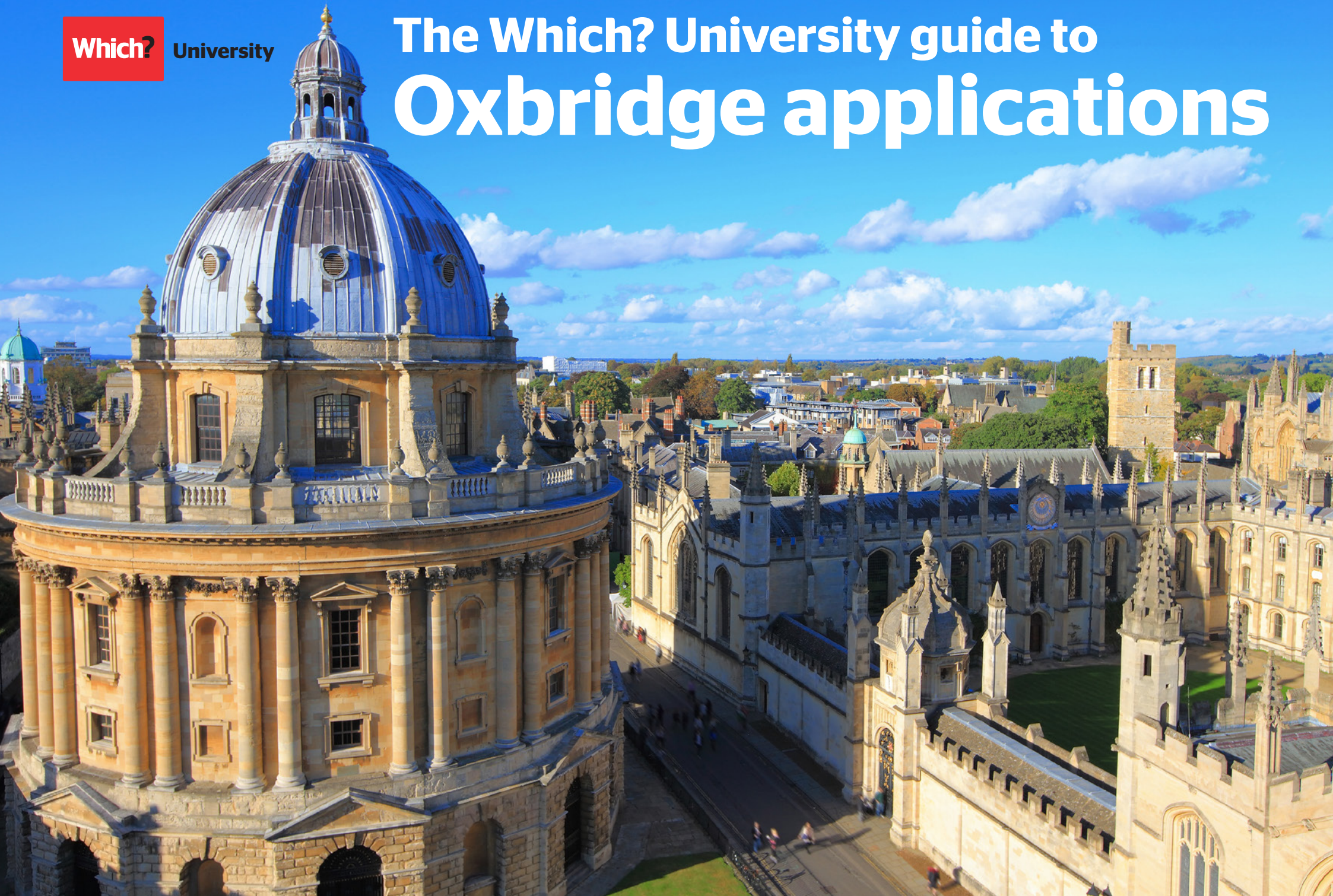


Which? University

The Which? University guide to Oxbridge applications



Is Oxbridge for you?

Like the sound of applying to Oxbridge? Think you might have what it takes? Here's how to work out if it's the right route for you

Widely regarded as the UK's most prestigious universities, it's not surprising that places at Oxford and Cambridge are highly sought-after. The application process is challenging so it's important that you can demonstrate drive and passion for the university and the course you choose.

Start by researching each of the areas where you'll need to shine - consider what you can offer for each of these carefully before committing to apply.

Grades

Both universities are looking to find students with the best academic potential, so good grades are a must. Required A-level grades (or equivalent) are clearly stated for each course on each university's website, however standard conditional offers generally range from AAA to A*A*A.

In terms of GCSEs, many applicants have all A*s, but this is not always a requirement. 'Each application is considered carefully on its individual merits, taking each aspect into account,' explains Director of Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach at Oxford University, Dr Samina Khan. 'We look at the context in which qualifications have been achieved as well as the grades themselves.'

Wider reading

Both universities will expect to see evidence that you explore your subject beyond your studies at school or college.

This might be through reading books, journals or magazines, or through podcasts, TV and radio programmes.

Dr Samina Khan says that tutors do not have a checklist of achievements that they are looking for, so they won't be impressed by a list of books in isolation, however. 'Tutors want to see how you have engaged with your subject and what you have learned, so make sure you evaluate what you have read and experienced,' she advises.

Love of the subject

Do you find yourself talking and reading endlessly about your subject and related fields? Tutors will be looking for students who not only have great grades and are

What are they looking for?

- You might have an image of the typical Oxbridge student, but both universities are keen to encourage all types of applicants from all backgrounds.
- In 2014, 56% of UK students accepted for Oxford and 62% accepted for Cambridge came from state/maintained schools.
- In the same year, around 34% of Oxford entries came from one or more disadvantaged groups, such as those from socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods or areas of low participation in higher education.



well-read; they expect you to be genuinely passionate about your subject, too.

Of course, you might visit museums or other places appropriate to your subject, or undertake relevant work experience. These will all help to impress, so long as you can talk enthusiastically about the experiences and explain how they have added depth to the study of your subject.

Personal statements

Universities build a picture of you as a student from all the different information you provide. The personal statement is an important part of this, but it is judged alongside all the other elements of

your application. Because Oxford and Cambridge use a wide range of assessment methods, the personal statement is arguably less critical than it is when applying to other universities.

Tutors will read your personal statement to try to understand what has motivated you to apply for their course. Oxford advises that around 80% of your personal statement should focus on your academic interests, with 20% covering unrelated extra-curricular activities.

You don't necessarily need a long list of extra-curricular activities on your personal statement. Oxford says these are only

helpful in so far as they demonstrate the selection criteria for your course. Tutors would prefer to see how you can reflect critically on your experience rather than looking at where or with who you have gained experience.

Interview

Just like grades, how you perform at interview will be a big deal. Think of your Oxbridge interview as being a bit like an exam, but out loud. It will be an intellectual interrogation - but it should be a friendly one! The key is in your preparation (see pages 10-11 for more on how to prepare).

During the interview process, tutors will be looking to see how you respond to new information. Many questions are designed to test your ability to apply logic and reason to an idea you may never have encountered before. The questions may seem difficult, but tutors are more concerned with how you think than what you know.

Tests

For many courses at Oxford, you need to take a test as part of your application. You will need to register separately for any tests, by a set date in October, and generally sit them in your school or college, or at a local centre.

Cambridge is also introducing written tests as part of its admissions process, affecting students applying for courses starting in autumn 2017.

Useful links:

- www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/tests
- <http://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/applying/admissions-assessments>

Is Oxbridge for you?

- You can get a better idea about the university and the course before you decide to apply by taking advantage of:
 - **Open days** - find out more about courses, the application process, student support, finance and careers, and speak to staff and current students.
 - **Other events** - Cambridge offers a range of subject masterclasses and student masterclasses for year 12 students and Oxford has an extensive outreach programme of local events:
 - www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/open-days-outreach
 - www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/events
 - **Current students** - talk to students on your chosen course when you visit. You can also read the student views on Which? University:
 - www.which.co.uk/oxford
 - www.which.co.uk/cambridge

'The important thing to remember is that you're preparing to study your subject at university and that's what we're tapping into at interview,' says Dr David Beckingham, an interviewer at Cambridge University. 'We want to see how you've gone beyond your school curriculum, the kinds of things you've been reading and the academic debates you've been having - that's what we want to explore with you.'

David Beckingham



Oxford versus Cambridge

Now you've made the decision to make an application, it's time to consider which university, as well as which college, to apply to

You know that Oxbridge is for you but you can only apply to one of them, so how do you decide between the two? The universities have a lot in common, including their collegiate structure, personalised teaching methods and wealth of resources available to students. The main difference is in the courses they offer; both universities agree that the most important decision to make is the degree you wish to study, not which institution to apply to.

With this in mind, be aware that some courses are offered at one university but not the other and courses with similar titles may be different in content. Scrutinise the course details to see which appeals to you and read each university's prospectus and website for up-to-date course information.

The collegiate system - what is it?

Oxford and Cambridge are both collegiate universities, which means they consist of the central university and a number of financially-independent colleges. There are over 30 colleges at Oxford and 29 at Cambridge. So once you have selected your university and course, you'll need to consider the colleges on offer.

Your college is your base while you're studying, but it's much more than a hall of residence – it's also where you eat, socialise and spend time studying. Students are members of their college

and of the wider university, with access to university and department facilities like laboratories and libraries, as well as groups and societies.

Many students find that this structure gives you the best of both worlds – you can study at a large, international university while enjoying the benefits of a small, friendly community.

Working and studying

While part-time work is a normal part of life for most university students, it is less common for Oxbridge students.

Oxford University says that full-time graduate students should 'regard their studies as a full-time occupation of at least 40 hours per week' and recommends that students do not undertake more than eight hours' paid work each week whilst studying.

Cambridge also has strict rules about students working whilst they study. It does not allow students to undertake paid work while they are studying full-time, however it does allow academic-related work for up to 10 hours per week.

Your semesters will involve a lot of hard work and academic study, however you'll be rewarded with long holidays too. Terms typically last just under two months and holiday periods often stretch to five or six weeks at Easter and Christmas and longer for the summer break.



Day-to-day life in Oxford and Cambridge

If your choice of course hasn't ruled out either university it's time to think carefully about how your student experience will differ in each city. Here's an overview, although the best way to know which will suit you is to visit and see for yourself.

Cambridge

- A small city where almost a fifth of the population are students and the centre is dominated by the university; it could be the place for you if you're after a small town feel.
- Cambridge is more laidback than Oxford and arguably prettier, with a river flowing through the city centre and countryside surroundings.
- If you're into pubs more than clubs, Cambridge won't disappoint.

Oxford

- If you're after a bustling city, Oxford is livelier and busier than Cambridge, but it's still small enough to cover on foot.
- The downside to this is that traffic can get very busy at times.
- There's plenty of culture on your doorstep, with a wealth of museums and galleries and great shopping.
- Oxford has better nightlife to offer than Cambridge, with more bars and clubs.

Top tips on choosing a college

- You can apply to a specific college, or if you would prefer not to choose you can make an 'open application'. This won't increase your chances of being accepted, but you won't be penalised for submitting an open application either.
- Some colleges have more applicants than others, but selecting a college with fewer applications doesn't increase your chance of being made an offer.
- Make sure the course you want to study is offered at the college before you apply.
- Take into consideration factors such as the size and age of the college and its buildings, the type of accommodation provided, location and facilities – these all vary and will affect your day-to-day life at university.
- Think about your finances – rents vary and some may offer grants or other funding opportunities.
- Shortlist a few colleges by looking at their websites to read about their facilities. You can then contact college admissions offices if you have any questions.
- Try to visit a few colleges on your shortlist to get a feel for them before you apply. Use your instinct – some will suit you better than others and only you can be the judge of this.

Student views on Oxford

"Oxford works hard and plays hard. Although it can be quite expensive in places many areas have student deals. Colleges have their own bars, and they're a lot cheaper than nights out."

2nd year, English Literature

"For the German course there are typically around four tutorials a week, one-two group classes and one-two lectures a week. Most of the teaching aspect is personalised and targeted."

1st year, German Literature

"The colleges vary massively in the accommodation provided, as some guarantee accommodation for three years, others [don't]... some are self-catered while others are catered."

1st year, Biology

Oxford famous alumni:

- Tony Benn
- Alan Bennett
- Sir Tim Berners-Lee
(inventor of the World Wide Web)
- David Dimbleby
- T S Eliot
- Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall
- William Golding
- Professor Stephen Hawking
- David Cameron and over 20 former prime ministers, including Tony Blair, Margaret Thatcher and Sir Edward Heath.

Cambridge famous alumni:

- Charles, Prince of Wales
- Prince Edward
- Earl of Wessex
- Oliver Cromwell
- 15 former British Prime Ministers
- Sir Kingsley Amis
- Sylvia Plath
- Hugh Laurie
- Griff Rhys Jones
- Sir Trevor Nunn.

Student views on Cambridge

"Supervisors will see you each week, for some subjects this means four or five hours a week of small group teaching."

2nd year, Chemistry

"Libraries are full of everything you could ever need and more! All departments are fantastically equipped. Make the most of everything."

3rd year, Experimental Psychology

"College life is great, it is nice to have a small community where you can socialise with your friends and be involved in college events."

2nd year, Pre Clinical Medicine

Oxbridge interviews and tests

You can't predict how an interview or entry test will go, but with our help you can be prepared

What to expect at your interview

A good deal of the teaching at Oxford or Cambridge takes place in small classes ('tutorials' at Oxford and 'supervisions' at Cambridge). In many ways, your interview will be replicating this to assess whether you're suited to the teaching style.

The details of the interview can vary depending on your chosen subject or the college you're applying to. At Cambridge you'll get one to three interviews lasting 20-40 minutes each and you'll be interviewed by up to three people.

Before the interview at Oxford, you may be given something to consider, such as a piece of writing, a maths problem or an object, depending on your course. This will then form the start of the discussion in the interview, and further questions will flow from the discussion.

Useful links:

- www.ox.ac.uk/interviews
- <http://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/applying/interviews>

Top tips: How to prepare for your interview

- Think about some basic questions that are often asked at the beginning of interviews. For example, why you have chosen this particular subject, and why you want to study it at Oxford/Cambridge.
- Re-read your Ucas application, personal statement, and any written work that you have submitted, thinking about how you might expand on what you wrote.
- Remind yourself of the selection criteria for your chosen course and why the course is right for you.
- Read widely around your chosen subject, including newspaper articles, websites, journals, magazines and other publications.
- Take a critical view of ideas and arguments that you encounter at school or college, or in the media - consider all sides of any debate.
- Organise a practice interview with a teacher or someone familiar with your subject, but preferably not someone you know very well.

Dr David Beckingham, an interviewer at the University of Cambridge, says they're not interested in a perfect, polished performance. "It doesn't matter if you have to repeat yourself, if you have to ask us to repeat a question or if you take time to answer a question. The important thing is that we are there to discuss you and your interest in your subject. My advice is to be yourself," he says.

How Oxford and Cambridge use entry tests

Students applying for courses starting in autumn 2017 will now have to sit tests as part of their application to Cambridge. Oxford has always used tests as part of its application procedure, so expect to sit a test regardless of the university you apply to.

At Cambridge, written assessments may be taken pre-interview or at-interview, depending on the course you apply for. Oxford tests generally take place before your interview and you can normally sit them in your school or college, or at a centre near your home.

Remember, the tests are only one part of the application process - tutors will be considering every part of your application. Tests are not used as a stand-alone mechanism for interview selection.

Interview over - what happens next?

The next step is to hear whether you are offered a place or not. If you are, it may be 'unconditional', but it is more likely to be 'conditional' and dependent on achieving certain grades.

Interviews take place during December at Cambridge, and decisions are made by January. If you aren't offered a place, you may be put in to the 'winter pool', which puts you in the running for an alternative college to the one you originally applied to. Decisions on pooled applicants are made by the end of January.

Oxford has three deadline admissions

- in November, January and March - and applicants are usually notified of the outcome from the department 8-10 weeks after the deadline.

No matter what the outcome, remember to take a moment to congratulate yourself! Completing the Oxbridge application is a brilliant experience that you will be able to learn from and draw upon in many circumstances in the future.

Many outstanding students are not offered Oxbridge places but still go on to excellent universities and have successful futures. Of course, you may choose to reapply. It's worth questioning if you are fully prepared to go through the application process again before making that decision.

If it's a genuine 'yes', follow each university's guidelines to ask for feedback from your application - that way, you can make sure you're fully prepared next time.

Did you know?:

- Cambridge also expects you to fill out a Supplementary Application Questionnaire (SAQ) after you submit your Ucas form. It is designed to ensure that tutors have consistent information about all applicants. While this is not strictly a test, it is important that you fill it out carefully.
- Find out more here: www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/applying/saq

"Sometimes it's a good idea to talk out loud and develop your thoughts with the interviewer, as it shows them how you think and approach problems."

Second Year French Student, University Of Oxford



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about Oxford and Cambridge universities:
www.which.co.uk/oxbridge

