performance in the context of the school attended. A realistic Oxbridge candidate will have GCSEs which were comfortably within the top half of the relevant school's cohort. Students do not need to have a certain GCSE profile in order to apply.

The average GCSE profile of successful BHASVIC applicants in recent years has been 6/7 A\*s (9s) + 4/5 As + 1B. The range has been from 12A\*s to 2A\*s + 5As + 5Bs. This is an average and several students secure Oxbridge offers with a 'lower' GCSE profile.

The pattern of GCSE achievements is as important as any overall total of 9s and A\*s. An applicant for a science/maths subject will be expected to have achieved exceptionally well in relevant subjects; performance in, say, a Language or PE is probably irrelevant.

These GCSE profiles are 'retrospective' and GCSEs are only one of several factors Oxbridge and other leading universities consider. Oxford may place 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, may be better to apply post A level, having secured A\*s and As.

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

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Out of all the questions asked about Oxbridge, this is the most irritating. 160 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 as out of kilter as 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, LSE, Imperial, UCL.

Some Oxbridge Colleges have significantly higher state school figures: Mansfield Oxford = 96%. Homerton Cambridge made 9 BHASVIC students offers in the last two years. 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, very often selected by public school applicants, 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. Library resources are outstanding.

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

## **How important are extra-curricular activities?**

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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.

**Oxford and Cambridge are looking for 'super-curricular'** – in other words self-motivated academic reading and thinking 'beyond A Level' – showing a lively, engaged, thoughtful mind. Several leading universities – Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge and others – have released an impressive range of free resources/courses for 'lockdown' students to explore. (For example Michael Sandel's brilliant Harvard lecture course on Justice ... perfect for Philosophy/Law/Politics/PPE students). These are precisely the sort of 'super-curricular' activities which are welcomed.

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.

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

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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. Imperial interviews are easily as challenging as Oxbridge ones.

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.

Everything that is done by way of early preparation for an Oxbridge application, strengthens applications to the other four universities.

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

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Oxford or Cambridge. There are no 'choices' in the sense of 'order of preference' on the UCAS form. Students have 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.

Applications to Oxford and Cambridge must reach those universities by 15<sup>th</sup> October.

**The BHASVIC deadline will be 11th September 2020.**

This early date will allow BHASVIC staff to deal with any issues arising from the unusual circumstances of applications this year.

Students can apply to all five universities straightaway or add their other choices up until the UCAS deadline in mid-January 2021.

## **Should the student apply to Oxford or Cambridge?**

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The most important factor should be course choice. Students should look closely at the A level subject requirements. State school students can be poor at looking at the full range of courses on offer – courses with an unusual name such

as Materials Science or Anglo-Saxon Norse and Celtic – and at looking beyond a course ‘label’, for example the seeming absence of an Environmental Science course at Oxbridge – delivered comprehensively by Natural Sciences.

Students are urged strongly to look carefully and fully at the full range of courses offered by Oxford and Cambridge. Too many students apply for a narrow group of subjects, not bothering to read the relevant prospectuses carefully.

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. It is pointless applying to Oxford without diligent preparation for the relevant Test. Cambridge deselects fewer pre-interview but the Tests are growing in importance there too especially for Natural Sciences applications.

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.

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

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Oxford and Cambridge argue very strongly that College choice does not impact upon the chance of gaining a place at the University. 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.

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 and share 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’ and Neil can guide applicants appropriately.

To repeat, **students are urged not to obsess over College choice.** Ask Neil for guidance and he will (almost certainly) be able to link an applicant with a BHASVIC student studying the chosen course at a specific College.

## **What is the UCAS Personal Statement and how important is it?**

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Most importantly – one Personal Statement is submitted via UCAS to all five university choices. NB it is not possible to write a Personal Statement tailored specifically to an Oxbridge course (although Cambridge has a separate SAQ form which allows for a paragraph with a focus solely on the Cambridge course – to be submitted by 22<sup>nd</sup> October). Therefore, if a student is applying for Natural Sciences at Cambridge but Chemistry at the other four universities, the Personal Statement must have a strong Chemistry focus. Oxford and Cambridge understand this constraint.

The Personal Statement probably matters less for an Oxbridge application than for the other four universities as Oxbridge will undertake a much more thorough scrutiny of an application (tests & interviews). However, the Personal Statement may lead to detailed interview questions and so it is important for an applicant to be confident and engaged with what they’ve written.

Students should largely ignore non-Oxford and Cambridge resources and advice online (other leading universities, such as the LSE, also publish sound guidance). In previous years 4 Personal Statement Days have been organised when ex-BHASVIC students now studying at Oxbridge have worked with applicants. These have been fantastically useful but regrettably cannot be organised this year. By way of replacement, Neil proposes to organise a ‘twinning’ system where an applicant for a specific subject will be paired with a relevant ex-student. Of course this depends upon the kindness of ex-students who have their own lives to lead in these difficult times and so Neil will coordinate this so that individual ex-students are not too overwhelmed with requests for support.

There is no ‘magic’ to a Personal Statement. A good Statement is well-written in normal English (not over-flowery); it is a celebration of the student’s interest in the subject being applied for, showing evidence of pursuing this interest beyond the constraints of the school curriculum. It should be thoughtful and reflective, not a list of books read; far

better to focus on a few books/experiences, writing about these in some detail rather than a mere list of 'stuff'. Students must show their engagement with a subject not just say they are enthusiastic.

Given the present uncertainties, it would be a very good idea for students to begin the Statement in June, emailing drafts to Neil so that he can both look at them and forward them to an appropriate ex-student. It will not be possible to start a Statement from scratch in September.

## **How should students prepare for the 'tests'?**

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All the tests are offered at BHASVIC with the exception of LNAT for Law at Oxford (and other universities) which must be taken before 15<sup>th</sup> October 2020. **The student is responsible for booking the relevant test with BHASVIC Exams Dept by 1st October.** Some other universities require Tests too – all Medicine and some Mathematics courses.

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 a few years ago and so there are fewer past papers. The long-standing TSA is a good model for some Cambridge tests and the BMAT for the Cambridge Natural Sciences Assessments. Please note that Cambridge is still thinking flexibly about the role of Tests and some subjects, HSPS for example, are changing the Test requirements this year. Students must look carefully at the relevant guidance on the two universities' websites regarding the pre-interview Tests.

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. However Oxford and Cambridge do not expect applicants to have to prepare too much for these Tests and are vociferously against the purchase of so-called support from private providers.

At the moment **the scheduled Test date is 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020**, virus allowing.

## **What's the best way to prepare for interviews?**

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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 interviewers will simply ask a different question. Interviewers most frequently say they are looking for 'teachability'.

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 working through a problem with the interviewers.

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. It does not matter what the student wears!

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 an academic discussion. 'Right answers' are not sought but thoughtful answers, which apply and develop existing knowledge to new challenging scenarios, are wanted.

It is crucial to consider the interview as "*the final piece of the jigsaw and not the final hurdle.*"

## **When do students make their final university selections?**

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**May 2021. 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 (which means that the 2 universities must make fewer offers than other universities). 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! However, I have little doubt that going through the Oxbridge application process enriches a student's application to other universities. As long as the realistic predicted grades are appropriate – 'if in doubt, give it a go!' – apply to Oxbridge – seemingly little or nothing to lose.

Each year, students gain offers from Oxford or Cambridge and yet are rejected by other leading universities such as LSE or Imperial.

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

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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.

It is worth reading the independent HEPI Report on Student Satisfaction and Oxbridge: [https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/HEPI-How-different-is-Oxbridge\\_Report-107-FINAL.pdf](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/HEPI-How-different-is-Oxbridge_Report-107-FINAL.pdf)

## **What's the timescale for Oxbridge applications?**

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Here are the key dates for an Oxbridge application – you will understand that Covid makes it very difficult to be too prescriptive at the moment:

**May/June/July: in the absence of the usual Open Days, Cambridge and Oxford are providing a wealth of online resources/College and Course information etc. Potential applicants must undertake all relevant thorough research this academic term.**

- **15<sup>th</sup> June: student submission of initial Oxbridge Application sheet (which students will receive during Progression Week) to Neil via email**
- **22<sup>nd</sup> June: UCAS form completed – excluding Personal Statement and University choices**
- **29<sup>th</sup> June: submission of detailed plan and structure of Personal Statement**
- **13<sup>th</sup> July: submission of a full draft of Personal Statement**
- **1st September: submission of final draft of UCAS Personal Statement**
- **11<sup>th</sup> September: submission of completed UCAS Form including final Personal Statement**
- **25<sup>th</sup> September: deadline for Medicine applicants to have registered to take the BMAT – students are responsible for this**
- **25<sup>th</sup> September: deadline for students to book the relevant pre-interview assessments with BHASVIC Exams Office.**  
(LNAT for Oxford Law applicants – cannot be booked or sat at BHASVIC and must be taken 'on a date between 1 September and 15<sup>th</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> November October' – students are responsible for making these arrangements)
- **15<sup>th</sup> October: deadline for submission of Statement of Extenuating Circumstances (completed by BHASVIC) – if required**

- **22<sup>nd</sup> October: deadline for completion and submission of compulsory online Supplementary Application Questionnaire (SAQ) for Cambridge applicants**
- **4<sup>th</sup> November: 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)**
- **15<sup>th</sup> January 2021: deadline for applications to all UK universities**
- **January 2021: Oxbridge application decisions**
- **End of March 2021: deadline for all universities to make decisions regarding offers**
- **May 2021: final Firm & Insurance decisions by students**
- **May 2021: students to complete Student Finance**

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