



# Applying to Oxbridge

## What You Need to Know

2020 Entry



Higher Education



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# 1 | Oxbridge Preparation at Downe House

## Our Ethos

Downe House encourages and supports all pupils in seeking to fulfil their academic potential and to aspire to the highest possible standards of achievement. We endeavour to guide each girl to the university which will best cater to her abilities, interests, career aspirations, and learning style. For some, this will be Oxford or Cambridge, universities of world-class reputation, which are committed to taking the most able students irrespective of background. It should be remembered, however, that Oxford and Cambridge are not necessarily the best universities for the study of every subject.

Both universities have a distinctive style of teaching, which involves a more intensive form of tuition, often individual or in small groups. The universities are looking for students with an inherent interest in and enthusiasm for their chosen course, with the ability to think critically and independently, and with a willingness to argue logically whilst keeping an open mind to new ideas. Self-discipline, motivation and commitment are the hallmarks of a student who will thrive in this environment. It is important that potential candidates realise that academic success in public examinations is not, in itself, sufficient reason to apply for Oxbridge, nor will it ensure acceptance. Nationally, about 20% of applications result in the offer of a place and almost all of those who are unsuccessful have top grades at GCSE, A- level, Pre-U or their equivalent.

Application requires very careful thought, therefore, and a focused effort for a sustained period of time. It is one of the most rewarding and exciting intellectual experiences, even if it does not result in an offer, but it can bring a degree of disappointment – and, statistically, many will be disappointed. A sense of perspective is needed; Oxford and Cambridge by no means hold a monopoly on future success and happiness.

## The Process

It has always been the policy to allow girls to put themselves forward as candidates rather than the school selecting those whom it considers suitable candidates, and our overall approach is one of encouragement. Nevertheless, it is desirable that Heads of Oxbridge Applications should advise students as to whether their application is realistic, and ultimately to make a representation to the Headmistress if they feel strongly that an individual should not apply. Allowing an application to proceed if there is little chance of success would be unfair to the student concerned. Heads of Department have access to baseline data which may have a bearing on the girl's ability to cope with the level of understanding required at Oxbridge, and to be able to identify those who are genuinely in the desirable top 2% of ability nationally. In reality, the decision is taken after consultation between the pupil, her teachers and her parents or guardians, and it is hoped that all those involved are happy with the decision to apply as wholehearted and comprehensive support is needed during what will be a demanding and rewarding process.

The School's entrance examinations and scholarships may well have identified the most academically talented pupils at an early age, and the School's More Able programme provides many opportunities for these pupils to extend and enhance their knowledge. Yet, pupils mature at different rates. Lectures, enrichment activities and taster courses are provided, and Oxford and Cambridge are increasingly welcoming visits from UV and even LV pupils. Consideration is also given to Oxbridge applicants in the UV at the stage when Sixth Form subjects are chosen to avoid problems with course requirements but these same considerations will apply to most university courses and the Higher Education department will offer the best overall advice.

Parents who attend the LVI parents' meeting are keen to ask about the Oxbridge process and the H.E. Guidance team will be on hand to make parents aware of current information regarding choice of University and deferred entry. The Oxbridge team has a number of important responsibilities, not least of which is to establish and maintain relations with both universities, and to keep abreast of changes in application procedure and requirement.

When students have decided, keeping all of the above in mind, that an Oxbridge application is the right course of action for them they will be assigned an academic mentor in their chosen subject. This mentor will meet the girl weekly on an individual basis in order to guide them through the subject-specific demands of the application, such as preparation for Entrance Tests or submission of written work. However, and perhaps even more importantly, the mentor will help to broaden and deepen the student's understanding of their subject. Our ultimate aim is to extend, enrich and challenge the minds of our girls at an academic level beyond Sixth Form and it happens that Oxbridge often naturally follows on from this overarching ethos.

## How to Use This Guide

The purpose of this guide is to provide you, the applicant, with all the information that you might need in order to apply for Oxbridge. This includes deciding whether Oxbridge is right for you in the first instance to the preparation that will need to take place for the UCAS application itself and then finally onto the interview.

This guide should be used as a constant point of reference throughout the entirety of the application process in conjunction with the expert advice offered by your subject mentor and the Higher Education team. **The creation of this guide stems from the simple assumption that if you know exactly what the application process demands then you will, by that fact alone, be enhancing your potential for success.**

## 2 | Why Oxbridge?

Whilst hugely rewarding, an application to Oxbridge is also, without doubt, time consuming and often stressful. As such, it is important that before embarking on this journey you are positive that it is the right decision for you. In this section of the guide, we will explore some of the reasons why so many people decide to apply to Oxbridge whilst also discussing whether or not you are right for Oxbridge. As two of the most competitive universities in the world, Oxford and Cambridge are highly selective and as such a lot of those who apply simply do not fit the profile, whether that is in regards to academic disposition or grades. Knowing what the entry requirements are, and whether you meet them, is an important first step in your application process.

### Is Oxbridge Right for Me?

Perhaps the primary reason that Oxbridge is so oversubscribed is because, quite simply, both universities are consistently **ranked at the top of the university league tables**. Both in terms of teaching excellence and academic research, the two institutions regularly come in first and second place in the various available university ranking systems. If you are a budding academic who wants to be taught by people at the cutting-edge of their discipline, then Oxbridge is for you. Oxford and Cambridge are, and have been for centuries, at the intellectual heart of this country: they are scholarly powerhouses and for those with a studious bent there is no greater environment.

Part of what makes both Oxbridge and Cambridge such wonderful academic institutions is their **tutorial system** (known as supervisions at Cambridge). Aside from a handful of other institutions, they are the only universities in the country that employ this system. A tutorial involves meeting with a tutor on an individual basis or with one or two other students and will often last one hour. You will often discuss in detail an essay or some work that you produced in the preceding week. What makes this so special is that you have personal access to some of the top academics in your discipline and you are able to debate and discuss ideas that interest you with them. This hallmark of an Oxbridge education suits those students who are independent-minded and willing to work hard and be challenged by their tutors.

However, not everyone likes this style of teaching and that is absolutely fine, but if you do not then it probably means that an Oxbridge application is not right for you. In fact, the interview itself is designed to replicate an average tutorial: they want to see how to cope with this Socratic style and whether or not you enjoy it. After all, this is how you will be taught for the next three or four years and if you dislike it then that doesn't bode well for the admissions tutor.

Another factor that makes Oxbridge so attractive is their **collegiate system**. Both Oxford and Cambridge are comprised of a number of individual colleges, which are independent, self-governing communities of academics and students. Whilst it is the central university that sets the standards of teaching across the entire institution and it is the central university that awards the degree, the college is where you live and it is where you have tutorials. Each college also has its own library and facilities in addition to the Departmental ones across the city. Thus, the college is the central hub for your university experience. The main benefit to a collegiate system is that you belong both to a large, internationally renowned institution and a smaller academic community.

Whilst Oxbridge no longer subscribes to the ‘Old Boy’s’ ethos that it once did, it would be disingenuous to say that **the people you will meet** do not form a distinct benefit to an Oxbridge education, both at a personal and professional level. Given that it is so competitive, both Oxford and Cambridge attract students of the highest calibre and as such you will be keeping company with future lawyers, judges, MPs, and CEOs. There is a reason that despite there being over 120 universities in the UK almost all of our Prime Ministers came from either Oxford or Cambridge. In addition to this, there will be plenty of opportunity to discuss various intellectual topics with your newfound friends and you will be sure to find the company intellectually stimulating. Again, if you are of an academic disposition and you enjoy learning for the sake of learning then there can be no better place than Oxford or Cambridge.

Also, perhaps contrary to popular belief, both Oxford and Cambridge provide ample opportunity for recreation whether that be punting down the river, joining a society, or socialising in the Junior Common Room (JCR).

Finally, a distinct advantage has to be the **location** itself. Both Oxford and Cambridge are ancient cities that are beautiful places to work and live. However, there are some differences in terms of character between the two. Cambridge is much smaller than Oxford with the colleges being closer together whilst Oxford is far more spaced apart and feels more like a city.

Therefore, to summarise, some of the main reasons that make Oxbridge an attractive place to study are:

- Its academic reputation and prowess
- The tutorial system
- The collegiate system
- The people you will meet
- The location

## Am I Right for Oxbridge?

Whilst it is true that there is no longer a ‘typical’ Oxbridge student, there are still some attributes that most, if not all, successful candidates share. Oxbridge applicants will be intellectually curious, committed to deepening their knowledge of subjects that they enjoy, find exploring new problems and unfamiliar scenarios stimulating, and they will have a flexible mind. They will also, more generally, be independent thinkers, resilient, and resourceful. The question becomes, then, how do Oxbridge assess to what extent you possess the above characteristics? Aside from various Entrance Tests, references, the personal statement, submission of written work, super-curricular activities, and the interview (all of which will be discussed in detail later), Oxbridge have set **entry requirements** that help them to narrow down an already very competitive field. It is worth noting, though, that both institutions stress that they take a holistic approach to applications and so the below entry requirements are only one aspect of many, as is the interview and the Entrance Test.

### GCSE Grades: What do you need?

In order to widen access and to be as fair as possible, Oxbridge considers what they label contextual data when looking at GCSE grades. In short, they expect someone from a top independent school such as Downe House to do considerably better than someone from a struggling state school. **In practice, this means that to be competitive you will need to have 8 to 12 GCSEs, around 7 to 8 of which will need to be A\*. As a general rule, the more A\* grades the better.** Oxbridge currently consider the Grade 8 to be equivalent to A\* and whilst Grade 9s are preferable one would not need these across the board to remain competitive.

### A-Level / Pre-U: What do you need?

Oxford University makes conditional offers for students studying A-Levels between A\*A\*A and AAA. For humanities the offers tend to be AAA and for the sciences it tends to be A\*AA, with some sciences and Mathematics being A\*A\*A. **However, in reality, the vast majority of students who go on to gain a place at Oxford do have A\*A\*A or above** across the range of courses offered. For example, in 2017 only 7.3% of successful applicants had AAA with over 70% having A\*A\*A or above. For Pre-U, offers are usually made based on a D3 being an A and a D2 being an A\*.

Cambridge University makes conditional offers for students studying A-Levels between A\*A\*A and A\*AA. The former is generally offered for those applying to the sciences whilst the latter is made for those applying to the humanities and psychological and behavioural sciences. **As with Oxford, though, the vast majority of students who go on to gain a place at Cambridge will have A\*A\*A irrespective of offer.** For example, a total of 85% of successful applicants had A\*A\*A or better in 2017. Cambridge sometimes also have a tendency to alter their required grades based on other factors, such as, predicted grades. For example, whilst a minimum offer might be A\*A\*A, it is feasible they could require A\*A\*A\*A. Oxford tend not to alter their offers in this manner.

In both instances, the more A\* grades the better and this is why taking a fourth subject is often not advisable. Oxbridge are quite clear that they only require three subjects and what they are most interested in is depth of understanding and so A\*A\*A always beats AAAA or even A\*AAA. **Grades below AAA will almost certainly not be accepted at either university.**

### EPQ: Do you need one?

Both Oxford and Cambridge welcome the EPQ, but neither will ever use it as part of their official offer. In this respect, it does not replace an A-Level. However, it does provide a framework in which to move beyond the syllabus, which is essential for an Oxbridge applicant and it also demonstrates independence and fosters research skills. It may also be discussed at interview. **As such, the EPQ can be a valuable addition to your overall application, but only if it provides you with an opportunity to deepen your understanding of the subject that you wish to apply to.**

## 3 | The Early Stages of Preparation

If we were to try to pinpoint the two most important characteristics that you will need to demonstrate in order to be successful then it would be: 1) a deep enthusiasm for your chosen subject, and 2) an ability to discuss and explore ideas and concepts beyond the scope of your syllabus and above the level of your peers. Simply put, Oxford and Cambridge are looking for students who love their subject and are deeply committed to it and who demonstrate this commitment by moving well beyond the school syllabus in an intelligent and perceptive manner. But, how do you do this?

NB: Please find in Appendix 1 a full timeline in regards to an Oxbridge application covering both L6 and U6 in order to situate what we mean by 'The Early Stages of Preparation'.

### Read, Read, Read!

**We simply cannot overstate the importance of reading around your subject and beyond the syllabus.** There is no better demonstration of commitment than this. If you read around your subject and if you go beyond what is being taught in the classroom, then you are showing the admissions tutor that you are passionate and dedicated in addition to deepening your understanding of the subject in the first instance. **If the thought of sitting in your room and quietly ploughing through a book or a series of equations simply for the fun of it appears boring or unappealing to you then it is highly likely that Oxbridge is not the place for you.** You need to be excited by the prospect of reading around your subject and you need to be independent enough to get out and do it!

Whilst we know how very important sport and music are to students at Downe, these things will not get you into Oxbridge as, unfortunately, their standardised entry matrix does not include these activities. If you are truly committed to an Oxbridge application, then your priority must always be your academic pursuits.

### Recommended Reading List

It is all well and good telling you to read, but how do you know *what* to read? Your first port of call should be your department. Go and ask your teacher what they recommend you read. Perhaps they have a favourite book that they can suggest and then talk to you about? Speak to your subject specific mentor also and ask them for suggestions. It might also be that there is a topic that you are studying that you find especially interesting: speak to your teachers and mentors to find other books not on the syllabus that relate to that topic. It is exactly this kind of motivation and independence that Oxbridge wants to see. There is also a general reading list that covers several subjects and topics available from the Head of Oxbridge Admissions. Go and pick it up and then read some of what is on there!

You might also consider an online subscription to, for example, *Geography Review*, *Nature*, *New Scientist*, *Scientific American*, *The National Geographic*, *The English Review*, *Student BMJ*, *Biological Sciences*, *The Economist*. Again, speak to your mentor to discuss what might be useful in your subject area. This also goes for listening to podcasts and TED talks and reading around your subject in the press.

The University of Oxford also has a fantastic online reading list for almost all of the subjects that it offers, which are applicable for Cambridge also. It is available at the following website: <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/courses/suggested-reading-and-resources?wssl=1>

Undertaking a MOOC (online course) is also an excellent and highly valuable way to supplement your reading. Explore respected sites such as FutureLearn, Coursera, EdX, Khan Academy or Unifrog to see what MOOCs are available in the relevant academic areas.

**In order to get the most out of your reading, you should keep a reading log and each time you read a book make a note of the author, the title of the book, its main arguments and ideas, how this enriched your understanding of the subject, and a couple of specific quotations.** You should do this also for any articles, podcasts or MOOCs you have engaged with. This will be a fantastic resource for when you come to prepare for interview or write your personal statement.

## The Library

Another fantastic resource for extending your subject knowledge is, of course, the library and the Murray Centre more generally. In addition to its wealth of reading material, Downe House also subscribes to the Library Reference Centre, which is a searchable database of academic journals and books. We are also subscribed to JSTOR, which is an online repository of thousands of academic articles. **Search for a topic that you are interested in and read a couple of articles being sure to note them in your reading log.** A word of caution though: JSTOR tends to have mostly older articles and so for certain subjects, mainly science, reading out of date articles may in fact be counterproductive. Just be careful of this and if in doubt speak to your mentor.

Both JSTOR and the Library Reference Centre are available via the Library's site on Elaine.

## Subject Events and Super-curricular Activities

We won't say too much about this now, since you will be contacted via email about the various events and workshops that are organised through the Higher Education team. However, it is worth noting that you should be taking advantage of things such as subject taster days and essay competitions. You will receive a super-curricular (a term used to designate specifically academic extra-curricular activities) newsletter from the Higher Education department and this will outline some of things that you might want to sign up to. Do take notice of this as it is exactly the kind of thing that will help you to stand out.

We are also including under this general heading the various academic clubs and societies that are organised by school departments. Try to attend these if they are on offer as this will give you a perfect opportunity to discuss material beyond the syllabus.

It is also worth mentioning something about the various sporting and musical commitments that you might have. Both Oxford and Cambridge are very clear that extra-curricular activities of this nature play no part in the decision making process. However, an ability to play, for instance, lacrosse or a commitment to piano does exhibit certain transferrable skills such as timekeeping, team playing, maturity, people skills, and the like. **Our advice would be this: by no means should you disregard non-academic commitments, but equally they should not, from the point of view of an Oxbridge application, become detrimental to your ability to attend academic clubs and nor should they take up so much time that you cannot read beyond the syllabus.**

## 4 | Choosing the Right Course, University and College

Given that whatever decisions you make about your course, the specific university, and the college will determine a lot about your life for the next three or four years, this is a decision not to be taken lightly. **As an undergraduate, you can only apply to either Oxford or Cambridge and not both and so it is important that you make an informed choice:** be sure to visit both and research what the university is like by reading the prospectus. Try to get a sense of the atmosphere of both and think very carefully about the differences in course between the two institutions.

### Which Course?

When one considers the fact that both Oxford and Cambridge value your academic potential above all else it should come as no surprise that they both agree the most important decision that you need to make is your course choice. This therefore requires a lot of thought and a lot of research. The first thing to consider is whether or not the university that you prefer offers your desired course, since not all courses are the same at both institutions.

NB: Appendix 2 includes the full admissions data for the latest cycle.

Subjects available at **Cambridge**, but not Oxford include:

- Architecture
- Asian and Middle Eastern studies
- Economics (as a stand-alone subject)
- Education
- Human, social and political science (HSPS)
- Land economy
- Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic
- Management studies (as a stand-alone subject)
- Natural sciences (Cambridge do not offer single sciences)
- Philosophy (as a stand-alone subject)
- Veterinary medicine

Subjects available at **Oxford**, but not Cambridge include:

- Archaeology and anthropology
- Human sciences
- The languages Sanskrit and Czech with Slovak
- Oriental studies
- PPE
- PPL
- Separate sciences

It is also very important to note that even those subjects that both universities offer, such as English or Classics or History often have distinct differences in terms of modules offered. **You should always take the time to research your desired courses in detail and compare across the courses offered by both.**

Also, in terms of course choice another factor might be how each university assesses and teaches the course. Whereas Cambridge employs the **Tripes system**, Oxford has a two-part system. Each course, or Tripos, is divided between two parts: Part I and Part II. After each Part there is an examination, which counts towards your final degree. After you have completed Part I, whether it

takes one year or two years, you then have the option of specialising in the same subject or changing to a related discipline. The benefit to this system is that it offers flexibility and it can often lead to interesting inter-disciplinary approaches, which is certainly encouraged in a subject such as Natural Sciences.

However, at Oxford assessment is divided between Preliminary Examinations (Prelims), which are taken at the end of the first year and the Final Examinations (Finals) taken at the end of the third year. There is not often the option to switch subjects during the course of your degree.

**Whatever subject you decide to study, it is important that you think carefully about your options and your reasons for wanting to read it.** You may be asked about these things at interview. Be sure to discuss your thinking with your tutor, mentor and the Higher Education team. You can even email the undergraduate studies secretary with a specific question about your chosen course.

### **Think Outside of the Academic Box**

When deciding on which course to apply for the natural inclination is often to opt for the subject which you are best at. However, don't forget that there are a *lot* of subjects on offer that you would never have been taught before. For example, you might have taken a maximum of 12 GCSEs and then 4 A-Levels, but there are 30 subjects on offer at Cambridge and 50 at Oxford. **So, do not discount those subjects that are unfamiliar.** Try not to think about your degree as simply the continuation of your school career, but rather as a new beginning.

There is also a possible **strategic element to thinking outside of the box.** For example, in 2017 there were 436 applicants for Modern Languages at Oxford, but only 74 for Modern Languages and Linguistics. By slightly tweaking your course choice, you have dramatically cut the pool of candidates. The same would be true if you decided to apply for, say, a non-European language rather than the ever popular option of French. Furthermore, you might want to consider Land Economy at Cambridge rather than Economics and Management at Oxford: the latter has an 6% acceptance rate whilst the former has 20%. Or, you might consider Materials Science rather than Engineering. In other words, competition is very high for certain subjects whilst for others it is far less. So, you can optimise your chances of success by opting for a less competitive subject.

The point here is not to 'game' the system, but rather to underline the **advantages of retaining a flexible mind** and not simply picking those subjects you already happen to be familiar with. Be open-minded and explore subjects such as Anthropology or Sanskrit or Asian and Middle Eastern studies. You might find that you find them far more fascinating than the more traditional subjects you were at first drawn to.

However, 'fascinating' is the key word here. The worst mistake that you could make is to choose a course only because you think it will get you a place at Oxford or Cambridge. There is absolutely no logic at all to deciding not to study Economics, which you love, because Land Economics, which you find boring, has a higher acceptance rate. The admissions tutors will realise what you have done within minutes of the interview and, in the unlikely event that you do get offered a place, you will still have to slog through the next three years studying a subject you dislike. Remember: you need to love the subject that you are applying to. **Do be flexible when it comes to course choice, but only for the right reasons. Please make sure you arrive upon this decision as soon as you can so that we can assign you the appropriate mentor and start targeted preparation.**

## Which University?

If the course that you want to study happens to be offered at both Oxford and Cambridge, then you now need to decide which of those two institutions suit you better. The first thing to do to help you to decide is to look carefully at the prospectus. It might be that one course, whilst they are both the same subject, suits you better. It is also worth clarifying here that the old stereotype that Cambridge is better at the sciences whilst Oxford is better at the humanities is woefully out of date. They are both world-class institutions and so such distinctions no longer hold any water.

Other factors to consider might include **location**. Oxford has better links to London and is generally seen to be a livelier place to live. However, Cambridge is smaller than Oxford and might feel claustrophobic to those who are used to a faster pace of life. The **student demographic** might also influence your decision. Oxford has an undergraduate ratio of 54% male and 46% female with 38% international students. Cambridge's profile is very similar with 53% male and 47% female, but only 18% international students. The **teaching** at both is so similar that it is likely not to make an impact on your decision: Oxford uses tutorials and Cambridge supervisions, but they are essentially the same. The **method of assessment**, as described above, is rather different with Oxford having Finals, but Cambridge assessing students throughout their degree. Finally, if you see yourself moving into academia then you might like to know that Oxford is generally considered to be the better research university, but only marginally. In essence, there is, in fact, very little to distinguish the two institutions once one excludes course choice.

**To summarise, your choice of university must always be rooted in course choice, but you might also consider factors such as location and method of assessment.**

## Which College?

Once you have decided on your course and your university you should now begin thinking about the college that you would like to apply to. **First of all, check that your course is offered at potential colleges, as not all colleges support each course.**

The first thing that you might consider when selecting a college is **academic reputation**. Each year both Oxford and Cambridge publish a collegiate league table based on the number of Firsts awarded called the Norrington table (Oxford) and the Tompkins table (Cambridge). Both of these tables are reproduced in full in Appendix 3 for the latest cycle. Whilst colleges do tend to move positions frequently and sometimes dramatically, the table might give you some indication of academic prowess. However, the disadvantage to picking based on academic reputation is that the top performing colleges will be harder to get into as there will be more competition. This is something that you should factor into your decision.

A further consideration might be **the amount of people also studying your course in the college**: would you rather lots of other students study your course or are you happy to be the only one? One final consideration might be **the academics who study at a certain college**. If you have a particular interest in Modernism and a Fellow of St John's is a renowned expert in Modernism then, for this reason, it might make sense to apply to St John's. However, both universities recommend not doing this since there would be plenty of opportunity to meet the particular Fellow in lectures and specialisation modules.

You might also take into account the **location** of the colleges. You should decide to what extent the college's location is an issue for you. Some colleges are very central whilst others are situated towards the edge of the city. You might also consider whether or not the college is near your chosen Faculty building, which is where lectures will take place. As with academic reputation, those

colleges which are especially busy and near the town centre might attract more applications and as such make them more competitive.

Finally, a key consideration might be the **facilities** on offer and the quality of **accommodation**: you might want to consider whether or not the college has especially good facilities for, say, sports or music. You might also think about the size and atmosphere of the college JCR or the library provisions. The availability of accommodation might also play a role in your decision. Some colleges will be able to provide accommodation for the entirety of your stay whilst others may only provide accommodation for your first and third years. This would mean you would need to find your own accommodation in the second year at an increased price. College rents also vary considerably and this should be accounted for. Other factors such as the age of the college, its architecture, dining, the size of the college itself and its rooms might also play a role in your decision making.

An excellent resource when thinking about these things is the **Alternative Prospectus** for each college: this is written by current and ex-students and gives a far franker appraisal of what it is like to study and live at the college. Googling the college with alternative prospectus should bring up the correct page.

If you genuinely are not moved by any of the above, then an **Open Application** might work best for you. Both universities make it clear that an open application will not disadvantage you at all and indeed the interviewer will not know whether or not you applied specifically for that college or whether it was open. However, given that you will be allocated to colleges that do not have as many applicants then it is probable you will be sent to a less popular college. Whilst one may argue this is a benefit (the competition will be less fierce and you will stand out more) there will also be a reason that the college is less popular and given that you will spend at least three years of your life there it makes sense to at least seriously consider your options and where you might be happy. It is also true that both universities put a lot of effort into inter-college moderation in order to ensure that your chances do not depend on which college you applied for and as such there is no reason to try to make a tactical decision. This being said, there is almost certainly still truth to the idea that applying at an especially popular college will diminish your chances of standing out and getting shortlisted.

To summarise, then, you might want to consider the following factors when choosing a college:

- Whether or not it offers your course
- The academic reputation
- The demographic of the college, both students and academics
- The location
- The facilities and accommodation

## 5 | UCAS, Entrance Tests, and the Personal Statement

This section will address those aspects of your UCAS application that are slightly different for Oxbridge candidates as opposed to applicants for other universities. **For more generic aspects of your application, such as how to fill in the UCAS form itself there are other detailed guides available from the Higher Education department.** Also, bear in mind that this part of your Oxbridge journey has very strict deadlines, both internal and external. An overview of these deadlines is included in Appendix 1, but more detailed and specific deadlines will be issued in due course.

### Entrance Tests

Entrance tests, whether it is the ELAT, BMAT, TSA or one of the many others, are an increasingly important part of your application to both Oxford and Cambridge. Almost all courses now require you to sit an entrance test of some description.

Entrance tests were introduced in order to help universities **differentiate between applicants**. Given the increasingly high number of A / A\* grades at A-Level this is one of many things that allow the admissions tutor to make the most informed decision possible. Entrance tests have been used for the vast majority of subjects at Oxford for the last several years, but it was only in 2016 – 2017 that Cambridge decided to follow suit. **In all likelihood, the entrance test that you sit, if you sit one, will be much more difficult than any test taken as part of your A-Level. But, this is taken into consideration and you are not expected to get 100%, by any means.**

**The course entry requirements for your particular subject, available online and in the prospectus, will state which entrance test, if any, you will need to sit.** Do check this information when researching your course. At Oxford almost all entrance tests are sat before the interview and these will take place at Downe often on the first Wednesday of November. However, some Cambridge courses vary between pre-interview test and an at-interview test. This information will be available on the Cambridge website and they will email the specific instructions once your application has been accepted if it is at-interview.

An especially useful website when researching entrance tests is the **Admissions Testing Service** (<http://www.admissionstesting.org/>). This site includes information for most of the main pre-interview tests including specifications, mark schemes, and past papers. It is an invaluable resource.

**During your weekly mentor sessions entrance tests will be discussed in detail so that you are fully prepared come examination day.** This will include discussing the format of the paper and lots of past paper practice. There are also additional workshops offered internally for some of the more popular papers such as the BMAT and the TSA.

## Written Work

With the advent of the entrance tests fewer courses are now requiring you to submit written work as part of your application. However, by no means has the submission of written work been entirely displaced. **When reading your work the admissions tutor is attempting to assess your ability to research, organise information, form opinions and construct a cogent argument in writing.** This is why they will often accept an essay from a subject that you are not applying to, although this will be specified in the Entry Requirements for your subject.

The essay you submit will need to have been written as part of your A-Level course. In other words, it should not be written specifically for the application and it should not have been re-drafted. The essay will usually be in the region of 2000 words and should be marked by your teacher. Be sure that the work you submit is of a high standard and that you would be happy to talk about it at interview, as it can often be used as a starting point for discussion.

At Oxford, the requirements for the submission of written work are clearly stated on the course website and in the prospectus. If you type into google 'Oxford University submission of written work' then you will find a full list of the subjects that require written work. However, at Cambridge each college has a different policy on written work and so they will contact you directly with clear instructions once you have applied.

## Supplementary Application Questionnaire (SAQ)

This is specific to Cambridge and you will need to complete it within one week of submitting your UCAS form. The SAQ includes eight sections, such as the submission of a photograph, personal details, course details, education, qualification, and **additional information**. The latter is essentially an additional personal statement and so it is another opportunity for you to persuade the admissions tutor that you are the right person for Cambridge.

Use the additional information section in order to tell the admissions tutor what specifically excites you about the Cambridge course. Are there particular modules that you look forward to studying? Is there a particular academic area/discipline that you look forward to working with and why? Is the college renowned for a particular development in your area of interest? Is there a particular aspect of your subject that you want to discuss that could not fit into the personal statement? As with the personal statement itself, be prepared to discuss at interview what you mention here.

**Whatever you decide to discuss make sure that it is related specifically to Cambridge and do not duplicate what is already in your main personal statement.**

## The Personal Statement

**The personal statement is one of the important aspects of your overall application and as such it is essential that you produce one of exceptionally high quality.** The below outline should help to achieve this. However, do remember that it is *your* personal statement and as such it is entirely up to you how you write it and what you put into it. Whilst we can offer advice, you are the best person to know what your statement ought to be.

The best way to organise your time when writing the personal statement is to produce a first draft and then show it to both your mentor and your tutor. We advise that in the initial drafting stages you only show it to these two people as beyond this advice can be conflicting and can become too confusing. Once you are happy with the draft, this is when you will send it to the Head of Higher Education and the Head of Oxbridge Admissions for some final comments.

**Introduction:** This should be about 5 or 6 lines long and the first sentence should be short and snappy. Realistically, the tutor will have so many statements to read that you may well be remembered on your first sentence alone and so you need to catch the reader's attention. In essence, you need to address why you want to study your subject, but you want to make it personal: you need to show your reasons and motivations for studying the chosen subject. What exactly sparked your interest? This might mean attempting to capture the essence of why you enjoy your subject or recalling a memory which perhaps shaped your decision to study the subject or outlining a specific area that has opened up the subject as a whole. Avoid clichés like 'since a young age' and words like 'passion' and 'deeply fascinating'. Also, avoid using quotations within the personal statement.

**The main body:** This should be about 25 to 27 lines long and might be divided into three distinct sections. In general, you need to convey your suitability for the course both at a personal level and, more importantly, at an academic level. The first section should address your academic suitability. This will primarily include your main academic interests within your subject area and this is the best way to demonstrate motivation and enthusiasm. What have you read beyond your A-Level syllabus? What has excited you that others may not have read? What specific area do you find especially fascinating and why? You might also discuss a specific book or journal article or a course that you attended. However, it is very important to engage critically with the material and to reflect on what you have read: discuss how it has changed or informed your decision to study the subject and why you enjoyed it. How has the book enriched your learning? What the tutors don't want to see is simply a list of books that you have enjoyed reading. A reflective and critical discussion of a few books is much better than a superficial list of many. However, you should also avoid turning it into an academic essay: it should demonstrate how ideas and texts have shaped your *personal* engagement with the subject. This should be a substantial chunk of the statement, and also do not forget that at interview tutors will use this to guide questions so make sure you are familiar with the material.

The **second section** might address personal suitability and might mention a challenge that you have overcome or work experience or prizes / accolades that you have won. It might describe a personal experience and how these have shaped your academic choices. Again, remember to reflect critically on these events and describe what you have learned from them.

In the **third section** you might want to briefly mention extra-curricular activities that you do, but again link them to your suitability for the course by perhaps saying they have helped to cultivate time-management, integrity, communication skills, leadership, etc. Of these three the academic suitability is the most important and so don't be afraid to speak more about that than the other two if you have a lot to say. The section will include more than one paragraph.

The **conclusion** should only be a couple of lines long. You should not introduce new information here, but you should try to bring together the various threads of your statement. Perhaps, you might like to look to the future by expressing enthusiasm in looking forward to meeting the demands of the course.

As some **final advice** be sure to engage the reader; demonstrate academic enthusiasm; write accurately and clearly; reflect and critically engage with what you say at all times, and do not use spaces as you have 4000 characters only including spaces.

## **Post-Qualification Applicants**

This refers to those students who decide to apply to university after their time at Downe and once they have their final examination results. We give substantial support and encouragement to pupils applying after they have left Downe House. Pupils and parents are contacted by the PQA Coordinator in early September to discuss applications. The candidate's reference will be updated in the light of her examination results and she should write a new personal statement. Heads of Department, the H.E. Guidance team and the Head of Oxbridge Applications are delighted to support these applications, but a greater degree of independence and responsibility is expected, especially if the candidate has been through the process before. Each candidate must keep up to date with her reading and re-acquaint herself of any ideas or texts mentioned in her personal statement. It is the girl's responsibility to ensure that she has saved work from the year before to submit if required, and to register for certain tests. If a post Sixth-Form candidate is called for interview, she is advised to make time available in the two days prior to her interview to refocus and consolidate the work she has been undertaking to ensure her knowledge is fresh. **It is worth remembering that the bar is set higher for these candidates who are expected to show greater maturity and range in their knowledge.**

## 6 | The Interview

The interview is the final part of your Oxbridge journey and needless to say that you would have been preparing for it, in one form or another, for some time. The interview is designed to assess whether you are suitable for Oxbridge. The admissions tutors are looking for people who they will enjoy teaching and who will contribute to the academic life of the department. They want people who are academically aspiring and intellectually ambitious.

It is also worthwhile to think about why Oxbridge specifically holds the interview as a means of selection in such high regard. The interview is intended to mimic the format of the tutorial: it is exactly the same kind of discursive, Socratic back-and-forth that you will be expected to engage in week in and week out. As such, the best piece of advice we can give you is, simply put, to enjoy it. Think about it like this: you have the opportunity to discuss a subject that you love with the best minds working in that field at the moment. **If you enjoy the interview and relish discussing complex and challenging topics, if you demonstrate intellectual flexibility, but also the ability to justify your point of view where appropriate, and if you can confidently apply prior knowledge to new scenarios then you are exactly what they are looking for.**

### Who, When, Where?

Applicants are shortlisted for interview based on their UCAS form and their entrance test. Cambridge tend to interview in the region of **90% of applicants** whilst Oxford interviews a smaller pool of between **60 – 80%**, depending on the year. The interviews are conducted by a senior member of staff for the subject applied to. Often this is the Director of Studies. There will also often be a second member of staff who takes notes and also asks questions.

Interviews are held for both universities at the **beginning of December**. It is also possible that some applicants will be called back for a second round of interviews at the beginning of January at Cambridge. It is typical for you to have at least two interviews, but it may be more. **You should hear back by late November** as to whether you have an interview, but it can be slightly later.

The interviews are **held in Oxford and Cambridge at the college that you applied to**. However, if you are applying to Oxford then you may also get interviewed at another college and Cambridge applicants may get pooled, which means they will be re-interviewed in January at a different college.

### The Practicalities

Some of the below may sound obvious, but we think they are worth reiterating nonetheless:

- Make sure you save the phone number of the admissions office just in case you get delayed or lost
- Make sure you know exactly where the interview is taking place. When you arrive and are given the location of your interview room, go and locate it as soon as possible. Oxbridge colleges are confusing and you could easily get lost and arrive late for the interview. Better safe than sorry – find the room!
- Dress sensibly. There is no need for anything especially extravagant, but equally do not arrive in jeans and a T-Shirt.
- Bring a pen and a book – there may be lots of waiting around.

## How to Answer a Question

When answering questions in an Oxbridge interview one of the most important skills to hone is **the ability to think out loud and divulge your thinking process**. The interviewer is far more interested in what you know rather than what you do not and so they are only too happy to try to point you in the correct direction, but they can only do this if they understand your thinking. **It is also often the case that your thinking process is far more important than the actual answer you arrive at.**

One example of this would be **unpicking and clarifying the parameters of a question**. For example, if you were an English applicant and you were asked whether or not literature has the capacity to effect genuine social change you might begin by explaining what you take social change to mean in this context and you might also question the use of the word genuine. Or, you might use phrasing such as 'In order to answer this I first want to consider the implications of X'. This is a good strategy to use irrespective of subject or question. Remember, though, it is absolutely OK to ask for a moment to gather your thoughts: 20 seconds of thinking which then leads to a precise, logical and cogent answer is always better than an immediate but waffling answer.

It is also worth pointing out now that **the questions you will face will be difficult and they will challenge you**. However, this is the point and so the absolute worst thing that you could do is to give up or refuse to engage with the question. You could point out that you have not encountered a question such as this before, but then use it as an opportunity to engage and work through the problem. The interviewers want to see someone who is flexible, resilient, and willing to grapple with complex ideas. This is, after all, what you will encounter week in week out in tutorials. It is important to show the tutor that you enjoy this kind of intellectual challenge. Equally, do not be put off if the interviewer challenges your view: be willing to modulate your perspective if appropriate or even justify it if you feel you are able to.

In order to get used to using long explanatory responses to questions and maintaining an academic tone listen to radio programmes such as Radio 4's *In Our Time* or *The Moral Maze*. These are available as podcasts on iTunes and will give you a clear sense of how to structure an academic argument verbally. Notice how the contributors, often Professors, including ones from Oxbridge, will use qualifying terms such as 'perhaps', 'on the other hand' or 'one might suggest' and they always maintain a logical train of thought. They are also open to new ideas and able to support their arguments with examples or secondary criticism, and always retain a sense of enthusiasm. It is this kind of dialogue that you want to engage in.

You will also be **given an opportunity at the end to ask a question yourself**. We would highly recommend using this opportunity, but do not ask generic questions such as 'what does my first year entail' or 'can I choose my room'. Instead, if there was a topic discussed during the course of the interview perhaps ask where you might find out more about it or maybe ask about a specific module that you read about or the possibility of studying X even though it is not mentioned in the prospectus.



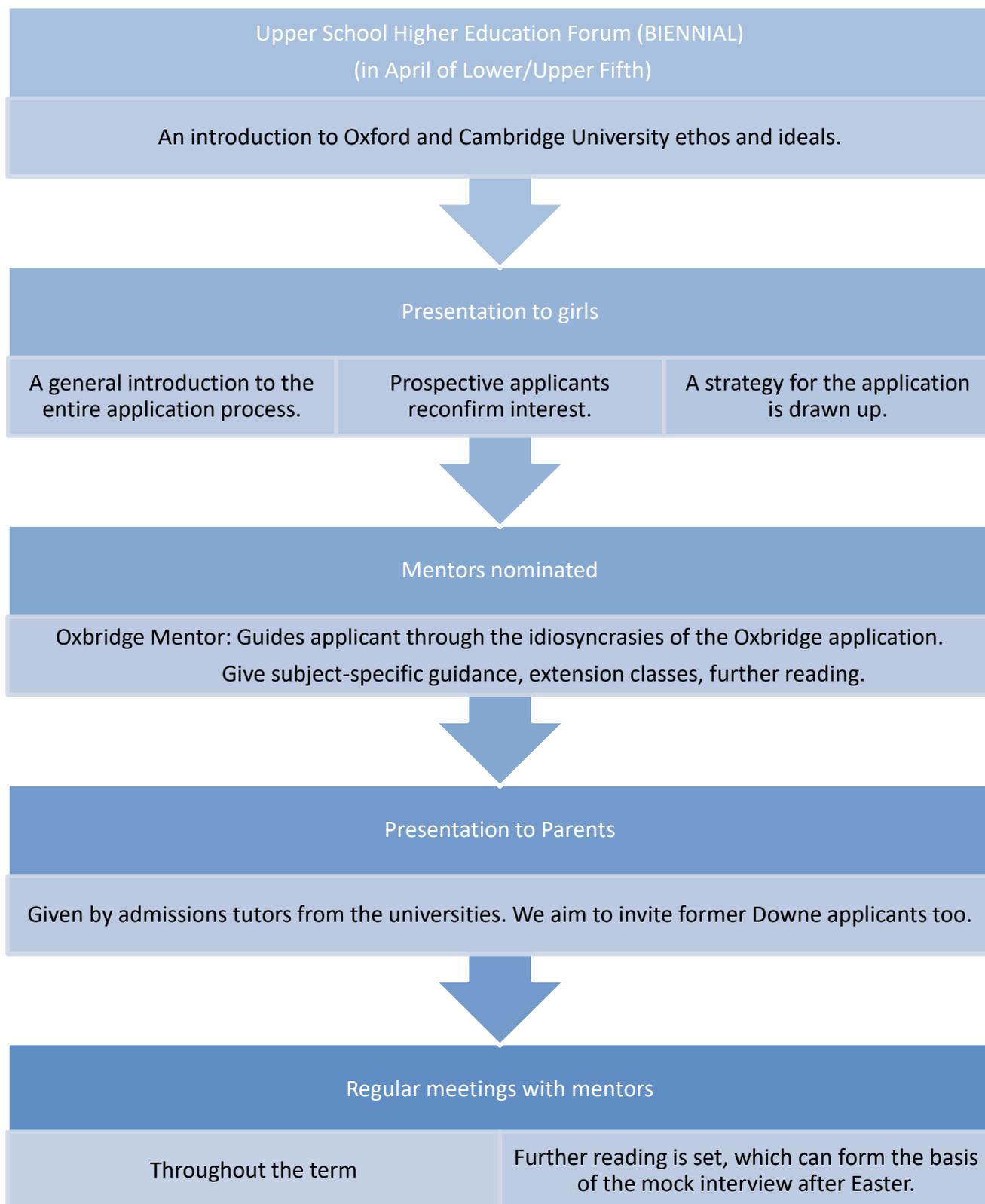
Dr Andrew Atherton, BA, MA, PhD  
**Head of Oxbridge Applications**  
[athertona@downehouse.net](mailto:athertona@downehouse.net)



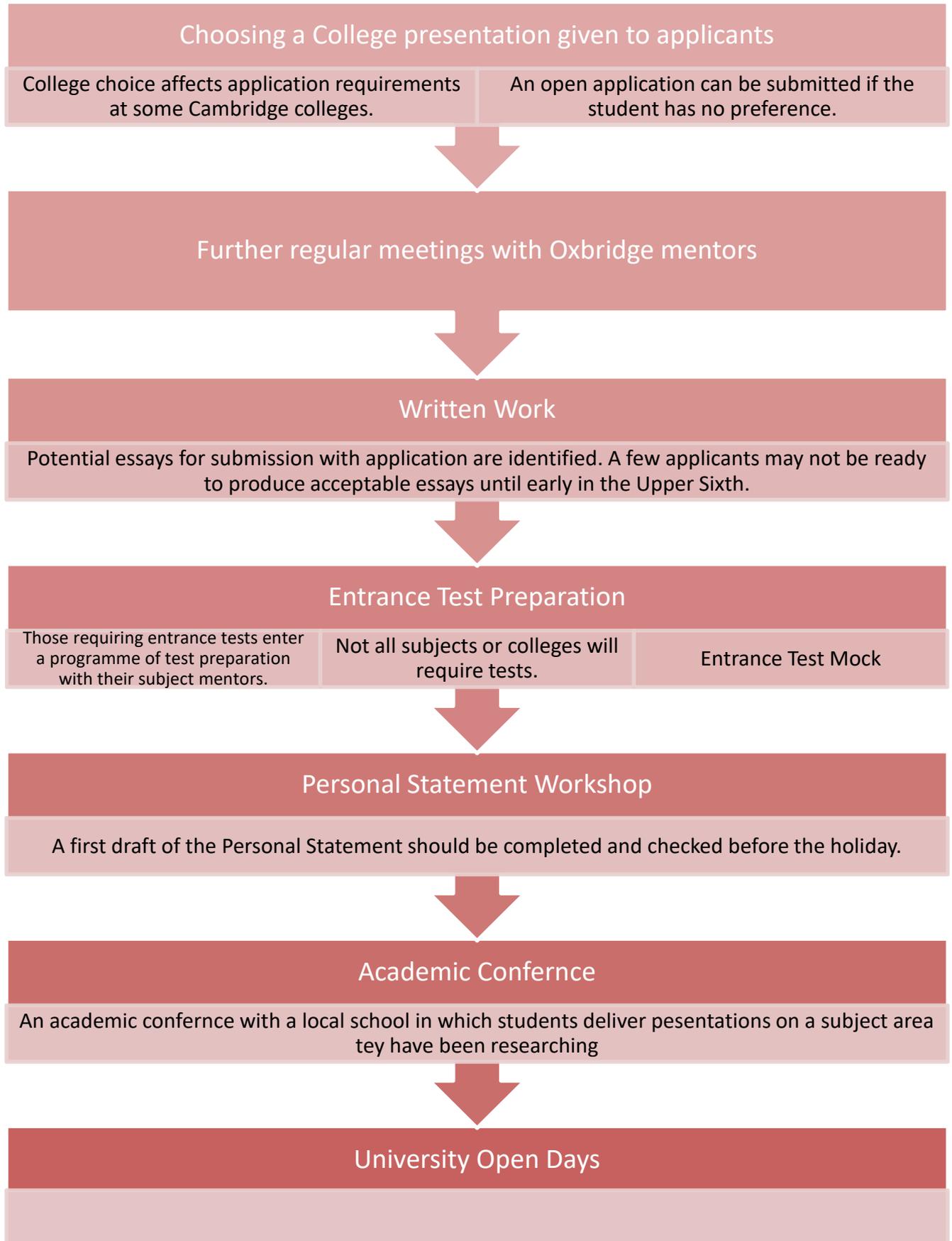
Ms Marya Akhtar, BA, MA, PGCE, LMCW  
**Director of Higher Education**  
[akhtarm@downehouse.net](mailto:akhtarm@downehouse.net)

# 1 | Appendix: Oxbridge Timetable

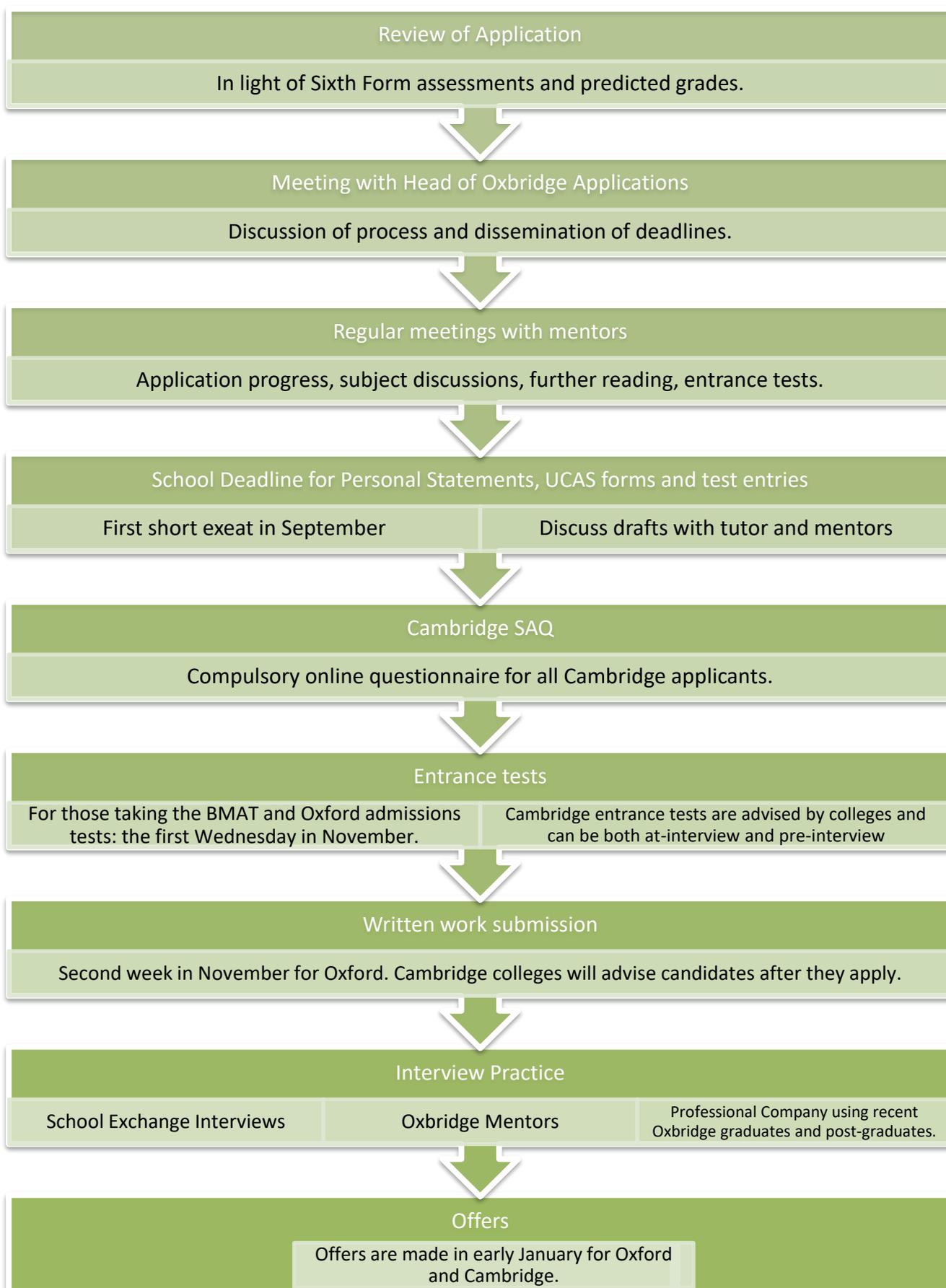
LOWER SIXTH: Lent Term



## LOWER SIXTH: Summer Term



## UPPER SIXTH: Michaelmas Term



## 2 | Appendix: Admission Data 2017

### Cambridge University

Degree programme	Applications		Offers		Acceptances and success rates		
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	Success rate (%)
<b>Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences</b>							
Anglo-Saxon, Norse, & Celtic	49	0.3	27	0.6	19	0.5	38.8
Archaeology	56	0.3	36	0.8	26	0.7	46.4
Architecture	430	2.5	53	1.2	37	1.1	8.6
Asian & Middle Eastern Studies	114	0.7	47	1.0	32	0.9	28.1
Classics	172	1.0	91	2.0	84	2.4	48.8
Classics (4 years)	50	0.3	26	0.6	18	0.5	36.0
Economics	1,005	5.8	182	4.1	155	4.4	15.4
Education	95	0.6	49	1.1	34	1.0	35.8
English	763	4.4	250	5.6	212	6.1	27.8
Geography	324	1.9	119	2.7	90	2.6	27.8
History	591	3.4	225	5.0	181	5.2	30.6
History & Modern Languages	77	0.4	21	0.5	20	0.6	26.0
History & Politics	195	1.1	57	1.3	40	1.1	20.5
History of Art	109	0.6	28	0.6	23	0.7	21.1
Human, Social, & Political Sciences	932	5.4	208	4.6	166	4.7	17.8
Land Economy	276	1.6	72	1.6	56	1.6	20.3
Law	1,161	6.8	275	6.1	219	6.3	18.9
Linguistics	96	0.6	39	0.9	33	0.9	34.4
Modern & Medieval Languages	404	2.4	207	4.6	180	5.1	44.6
Music	136	0.8	81	1.8	65	1.9	47.8
Philosophy	270	1.6	56	1.2	45	1.3	16.7
Theology, Religion & Philosophy of Religion	91	0.5	47	1.0	39	1.1	42.9
<b>Subtotals</b>	<b>7,396</b>	<b>43.0</b>	<b>2,196</b>	<b>49.0</b>	<b>1,774</b>	<b>50.7</b>	<b>24.0</b>
<b>Sciences</b>							
Computer Science	867	5.0	131	2.9	105	3.0	12.1
Engineering	2,296	13.4	395	8.8	334	9.6	14.5
Mathematics	1,456	8.5	532	11.9	257	7.3	17.7
Medicine	1,341	7.8	292	6.5	257	7.3	19.2
Medicine Graduate Course	397	2.3	28	0.6	23	0.7	5.8
Natural Sciences	2,809	16.3	741	16.5	629	18.0	22.4
Psychological & Behavioural Sciences	379	2.2	87	1.9	59	1.7	15.6
Veterinary Medicine	248	1.4	83	1.9	59	1.7	23.8
<b>Subtotals</b>	<b>9,793</b>	<b>57.0</b>	<b>2,289</b>	<b>51.0</b>	<b>1,723</b>	<b>49.3</b>	<b>17.6</b>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>17,189</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>4,485</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>3,497</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>20.3</b>

## Oxford University

	STATE			INDEPENDENT			STATE PROPORTION OF TOTAL UK STUDENTS ADMITTED <sup>1</sup>
	APPLICATIONS	OFFERS	ADMITTED	APPLICATIONS	OFFERS	ADMITTED	
Biochemistry	680	162	149	323	100	93	61.6%
Biological Sciences	683	214	168	392	136	116	59.2%
Biomedical Sciences	372	62	49	150	36	31	61.3%
Chemistry	916	317	263	453	206	182	59.1%
Classics	237	102	86	499	221	212	28.9%
Computer Science	415	34	28	101	10	8	77.8%
Earth Sciences	168	75	60	67	29	23	72.3%
Economics & Management	874	106	95	721	105	90	51.4%
Engineering Science	799	209	173	534	175	157	52.4%
English	1,439	391	349	903	280	260	57.3%
Experimental Psychology	280	87	61	141	46	39	61.0%
Geography	463	138	102	445	127	103	49.8%
History	1,406	366	314	1,166	308	293	51.7%
History & Politics	481	79	66	208	38	34	66.0%
Law*	1,819	361	310	617	148	126	71.1%
Materials Science	129	51	42	119	41	37	53.2%
Mathematics	2,112	294	270	525	114	108	71.4%
Medicine	1,834	285	258	922	171	163	61.3%
Modern Languages	643	261	226	591	225	208	52.1%
Music	251	106	90	208	109	97	48.1%
Oriental Studies	180	68	54	132	51	42	56.3%
Physics	1,933	277	264	613	137	135	66.2%
PPE**	1,396	319	288	907	224	215	57.3%
PPL***	103	29	23	105	37	31	42.6%
Theology and Religion	86	35	29	150	64	49	37.2%

\*Including Law/Law with Studies In Europe \*\*Philosophy, Politics and Economics \*\*\*Psychology, Philosophy and Linguistics

N.B: The above table outlines statistics related to the largest 25 courses and is divided according to state sector and independent sector.

## 3 | Appendix: Norrington and Tompkins Tables

### Norrington Table (Oxford)

College Name	1st	2.1	2.2	3rd	Other	Total Students	Norrington Score	Rank
St John's	60	47		1		108	82.04%	1
Magdalen	52	55		2	1	110	78.18%	2
St Catherine's	64	58		6	2	130	78.15%	3
Merton	38	39		3		78	77.69%	4
New College	51	59		3		113	77.52%	5
Jesus	41	50		2		93	77.20%	6
Brasenose	44	58		5		107	75.51%	7
Wadham	46	65		3	2	116	74.66%	8
Balliol	35	51		6		92	73.91%	9
Trinity	28	39		6		73	73.70%	10
Christ Church	47	70		9		126	73.49%	11
Oriel	34	43		8	1	86	73.49%	12
St Hilda's	37	69		2		108	73.33%	13
Worcester	41	68		4	1	114	73.33%	13
Corpus Christi	24	40		1	2	67	72.84%	15
St Peter's	34	61		3	1	99	72.73%	16
University	36	53		7	2	98	72.45%	17
Exeter	32	49		6	2	89	72.13%	18
Queen's	32	55		5		93	72.04%	19
Mansfield	21	39		4		64	71.88%	20
Lady Margaret Hall	40	64		9	2	115	71.65%	21
Somerville	35	63		6		105	71.62%	22
Keble	39	66		13		118	71.02%	23
St Anne's	35	80		3	1	119	70.92%	24
Pembroke	30	57		6		94	70.85%	25
Lincoln	27	45		4	1	79	70.63%	26
Hertford	29	67		8		104	69.62%	27
St Hugh's	34	75		9	1	119	69.58%	28
St Edmund Hall	26	73		8	1	108	67.78%	29
Harris Manchester	4	16		3		23	64.35%	30

Tompkins Table (Cambridge)

Rank	College	Score	%Firsts	Change in rank
1	Trinity	74.2	41.5	0
2	Christ's	71.7	35.2	+1
3	St John's	71.7	33.7	+2
4	Pembroke	71.0	32.9	-2
5	Churchill	70.8	34.9	+6
6	Emmanuel	70.2	35.2	-2
7	Queens'	69.6	30.3	-1
8	King's	69.3	32.4	+6
9	Selwyn	69.1	28.6	+6
10	Peterhouse	68.9	29.9	-2
11	Gonville & Caius	68.8	28.1	+8
12	Corpus Christi	68.7	27.9	-2
13	Clare	68.4	29.2	+5
14	Jesus	68.4	28.1	-7
15	Trinity Hall	67.9	28.1	-2
16	Magdalene	67.8	29	-7
17	Sidney Sussex	67.6	28.2	-1
18	Lucy Cavendish	67.5	28.3	+8
19	St Catherine's	66.9	24.9	-2
20	Downing	66.5	23.4	-8
21	Fitzwilliam	66.1	25.7	+2
22	St Edmund's	65.1	25.8	+6
23	Newnham	64.6	21	-2
24	Girton	64.1	21	+3
25	Robinson	64	20.6	-3
26	Hughes Hall	63.9	17.1	+3
27	Wolfson	63.8	18.9	-7
28	Homerton	63.7	21.5	-4
29	Murray Edwards	63	16.8	-4

## 4 | Appendix: Downe House Responsibilities

### HEADMISTRESS

- Approval of final candidate list
- Review of application and reference
- Communication of confidential information to Colleges

### HEAD OF OXBRIDGE APPLICATIONS

- Holding of meetings with Oxbridge applicants
- Advice to candidates regarding choice of college and subject
- Advice and guidance on personal statements
- Advice and guidance on tests and written work
- Liaison with Heads of Departments and Oxbridge mentors on programmes of preparation including extra classes, reading lists, lectures and mock interviews
- Arrangement of practice interviews as required
- Safe posting of applications and written work to Colleges
- Liaison with colleges and attendance at Open Days and Teacher Conferences
- Review of application and reference prior to its being sent to the Headmistress
- Debriefing of candidates and relaying of feedback from colleagues
- Help with supplementary forms e.g. SAQs
- Arrangement of entrance test practice

### OXBRIDGE MENTOR

- Meet regularly with the candidate to discuss the nature of the course and its requirements, and devise a programme of preparation
- Support with writing personal statements
- Provision of supplementary tuition and reading list
- Preparation for interviews in collaboration with the Head of Oxbridge Applications
- Preparation of candidates for entrance tests
- Support in selecting application essays

### DIRECTOR OF HIGHER EDUCATION

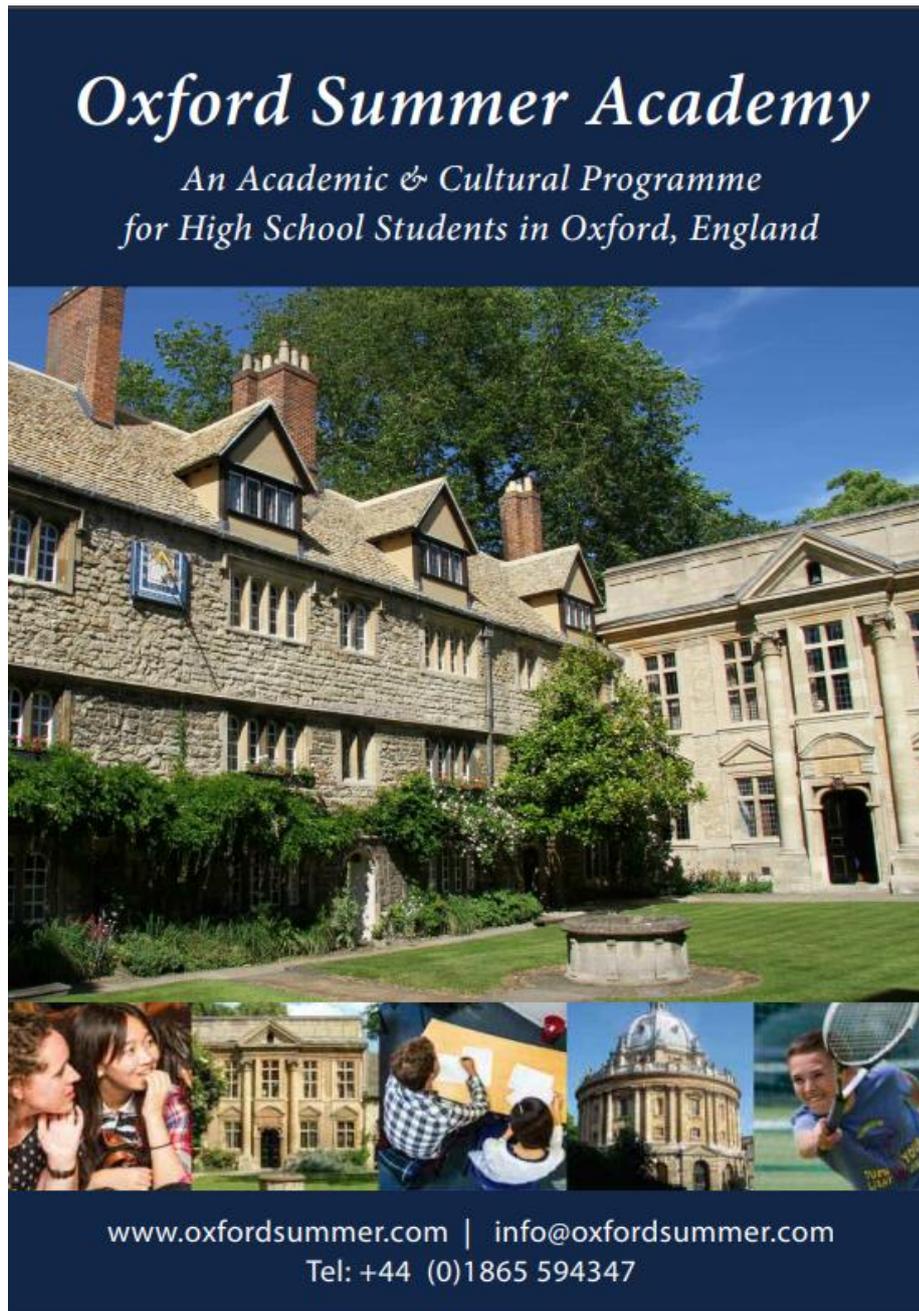
- Checking of UCAS application; support and advice
- Advice to teaching staff on personal statement and reference writing
- Monitoring of changes to application process, aptitude tests, UCAS deadlines, essay competitions
- Monitoring of Oxbridge support

### TUTORS

- UCAS application support
- Support with drafting of personal statement
- Reference writing

## 5 | Appendix: External Resources

Outlined below are some of the external resources that are available in order to support your daughter. They are companies that we have worked with before with great success and that have a proven track record of enhancing the extensive Oxbridge preparation that we already offer.

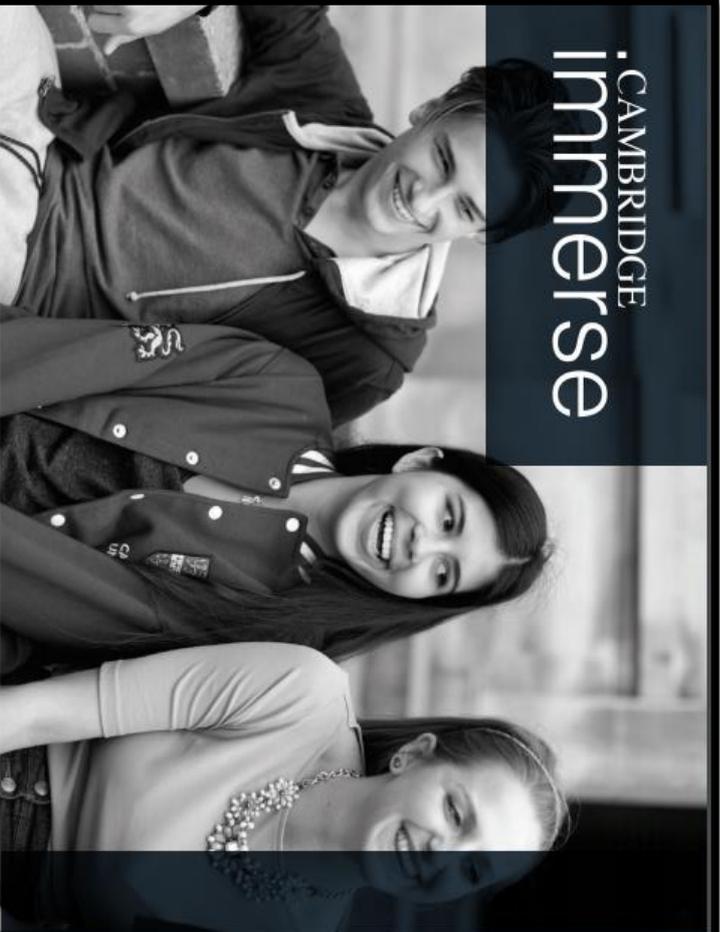


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- > BIOLOGY
- > CHEMISTRY
- > COMPUTER SCIENCE
- > CREATIVE WRITING
- > ECONOMICS
- > ENGINEERING
- > ENGLISH LITERATURE
- > HISTORY
- > INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
- > LAW
- > MANAGEMENT
- > MATHEMATICS
- > MEDICINE
- > PHYSICS

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Established in 1999, Oxbridge Applications is a global leader in Oxbridge admissions consulting. They provide expert guidance and support for students at every stage of their application to Oxford and Cambridge, as well as those applying to top UK medical and law schools. See their website for more information about the services they provide: <http://www.oxbridgeapplications.com/>



OxFizz work with over 40 top UK schools and have worked with Downe House for a number of years. They specialise in supporting their Oxbridge cohorts and medicine applicants. They leverage our eight years of experience, supporting over 3000 students, to provide bespoke support to students in our partner schools. See their website for more information about the services they require: <http://www.oxfizz.org/>

## Notes

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Higher Education