



## 2021-22 OXBRIDGE ADMISSIONS ROUND

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**This note seeks to set out the process for applying to Oxford or Cambridge (NB you can only apply to either Cambridge or Oxford – not both) in the Autumn of 2021. It is an outline of the process not an in-depth explanation.**

Any **KEY DIFFERENCES** between Oxbridge and applications to other universities are marked as such. Any really important points – marked **VIP!**

**It is crucial that students do not obsess about Oxbridge.** Anyone applying to Oxbridge will have the grades necessary to apply to other leading universities which deliver excellent teaching, a great student experience and super career prospects.

**The majority of Oxbridge applicants will not get an offer however, if students don't apply to Oxbridge, they definitely won't get an offer.** It is also perfectly fine to gain an Oxbridge offer but then decide to take an Exeter or Edinburgh etc offer instead!

Some other leading universities are just as (if not more so) tricky to get offers from – Imperial, LSE, St Andrew's, Durham, UCL spring to mind. Every year students who gain a place at Oxbridge are turned down by other universities.

Students must be thoughtful about all five equal UCAS University choices. It would be a mistake, for example, to apply for 5 very competitive university courses in a very competitive subject such as Economics or Law.

In the 2020/21 Admissions round, a few universities – most notably Bristol and Exeter – are making BHASVIC students very generous offers, some 2 grades lower than 'the asking price'. Students need to investigate these matters for themselves. It is impossible to give a comprehensive guide to applications to all leading Unis.

Applicants can apply for a deferred place at university, thus allowing for a 'gap year', on the UCAS Form. A large number (several hundred) apply to Uni post A-Level from BHASVIC. This is easy and very well-supported by BHASVIC (see ex-student section of website:

<https://www.bhasvic.ac.uk/ex-students/advice-for-bhasvic-ex-students-on-completing-their-ucas-applications>).

**Students can apply in Yr13 (Autumn 2021) and, if circumstances change etc, re-apply in Autumn 2022.**

### University choices:

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**VIP:** Oxford or Cambridge is merely 1 of 5 equal choices of university – which students apply for through UCAS.

**VIP:** The 5 university choices are not ranked in order of preference – therefore Oxbridge is not the first choice. **When the UCAS form is sent to the 5 chosen universities – the other university choices are redacted – each university does not know where else a student has applied.**

Students are often somewhat prejudiced in their university choices – dismissing places which are “too far away” (yet I know they’d probably take an offer from Harvard!) or what they perceive as ‘quiet/small’ places like St A’s/Exeter/even Cambridge – failing to note that these Unis very often score the best ‘student satisfaction’ scores. It is important to remember that students make the university social life – not the place!

Applicants for Medicine may select 4 Medicine courses and 1 non-medicine course.

**KEY DIFFERENCE:** UCAS expects applications to all universities to be made by 15<sup>th</sup> January 2022 but applications to Oxford or Cambridge, to Medicine and Music Conservatories must reach the relevant institution by 15<sup>th</sup> October 2021

**VIP:** Please be aware that processing some 1200 UCAS applications is a huge task for BHASVIC staff. Therefore, although UCAS deadlines may be 15<sup>th</sup> October and 15<sup>th</sup> January (as above), BHASVIC must set much earlier internal deadlines for submission of Applications – these dates will be provided later, next term, and must be adhered to.

### Widening Participation:

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BHASVIC has an excellent record of securing Oxbridge and other higher tier university offers for Widening Participation students. It is important that students put this on the UCAS form – it will also be stated in the Reference.

The UCAS form allows an applicant to indicate whether they are a Widening Participation student. Oxbridge will pursue this matter further refining the broad WP data in a more targeted way. Students should establish whether they are WP or not in Yr12 – if in doubt message Lynne Trower: [l.trower@bhasvic.ac.uk](mailto:l.trower@bhasvic.ac.uk)

### Course choices:

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**The single most important thing for students to do over the next few months is to settle on the course to be studied. NB not just at Oxbridge but at all 5 university choices.**

At Oxbridge it is vital to explore the full range of courses available. It is simply true to say that it is ‘easier’ to gain an offer for some subjects rather than others – because fewer people apply for a particular course. I urge students to look at courses which deliver a brilliant degree which suits them – but has a ‘different label’ – such as Cambridge’s Education or Oxford’s Materials Science.

**VIP:** Students must not apply for a course at any university if they lack the required GCSE profile or A Level subjects. UCL, for example, usually demands a Modern Language GCSE for Humanities courses; some Psychology courses require GCSE Grade 6+ – check GCSE and A Level requirements very thoroughly. Likewise, be aware of the expectation for Mathematics (Double?) for some courses at Oxbridge, Warwick, Imperial etc.

### OXBRIDGE College choice:

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**KEY DIFFERENCE:** Oxbridge Colleges. College choice used, perhaps, to be a factor in an applicant’s chances of success. It is not anymore. Students and parents/guardians can obsess over College choice – this is unnecessary and unwise. Over 25% of successful Oxbridge applicants gain an offer from a College they did not apply to. I will guide and support applicants in their College choice at the appropriate stage of the process.

**VIP:** If there is one area above all where I wish students would stop stressing, wasting time and energy, College choice is it!

Durham University also uses a College system BUT frankly there is very little point in becoming fixated on a particular college – as Durham just shoves students around without consultation. NB far too many applicants put down University College – if a student wants ‘old and central’ they may do better to apply to another College on the ‘cathedral island’.

### UCAS Personal Statement:

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**VIP:** The applicant writes 1 Personal Statement for your UCAS Form which goes to ALL 5 Universities; therefore it is very, very difficult to apply for very different subjects at different universities.

**KEY DIFFERENCE:** Wrongly – applicants obsess over a Personal Statement for Oxbridge. The PSt may actually matter less for Oxbridge than for other universities – as Oxbridge is going to gather more detail about an applicant – whereas say Bristol only has the UCAS form. Indeed, perhaps the extra focus given to an Oxbridge Personal Statement enhances an applicants’ chances at other universities.

But remember Oxbridge will have the opportunity to interview you over your PSt! Most Humanities applicants are asked something about what they’ve written, whilst the majority of scientists are probably not. A few universities are quite picky over PSts – see LSE guidance by way of example

If a student is in an Oxbridge Tutor Group – ex-BHASVIC students at leading universities will help applicants with the writing of the Personal Statement and also advise on possible College choice, Test preparation and Interview thinking.

**KEY DIFFERENCE:** Cambridge has a separate Cambridge Form which is sent to an applicant as soon as UCAS is sent – and it needs returning by 22<sup>nd</sup> October – called the SAQ. This allows the writing of a short separate PSt tailored to the specifics of a Cambridge course.

There is no requirement to have a slate of exciting extra-curricular activities or work experience for an Oxbridge application (medicine/vet med is an exception here). This is a common myth about Oxbridge and is entirely wrong.

**VIP:** Oxbridge expect ‘super-curricular’ engagement – by which the two universities mean what has an applicant studied/read/thought about etc ‘beyond’ or outside the A Level syllabus. And there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong;’ stuff here – whatever intellectually interests and excites an applicant.

### Exam results/Education:

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**The UCAS form contains full details of your GCSE results. These are judged by universities in the context of the specific exam cohort at the school attended. NB ystudents are not discriminated against if they attended an excellent public school.**

A Level predicted grades do not need to be a complete slate of A\*s. Ideally, they should be broadly in line with the likely grade requirement in any offer. It is important to secure excellent predicted grades in key subjects however – perhaps especially for some Science/Maths-based degrees. ABB, for example, would be problematic for an Oxbridge application (unless there were excellent, unique reasons) whereas AAA is absolutely fine for Humanities degrees. It is important to

remember that there is no point in an applicant securing offers from universities which demand grades which are unachievable.

### References:

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The UCAS Form contains one Reference which goes to all 5 university choices. This Reference is overseen by the Tutor and Guidance Manager and the subject teachers will write a paragraph per subject and give a predicted grade.

### Extenuating Circumstances:

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I believe very strongly that a student's academic track record must be judged in the wider context of their lives – so it is imperative that Universities are made aware of very significant, unique, challenges a few students have faced. These might be, for example, a very disrupted education (not covid related), serious health issues, caring responsibilities etc. I tend to outline these in the Reference but then write individually and confidentially to all five universities a student has chosen.

**KEY DIFFERENCE:** Cambridge has a separate Extenuating Circumstances Form, to be completed by the BHASVIC Tutor and sent to the relevant Cambridge College by 22<sup>nd</sup> October.

### Tests:

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**VIP:** Some Universities demand that applicants take a formal Test before the application is considered – this is, at the moment, in Mathematics and Law.

Students must investigate this fully for themselves as the list is not fixed – for example Durham/Warwick/Lancaster/ Imperial – demand a Maths test and there are various Maths tests. All students seriously considering applying for Maths at Uni, of a Maths-heavy degree should seriously consider participating in 'Maths Step & Stretch' run by Tarquin in the Maths Dept.

**VIP:** Law applicants – several leading Law courses demand that applicants sit the LNAT. Again, students must check this – as the list changes – but several of the most popular destinations require LNAT – Bristol and UICL for example. The LNAT cannot be taken at BHASVIC – students must book this independently through the Pearson website. Oxford requires LNAT too, this must be sat by a specific date.

The Maths tests mentioned above and all the other Tests required by Oxford and Cambridge can be taken at BHASVIC – usually the first week in November. Students are responsible for booking the required and the correct test with BHASVIC exams dept. The Tests (with the exception of LNAT) must be booked with BHASVIC Exams before 1<sup>st</sup> October. They are taken in BHASVIC – usually the first week in November.

**KEY DIFFERENCE:** a majority of Oxbridge courses require the taking of an Admissions Test. Students must be responsible for booking the correct Test!

Oxford and Cambridge argue keenly that no new material needs to be learnt for these Tests (indeed Humanities Tests are not essentially knowledge-based at all). The Tests require application of existing knowledge and understanding in new scenarios/situations etc – flexibility of thought etc

However, as with all Exams/Tests – knowing how the paper is structured, understanding time constraints, getting used to specific style of questions - means that 'having a few go's' is a good

idea. For example, the TSA used by several Oxford courses is very much about timing. There are plenty of past papers available online.

Some subjects require (in pre-covid times) an “at interview” Test.

It is completely unnecessary to begin thinking about any required Test until the summer break – and then the occasional but also regular ‘look’. Just try a couple of past papers in timed conditions in the Autumn.

### Interviews:

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**In pre-covid times – an increasing number of leading universities were introducing some form of interview or compulsory open day attendance. Few of these were academically challenging with the very notable exception of Imperial.**

Applicants for Medicine/Vet Med are very likely to be interviewed at all the Medical Schools they apply to. Architecture and Fine Art applicants are expected to put together a portfolio of work.

**KEY DIFFERENCE:** every successful Oxbridge applicant will have been interviewed. It is very important to note that an increasing number of applicants are not offered an interview. In the end this is due to numbers – Oxbridge cannot interview everyone. Oxbridge will use all the information they have about an applicant to ‘sieve’. The more competitive the course the less likely it is that an applicant will be interviewed. And so most Classicists are interviewed, whereas PPE applicants may be de-selected pre-interview.

**VIP:** Oxbridge interviews are not a performance – style, wit, charisma etc are not required or expected or wanted. An Oxbridge interview is an academic conversation. Interview preparation is generally unnecessary, interview ‘training’ is disastrous. Interviewers want an open, thoughtful responsive mind to talk with – not a pre-prepared, coached closed mind. Of course, the whole experience can be challenging – but it is not designed to catch students out, it is not really a knowledge test – it is about thinking and listening and articulating perceptions/arguments etc.

### Outcomes:

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**Universities can make offers as soon as they receive a UCAS application. Each year many students have a clutch of offers before December.** However, there is no pattern to this – some universities are very much slower. All universities have until the end of March to respond to a UCAS application (covid has altered these timeframes somewhat). And so, as I write this in the third week of March, many of my tutees have received all their university decisions; but other are still waiting to hear from universities. St Andrew’s, Edinburgh and LSE are always very slow to respond. Medicine applications take a long time to process.

**KEY DIFFERENCE:** Unlike other universities – Oxford and Cambridge are clear as to when offers will be made – a date in the second or third week of January.

**VIP:** At the end of the UCAS process applicants may keep **a Firm and an Insurance choice.** This has to be finalised by the end of May of the A2 year.

Ideally the Insurance choice has lower grade requirements than the Firm. But this is not always possible. Universities like Bristol and Exeter are making such generous offers to BHASVIC students that these offers may be the lowest received and yet the Firm choice. Oxford’s Humanities offers of AAA may mean it is the lowest offer received for a subject like Law.

Most years a BHASVIC student who has gained an Oxbridge offer decides not to take it but to go to Edinburgh or Exeter or somewhere. This is absolutely fine. Oxbridge is merely 1 of 5 equal university choices.

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I wish to end with the text of a kind email I received regarding an Oxbridge application this academic year. Whilst it unnecessarily says 'nice things' by way of thanks – the key points I have put in bold – this parent has 'got it', understanding the BHASVIC approach to Oxbridge:

*This is a rather belated 'thank you' email, but a heartfelt one. I really just wanted to say thank you for all of your help, support and encouragement over the course of the latest round of Oxbridge applications. My son and I have been so grateful for your guidance, and particularly for **the gentle, stress-free approach**. We have both really appreciated your breadth and depth of knowledge and experience of the whole process and also for **keeping the whole thing in perspective and not letting it be the 'be all and end all'**. I think all of this helped make it an enjoyable and interesting experience for X, and made him feel that he was glad he had done it whatever the outcome may have been. We were though, of course, thoroughly delighted when he received an offer from XYZ! The course looks a perfect fit for him and he is very excited about the prospect of being able to take up his place. (I know **he particularly valued the input from previous BHASVIC students at Oxford - they were so helpful, informative and encouraging**. It is a testament to BHASVIC and yourself that ex students are so happy to help and mentor the next cohort of potential students.)*

If students and/or parents/guardians have any queries arising from these notes – please just email me: [n.commin@bhasvic.ac.uk](mailto:n.commin@bhasvic.ac.uk)

Neil Commin