

Oxford and Cambridge Information Evening, March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011: a summary

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**Demythologising Oxbridge** - you need to be bright, not posh. Successful applicants from all socio-economic and educational backgrounds. You don't have to be rich: there is lots of financial support available.

Yes it's competitive, with 4/5 applicants per place, though this varies: more competitive for e.g. medicine and economics, less for e.g. theology and Czech. This is a much lower ratio than some other universities like Edinburgh and Leeds (40,000 applications for 4,000 places).

It's not the end of the world if you don't get in. Future academic and career opportunities won't be affected.

**Work:** You do have to work really hard, and to commit yourself to this. Work really hard to get good A level grades, then be ready to work 50 hours a week at Oxbridge. A lot of the teaching will be in small groups – 'supervisions', often 1:1.

Offers are tough. A\*AA at Cambridge, AAA at Oxford the standard offers this year – though A\* is being increasingly used.

Heavy emphasis on exams at both Oxford and Cambridge, so you must enjoy them. Lots of them, very little continuous assessment.

**Course choice:** it's your decision, not your parents' (unless they want to apply as mature students!). If you're going to work 50 hours a week on it, the subject must be one you're really interested in. Can be a subject you've already studied at school, can be a vocational subject (medicine, architecture), can be a subject you've not studied before (philosophy, law). Passion for subject is all-important.

Check if your subject is available. Science: Oxford offers single sciences, C offers Natural Science (more breadth). Oxford offers more joint degrees in humanities/social science (e.g. Philosophy and Psychology). Cambridge courses are single honours. Vet science and architecture – Cambridge only.

Both allow you to choose much of your own degree content: lots of flexibility is a virtue of being taught in tiny groups.

Oxbridge looking for hard-working, curious, clear-thinking, sharp, interested people. These will usually have excellent GCSE and A level results. There is a high correlation between successful school results and success at university. But you can still apply if something has happened that affects your exam performance - illness, family circumstances, school in special measures, etc. Don't be put off if you're dyslexic – allowances are made in work and exams.

**College choice:** doesn't matter! There will be 60 – 150 in your year group in your college. Don't pick based on who the tutors are at that college, as you will be taught by tutors from other colleges too. 1 in 4 are accepted by a college different from the

one they applied to. Don't try and work out which college you're most likely to get into. At Oxford, you'll be interviewed by more than one college. Open application (stating no college preference): the university picks the college that will suit you and your subject best. Only worry about a choice of college if you want specific facilities: academically, it doesn't matter.

**Application process:** apply through UCAS by October 15<sup>th</sup>. For Oxford, 70 % sit aptitude tests, for Cambridge, only medics/vets do. Cambridge looks at UMS scores at AS on a supplementary application form. Both may ask you to send examples of written work. Interviews are in December.

**Aptitude tests** (early November): used by Oxford because so many applicants have or are predicted top A level grades. Deliberately hard: mark range between 20 and 70 % (most candidates are in the 90% at A level). Tests not designed to trip you up. Don't expect to answer everything on the paper. Cambridge may ask you to do some writing at interview stage.

**Interviews:** use personal statement as springboard for things to talk about. Talk about what you've already studied, but also wider reading and what you thought of it. Revise A level work thoroughly before interview, plus what you put on your statement. You will be asked about it. Average length of interview: 20 minutes. Questions get progressively harder/more abstract. They want to see you thinking, see how sharp/good you are at problem-solving. So, explore the subject now to feel more comfortable about it then: read, explore, revise, think. Don't pretend to know about something you don't! A bad interview won't necessarily mean you won't get an offer. As with aptitude tests, they're not looking to trip you up – but there will be hard questions. Mathematicians may be given some maths to do, English will give you a poem to analyse, science may give you a rock to look at....

**Socially:** It's not just about hard work! Social and sporting activities are available as at other universities. You will have fun, especially in your college.

**Tuition fees:** expect £8-9,000 p.a. Large bursaries and support schemes exist. Don't worry about it. You won't be indebted for life. Repayments only kick in when you're earning £21k anyway. It's like a mortgage. (See *Student Finance England website*)

**What you can do now:** research courses, revise for AS exams. Make yourself a strong applicant: ignore companies that charge lots to help you get in! Go to bookshops, libraries, museums, galleries. Share experiences with your peers. Talk to lots of interesting people about your subject, in depth. Be tenacious! Use the resources of your school. Look at prospectuses, websites, faculty and college websites, talk to current students and admissions, attend open days.

## Questions

How much does GCSE profile matter? Maybe, but Sixth Form results are crucial. Cambridge use UMS scores at AS to differentiate; Oxford use aptitude tests. Oxford look at your GCSE profile in the context of the average at your school.

Cambridge Pre-U? Treated like an A level. Likely to place more emphasis on interview, and offer may be higher. Same for IB, as no results are available as at AS.

3 or 4 A2s? Very little flexibility if you miss your offer, so better to get three excellent results than four good ones. The bottom line is that you achieve your 3-grade offer.

BTEC = 4 GCSEs? Yes. It doesn't affect your application if your school has gone down the BTEC route.

Early GCSEs? You'll be expected to do just as well as you would in Year 11, so only do this if you're ready to get your highest mark.

Should you refer to career plans in your personal statement? Vocational courses (vet/medic/architect) yes. Doesn't matter too much what your degree is in. Employers will look for bright people with top degree. Career paths are unpredictable!!

Bill Skinner, Kimbolton School

(with thanks to Angela Barnett for minute-taking)

3<sup>rd</sup> March 2011