

MILL HILL SCHOOL

Introductory Notes on applying to Oxford or Cambridge University

How Oxford and Cambridge differ from other universities.

Oxford and Cambridge are two of the most internationally renowned universities in the world. They offer some of the most stimulating and challenging academic environments and they therefore also have some of the most demanding academic entry requirements. The **structure of both universities is collegiate** (i.e. there are Colleges, where you are based and have your tutorials, and Departments where formal lectures etc. take place). The Departments are represented by academic staff in the Colleges. Not every subject is available in every College – larger ones will have a larger range of subjects represented, but may feel rather impersonal. Smaller ones may feel friendlier. It is generally sensible to apply to a College which has a Tutor in your subject.

The **range and style of subjects** offered at Oxford and Cambridge tends to be strongly traditional and academic rather than practical and directly relevant to a future career. The courses are often geared more towards researchers than to practitioners (e.g. engineering, medicine). This means that some subjects which are offered at many other universities are not offered at Oxford or Cambridge. However, they are changing, and you need to do your research carefully.

The **Cambridge** degree structure is called a *tripos*, but is in two parts. Part One forms your first year and Part Two occupies your second and third years. It is possible to take one subject for your Part One and then change to something completely different for your Part Two. Clearly there are some restrictions to this – e.g. you can't do a Law Part One followed by a Medicine Part Two – but it does allow significant flexibility. The Science course at Cambridge is unusual; all science students read 'Natural Sciences' and will study a flexible combination of the experimental sciences, rather than one individual science subject.

Oxford, on the other hand, has more combinations of subjects than Cambridge – e.g. Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE); Psychology, Philosophy and Physiology (PPP); Engineering, Economics and Management (EEM); Physics and Philosophy.

Oxford and Cambridge set an extremely high academic standard of entry for all of its courses. Courses which are particularly tough to get on to at both universities are Law, Medicine, Economics, English and (at Oxford) PPE. Engineering and less high profile subjects such as Classics are less competitive numerically, but are still tough to get into.

Colleges vary greatly in size and character. Some are traditional, some are modern; some are large and perhaps a bit impersonal, others are small and friendly; some are very central and visited by tourists, some are less central but more peaceful; some will have outstanding sports facilities, in others these will be more modest. Most are mixed, but there are a few women's colleges. Read prospectuses and visit some to judge which appeals more to you. The School also has information on which Colleges have accepted Millhillians in recent years, and for which subjects; this may give useful indicators to where your 'face might fit'.

The Application Procedure

All the information you will need is also available on the universities' **websites**; these are undoubtedly the easiest way to obtain information. The websites are www.cam.ac.uk and www.ox.ac.uk. Oxford and Cambridge both produce their own prospectuses; these provide a lot of information about the Colleges, the courses and the applications and selection process. In addition, the Colleges and the departments also produce prospectuses, so there is a lot to read! Your starting point should be the University handbook. **You must start reading these now if you are serious about investigating further an Oxbridge application.**

When you apply, you can either express a preference for a particular College or you can make an Open Application, which means that your application will be forwarded to a College with a more favourable applications-to-places ratio. You are advised to express a preference for a College; the Director of Sixth Form will help you make your choice. However, the School avoids submitting two applications for the same course at the same College; this is to maximise your chances. Thus all applications must be approved by the Director of Sixth Form.

Applications to Oxford & Cambridge (along with all your other UCAS applications) must reach the institutions by 15th October. Your Oxbridge application counts as one of your applications on your UCAS form. Cambridge will also require you to complete a 'Cambridge Questionnaire' online, in place of the old additional Cambridge additional application form. Cambridge sends you all the relevant instructions to complete this online upon receipt of your UCAS application. You are also required to upload a digital photograph of yourself as part of this online procedure. Oxford at present does not require an additional questionnaire, although that may change.

Interviews at both universities are held from early December onwards (occasionally slightly earlier). There are formal entrance examinations, but it is likely that you may also be asked to submit samples of your work or to take a short written test during the interview period. Checking the websites for 'additional admissions tests' is advised, so that you are fully prepared. Oxford requires these tests to be sat prior to interview, whereas Cambridge requires these tests to be sat at interview. You in theory cannot prepare for these tests, as they are generally testing skills that are endemic to A Level study. You can however be fully briefed on what you will encounter by looking at the test websites which contain past papers etc. (refer to your HE booklet given out by LHS which contains details of these tests and relevant web addresses). You must also prepare some pieces of work in case they are required (again, check the web site & entry requirements for your course) of the highest quality, in consultation with your subject teachers. A simply 'good' piece of work will NOT do!

Decisions are made in late December/early January and sent out by early January. Those who have been unsuccessful in their application, but whom their College thought were strong candidates nevertheless may be 'pooled', which means that their application may be looked at by any other College which has unfilled places in that course.

Should you consider applying?

It is very difficult indeed to get an offer of a place at Oxford or Cambridge. The competition is intense and the standard is extremely high – much higher than you imagine. You must be realistic about this. Having high A level grade predictions is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for an Oxbridge applicant. In other words, being a pupil with high grade predictions does NOT automatically make you a realistic Oxbridge candidate. You need to be able to

demonstrate exceptional intellectual flair and curiosity, to be able to think, analyse and explore beyond the narrow bounds of your AS/A2 syllabus. **Cambridge expect 90% across your UMS marks at AS to be considered for interview and are using the A* in offers at A Level. Oxford is also using the A* in the offer made.**

You must take advice from the School on whether it is worth your while making an application; to do so against the School's advice will be unrealistic and may be counter-productive. You need to be an AAA* candidate at A level – start asking your teachers now. Admissions tutors will also be expecting to see GCSE results of around a minimum of 7 A*'s and 3 A's and 4 A's at AS level with 90% across your UMS marks. If you achieve less than this, you are unlikely to be offered an interview as there will be many better qualified, applicants. However, if you do achieve this, it doesn't mean that you automatically have a good chance of getting an offer of a place. If you don't understand why not, please re-read the previous paragraph of this section!

If you are a realistic candidate, then the School will give you all the information, advice and support it can. You will get help from the relevant academic departments here, as well as regular meetings with a senior member of staff, who will help you to arrange visits, plan appropriate work experience, make an appropriate choice of subject and College, get interview practice and so on.

Why not just 'have a go anyway, and see what happens'?

Both Oxford and Cambridge interview a high proportion of their applicants. This is exceptionally careful treatment, and extremely time-consuming for them. The people who conduct the interviews are outstanding academics. To 'have a go anyway' is likely to be a waste of their time and of one of your five UCAS applications. You need to be sensible and take advice from those who know and have experience of the Oxbridge applications system.

UCAS Point/Grade Offers Made

Offers will normally be AAA* for Cambridge & Oxford. This equates to 380 UCAS points. In a few subjects (e.g. Mathematics) Cambridge offers additionally require an Advanced Extension Examination grade or a STEP grade (Sixth Term Entrance Paper - Cambridge's own examination, sat at the end of the Upper Sixth at the same time as A2 exams).

Advice from Cambridge University relating to your A level Courses

The advice in this section is supplied by Cambridge University.

Number of A level subjects studied at Cambridge

In response to a query about *the need for a fourth A level*, Dr Mike Sewell (Chairman of the Cambridge Admissions Forum) replied on behalf of the Forum collectively as follows:

- their general view is that three academic/traditional and relevant subjects at A level are usually quite sufficient to show the width of an applicant's interests and their ability to manage a range of differing complex academic tasks
- for Arts and Social Sciences courses they are much keener that applicants show broader and deeper knowledge of their chosen subject (or those closest to it if a 'new' subject) rather than accumulating extra A levels

- if students have a genuine interest (and can sustain high quality work) in more than three A levels they clearly have no objection to them pursuing these – but they are not usually going to require that they do
- they would certainly expect students taking 3 A Levels to demonstrate at interview and in their personal statement that they have extended their studies beyond those three subjects.

In the case of students applying for *mathematical and science subjects*, the academic value of taking four A levels is clearer. The Forum:

- would not wish to put off an applicant offering, say, three sciences plus maths for their science-based courses and would very actively encourage all applicants in Physical Natural Sciences, Computer Science, Engineering, Chemical Engineering and Mathematics to take Further Maths if available
- would wish to see how else students might improve and develop their mathematical knowledge and skills (if Further Maths is not available) according to the advice offered on both the University of Cambridge Engineering and Mathematics Faculties websites. (At some schools this may involve taking AS Further Maths even when the full A level cannot be resourced. Further Maths is also of real value for Economists).

Regarding *Further Maths*, this is viewed separately from the above as, in many ways, it is effectively not a fourth, distinct A level, but grows out of work done for A level maths. The situation is as follows:

- where schools cannot provide more, Cambridge will accept the thinner diet of Maths, Further Maths and Physics as a possible A2 combination, but with reservations. (It is not an ideal preparation for Physical Natural Sciences, given the breadth of the Tripos)
- they would expect students taking only those three A levels to be broadening or deepening their studies in some way; in the case of Maths applicants, this might mean preparing for STEP
- many Engineers, as well as Natural Scientists, would argue the same – certainly budding Chemical Engineers must have Chemistry – and the breadth of the Engineering Tripos means that there are several other A levels (Electronics, the more academic varieties of Design Technology, Computer Science) that would better prepare a student than just a diet of Maths, Further Maths and Physics
- in the biological sciences, a pattern of four sciences A levels including maths, but not necessarily Further Maths, could also be considered a good preparation for these courses.

Useful Website on Admissions to Oxford and Cambridge

www.oxbridge-admissions.info

This website has been set up by an ex-Bootham School student who studied at Cambridge. It is designed to help applicants navigate their way through applications to Oxbridge. Pupils considering applying for Oxford or Cambridge are advised to consult it.

What you can do if you're unsuccessful

Don't panic. Plenty of very strong candidates are unsuccessful every year– there simply aren't enough places to go around. Being rejected doesn't mean you weren't very good – just that

there were other candidates whose application/tests/interviews were stronger than yours.

Continue with your applications to other universities, and if you get offers, ACCEPT one of your other offers and then wait until you get your A level results.

Work as hard as possible from then until June to try to get AAA* at A level.

If you get at least AAA* at A level and you still wish to apply to Oxbridge, you should:

- contact the School and discuss your plans with Miss Sharples, Director of Sixth Form.
- contact the university whose offer you have qualified for and see if they are willing to defer their offer for a year
- notify UCAS that you will not be taking up a place that October
- re-apply to Oxbridge and 5 other universities as a post A level candidate

What happens now?

Heads of Department, Housemasters/mistresses and Tutors will be consulted to get a clearer picture of which pupils are realistic Oxbridge applicants and which are not. Each of those pupils who have expressed an interest in Oxbridge and any who have not yet considered it but whose teachers feel have the academic and personal strengths to do so will then be advised individually.

You should visit the university websites: www.cam.ac.uk and www.ox.ac.uk.

You should discuss your plans with your teachers and Tutor. You should read 'Getting into Oxford and Cambridge' (published by Trotman), the Oxford and Cambridge prospectuses, 'Degree Course Offers' (written by Brian Heap) and other relevant reference literature available in the Careers Library. The reference books can also be bought at most bookshops.

Strengthen your academic work as much as possible, For example:

- read more books
- read relevant professional journals
- look for relevant research work published on the internet
- discuss aspects of your A level subjects in detail with your teachers
- develop special areas of interest in your subject and research them
- read newspapers and collect articles which may be relevant to the subject you wish to study (e.g. legal cases)
- get as much relevant work experience as you can, and write it up carefully and analytically

It is essential that by the end of this academic year you have an excellent set of school reports and that your AS examinations results are AAAA. Even one single weak result may significantly reduce your chances. Getting into Oxbridge will take a great deal of sustained effort, and you will need to have shown both academic excellence and strong personal qualities of self motivation, co-operation, imagination, determination etc.

Three years spent at Oxford or Cambridge offer exceptional opportunities which you will value for the rest of your life. If you and the School believe that you are a strong candidate, then we would encourage you to apply. But before you do, make sure that you <u>are</u> a realistic candidate,

and that the course for which you apply is right for you.

LHS February 12.