

Getting into Oxford or Cambridge

(If you're not already familiar with what entry to Higher Education in general entails, it's advisable first to read this website's article ['University Applications: Everything a Parent Needs to Know'](#)).

This article is aimed at giving you and your son/daughter enough information to assess whether pursuing a place at Oxford or Cambridge is likely to be worthwhile, in terms of their academic potential and their happiness.

Oxford and Cambridge deservedly enjoy great repute and can confidently be placed in the world's top 10 universities. Each consists of about 30 colleges, the earliest dating from the 13th Century, though some were founded only recently. The towns of which they are part are commonly thought fascinating and very attractive.

For every place on undergraduate courses, there are on average 5 or 6 applicants. Admission is based solely on academic potential, and most entrants are from the state sector, not private education. The gender balance of each university is very close to 50% male, and 50% female. Applications from ethnic minority and disadvantaged students are strongly encouraged.

Offers vary with the college, but if your son/daughter's institution expects them to gain AAA grades at A-level, (or equivalent) they are effectively 'in the running'. Their initial preparations must include

- a) identifying the degree course they want to study,
- b) establishing sound reasons and evidence for this choice, and
- c) learning how to communicate both to rigorous selectors.

Applications for Oxford and Cambridge (hereafter termed 'Oxbridge') undergraduate courses must be made by 15th October of the year before intended entry. For most students, this means either

- a) a lot of preparatory work so as to apply early in Year 13 (any offer then still depending on grades), or
- b) after A-levels, with grades in hand (offers then normally being unconditional).

Except for Organ Scholarships, YOU CANNOT APPLY TO BOTH INSTITUTIONS.

Applying in Year 13 means doing extra reading and research, work experience, and completing external tests and supplementary questionnaires, all while sustaining an impressive academic record. The remaining 4 university choices must be made, too, and the UCAS form (with Personal Statement and teachers' references) should also be completed by 15th October. No-one should attempt this unless very able academically, thoroughly organised, used to meeting deadlines, and not given to anxiety.

Oxbridge terms last 8 weeks, 2 less than other universities, but this entails more intense study. Part of it takes the form of what are called 'tutorials' at Oxford, and 'supervisions' at Cambridge. These consist of discussions with the tutor about an academic topic or assignment, either one-to-one, or with a very few other students. They offer no 'hiding-place' to the under-prepared.

Oxbridge looks for applicants who are captivated by their chosen subject, rather than (merely) very good at it. They seek evidence of this initially on the Personal Statement, then during any interview(s). They expect candidates to have read well beyond the A-level syllabus, and be conversant with some of the major issues and problems which the subject tries to address. Selectors welcome responses to their questions which show a willingness to debate, and readiness to defend stated opinions. It's not unusual, though, for them to award a place to a candidate whose interview performance was far from perfect.

You apply to a college of your choice, rather than the university itself. Given the number, this maybe a recipe for a headache, but judging each on size, age, and architecture alone may help considerably. Every college has at least one Open Day, usually in the Spring or early Summer, and viewing more than one on a single visit may be possible. Some let you stroll round at almost any time, and each has its own prospectus and website. Alas, no colleges are 'easier' to enter than others.

Should these resources leave your son/daughter still lacking a preference, they needn't despair. Instead, they should make an Open Application. This has a slightly different meaning at Oxford than at Cambridge, but in essence the university selects a college for them. There is no stigma attached to this, and many applicants turned-down by this 'allocated' college have gained offers via the 'pooling' system.

For certain subjects (e.g. Medicine) specific work experience is vital, and for vocational ones generally, variety, as well as relevance, counts for a lot. Wherever possible, placements should be sought not weeks, but months in advance, as even organisations keen to support may have restricted schedules, or been approached by several other students. The more specialised the experience hoped-for, the earlier the request should be made.

Anyone truly interested in their chosen subject will have explored it beyond the A-level syllabus, but the reading list each Oxbridge faculty features on its website shouldn't be overlooked. It conveys the range of topics a degree course might cover, and helps applicants wishing to become knowledgeable on an area which attracts them.

Both universities hold admissions tests for most subjects, normally at the end of October. Courses like Medicine and Law also entail an external aptitude test, also usually at about this time.

On receiving their UCAS form, Cambridge will send your son/daughter its Supplementary Application Questionnaire (SAQ). Most of its 8 sections request information that he/she will know, or can easily obtain. Oxford has no such form, but the relevant college will be in touch soon should it need any fuller detail.

If your son/daughter gained a place at Oxford or Cambridge, no doubt you'd be very proud, it would underline their school/college's status, and their own educational and career prospects would seem rosy. However, none of this guarantees they would be happy there. Fortunately, much more information (including the impressions of current or recent students) designed to help them decide, is readily available, and a book entitled 'Getting into Oxford and Cambridge', published by MPW/Trotman and updated every year, offers a thorough and impartial treatment of the whole subject.

Applicants who've been unsuccessful receive a letter to that effect during December or January. If your son/daughter is among them, they'll need time to get over this undoubted disappointment before considering whether to try again. If they've completed A-levels, a further attempt may not merit the accompanying delayed start to Higher Education. However, pre-A-level applications demand so much that a (relatively unencumbered) second 'shot' may well be worth it, but an honest appraisal by all concerned should be the first step.

It's worth noting that (literally) thousands of well-qualified Oxbridge applicants each year end up being happy and successful at another university.

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