

## Supplementary Admissions Guide for Teachers

Dear colleagues,

Following requests for additional support from our link area schools, Christ's College Admissions Department has written this additional guide. It is intended to supplement the information provided in the University's [Advice for Teachers and HE Advisors booklet](#) and to expand upon some of the guidance given there. In particular, this guide aims to cover the following topics:

1. [Helping students to prepare to apply in Year 12](#)
2. [Personal Statements](#)
3. [References, the SAQ and ECF](#)
4. [Preparing for admissions assessments](#)
5. [Preparing for interviews](#)

The content of this guide is taken primarily from sessions developed for Christ's College's Regional Teacher Briefings, which are held annually on a rotating basis between our different link areas. You can find out more about these events and other university-run events for teachers at the following websites:

- <https://www.christs.cam.ac.uk/regional-teacher-briefings>
- <https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/events/teachers>

If you have any questions at all or would like further support from Christ's College, please don't hesitate to get in touch using the contact details below.

### Helping Students to Prepare to Apply in Year 12

In addition to working hard at their academic studies, strong applicants to Cambridge and other competitive universities have often spent time in Year 12 preparing to apply in a variety of different ways. These can include:

- Exploring their chosen subject through wider reading and enrichment work outside of their A Level studies, also known as supra-curricular enrichment.
- Researching courses available at different universities and narrowing down their options, based on their likely grades, HE preferences and subject/career interests.
- Keeping up to date with current affairs, broadly speaking, as they are relevant to their subject interests.
- Attending university-run events such as Open Days, 'Taster Days' and Summer Schools to get an idea of what it is like to study their subject at university (if possible – please note, it is **not** expected that students will necessarily have had access to such opportunities and applicants are **not** disadvantaged in any way if they have not been able to attend such events).
- Organising relevant work experience (again, only if possible and relevant – Cambridge does **not** have a work experience requirement for entry to any of its courses).
- Looking up admissions assessments and other aspects of different universities' and subjects' admissions procedures online, so that students are familiar with these before undertaking them.

In order to be as well prepared as possible, it is therefore advisable to start this process relatively early in Year 12. A proposed timeline might be:

- Autumn Year 12 - Starting to explore possible subject interests and supra-curricular enrichment options.
- January onwards - Time set aside every week (e.g. tutor time) for supra-curricular subject enrichment.
- June/July and summer - Starting to prepare for the actual application (e.g. drafting personal statement, preparing for written assessments).
- September/October Year 13 - Finishing touches to application and submit.

## Supra-Curricular Enrichment

Supra-curricular enrichment entails anything that a student has done which enhances their learning and is not a part of their compulsory studies at school or sixth form. An activity is defined as being supra-curricular if it meets the following criteria:

1. It has academic content
2. It is relevant to their individual subject interests
3. It goes beyond the scope of their A-Level or IB syllabus

Evidence of supra-curricular activity is something that Cambridge and many other top-level universities look for as part of a strong application because it acts as evidence for some key traits that we look for in prospective students, including passion for the subject, the ability to learn independently, research skills and self-motivation. The activities mentioned can also be used as a discussion point at interview, allowing us to tailor some questions to the student's own academic interests and explore them in more detail. By comparison, extra-curricular activity not directly related to the academic subject applied for is now much less relevant to many top level universities because such institutions are far more interested in your pupils as potential academic students than as 'well rounded individuals'. Furthermore, the availability of extra-curricular opportunities is often linked to socio-economic status, meaning that the Cambridge admissions process would be structurally unfair if it prioritised this sort of achievement. By comparison, everyone can engage in supra-curricular activity as the resources are often freely available (and we work as a university to provide such resources free of charge), so nobody is disadvantaged by being unable to get access to them.

The possibilities for supra-curricular exploration are almost endless, but certain key resources can be identified:

- **Additional reading.** Perhaps the most obvious example of supra-curricular enrichment and often the best place to start. Encourage students to download university reading lists, suggest relevant reading using your own subject expertise and use short introductory guides to get them started before supporting them to read more challenging pieces, such as academic journals (if appropriate).
- **Free online courses.** Also known as MOOCs, providers such as 'Future Learn' have a huge range of freely available courses that cover all sorts of subjects. At most these require students to commit a couple of hours a week for a few weeks. They are very user-friendly.
- **Podcasts.** Academic podcasts exist that cover virtually every subject. Radio 4 is a particularly good source of material. Again, these are exceptionally user-friendly and serve the dual purpose of helping students explore their subject interests in more detail and keeping them up to date with developments in their subject areas.

These are just three examples of the sort of material that is widely available online. For a wider range of subject-specific resources, please see the [Christ's College Supra-Curricular Enrichment Resources for Prospective Applicants](#) sheet, which is available on our website. Other ways to source resources include building links with other HE providers local to your school and students might also be encouraged to start their own reading groups or academic clubs and societies. Whatever they do, students should be encouraged to keep a record of their supra-curricular activity, as this will help with writing personal statements and ensure that nothing is forgotten.

If students are unsure what they want to study at university, they should start by trying a bit of supra-curricular activity for each of the subjects that they are contemplating. It can then help them to narrow down their options. After all, this sort of exploration should be enjoyable, so if students are not enjoying supra-curricular reading about a particular topic, they probably wouldn't enjoy studying it at university.

Please note that we would never encourage potential applicants to pay for this sort of activity. Through libraries they can get access to many books, magazines and other resources, whilst all the online resources listed on our sheet are free to access (at least on a limited basis in the case of online journals). If buying books should ever be necessary, you can encourage second-hand purchases online to keep the costs as low as possible.

## Work Experience

Work experience is less important for a Cambridge application than it is for many other universities, but there are some subjects, such as medicine and veterinary medicine, where it is more relevant. Generally speaking, relevant work experience that develops students' understanding of their subject and/or its professional dimension is unlikely to be a disadvantage to any application and, if your school requires its pupils to undertake a programme of work experience during Year 12, it is in your students' interests to ensure that this is spent in a way that is beneficial to their future plans. As members of your local community, you are best placed to advise your students about the opportunities available to them locally. However, for general advice and guidance, please see the [Christ's College Year 12 Opportunities for Prospective Applicants guide](#), which has a section on finding relevant work experience.

## Summer Schools and Other Opportunities

Thanks to the outreach work of universities and colleges, professional bodies and widening participation charities, there now exist a wide range of opportunities for UK maintained-sector students to explore Higher Education in the years before they come to apply. While many providers offer opportunities for KS4 pupils, or even younger year groups, most of these initiatives are targeted at Year 12 students and are specifically intended to encourage those students to study a particular subject at university or to apply to particular institutions, or to help them to understand what they need to do at university if they wish to pursue a particular career and how they can get there. Alongside other enrichment activities, such as wider reading, these can provide a valuable way to engage in supra-curricular exploration of students' academic interests and to explore the options available to them at university. Cambridge, like many other top universities, does not expect its applicants to have engaged in any of these programmes because it does not judge applicants on the opportunities they have had access to during their education. However, we receive many emails from students and teachers asking whether opportunities such as these exist, so we have compiled the [Year 12 Opportunities for Prospective Applicants guide](#) to help students find the initiatives that are available to them, should they wish to take advantage of them during Year 12. Like other forms of supra-curricular enrichment, such opportunities may then provide students with additional experiences to discuss in their personal statements, or to put on their CVs in the future, but that is a secondary aim. Most importantly, students should enjoy these experiences: rather than feeling pressured to do something just because it might look 'impressive', they should use it as an opportunity to develop their own academic interests.

## Other Ways to Prepare in Year 12

Alongside supra-curricular exploration of their subjects, there are a couple of other simple things that students can be encouraged to do that can help them prepare to apply to university:

- Keeping up to date with current affairs is always a good idea, especially as they pertain to students' academic interests. It is often apparent at interview which applicants have a sense of the wider context to their studies and which do not and students can easily develop this through following some basic, reliable online news sources. If students are interested in subjects such as English, or history, where textual analysis is important, they could also be encouraged to treat these news sources as texts and to analyse the difference between how, for example, Al Jazeera and Reuters, or The Guardian and The Telegraph, might present the same story.
- Having regular academic conversations is perhaps the single best thing that students can do during Year 12 to prepare. By getting into the habit of having regular conversations with their teachers about things related to the subject they want to study at university, they are developing the focused discursive skills that will help them to succeed at interview. Moreover, they should then feel more relaxed in an interview setting because it will not be the first time they have actually had a conversation with someone about their academic interests. Whilst we fully appreciate that there are many demands on school teachers' time, even half an hour after school every fortnight could make a huge difference to how an applicant feels when they come for interview.
- Practicing admissions assessments. One for very late in Year 12, without a doubt, or over the summer before they apply, but we find students tend to do better at our assessments when they have had a look at them in advance and understand the kind of questions they ask. Timing is also often an issue, so doing a practice paper under timed conditions is never a bad idea. Because these are not tests of existing knowledge, students can't revise for them, but building their familiarity with and understanding of the assessment will help them.

## Personal Statements

Personal statements allow students to tell us about their subject interests, and the process of writing a personal statement can often help a student better understand their academic interests and intellectual motivations. Admissions decisions at Cambridge are based solely on academic criteria (ability and potential), so in a personal statement we expect to see evidence of students' supra-curricular activities and wider engagement with their areas of academic interest. Personal statements are also often used as a basis for discussion at interview.

At Cambridge we use the personal statement as one way of assessing an applicant's commitment and suitability for the course. It can also indicate their subject focus and interests, wider reading (which can then be discussed at interview) and the personality and honesty. Applicants also have access to the Cambridge-specific personal statement on the Supplementary Application Questionnaire, which they can use to tell us things that are relevant only to our course (for example, if they are applying for Physics elsewhere, but for Natural Sciences at Cambridge). The important thing to remember is that the personal statement is only one part of a much larger admissions process at Cambridge, so overall it is arguably less important than for some other universities. However, a bad statement will stand out in the wrong way and that is to be avoided at all costs.

As a general guide, a good personal statement should be academically focussed and subject specific. It should include information to indicate:

- Why a student has chosen the course
- A demonstration of their enthusiasm for and commitment to their chosen course
- Particular areas of interest in their subject
- Analysis of what they have done to learn/prepare
- An explanation of what they have gained from undertaking supra-curricular activities

As mentioned above, extra-curricular activities not directly related to a student's academic interests are generally less important at Cambridge than at other universities. If included in a personal statement, they should be discussed concisely, constituting only a small part of the statement and explaining briefly what the student has gained by undertaking them, rather than simply being a list of activities undertaken. A good overall model for a personal statement is therefore:

An opening paragraph explaining why they want to study the course.	At least 80% of entire statement.
Three to four paragraphs analysing their supra-curricular exploration of their subject.	
A short closing paragraph about their extra-curricular interests and career aspirations/future plans.	Maximum 20% of statement.

In the main section of the statement, students should not just list as many examples of their supra-curricular activities as they can, but should analyse a couple of key examples to demonstrate what they learned by doing this additional study. They will find this easier if they have kept a record of their supra-curricular work (as suggested above). Either way, there are a series of questions students can use to help them perform this analysis. These are:

- What did they do and why did they do it?
- How does it link to their current studies/future studies?
- What did they find interesting? Why?
- What did they learn?
- Did it change how they understand their subject? How?
- How did they/could they follow this up and develop their ideas further?

By analysing in this way, students can demonstrate what they have gained from their supra-curricular study and show how it has helped them to prepare to study this subject at university.

## References

When writing a reference for a student, teachers should summarise their educational background, including present and previous schools and colleges if possible, while flagging up any extenuating circumstances or school context. The reference should focus on the student's academics, highlighting their standing in relation to their peers, especially in the target, or similar, subjects, and discussing any supra-curricular (not extra-curricular – see personal statement segment) activities they have done. The reference should also comment on the student's organisation, focus and motivation. When putting candidates into their academic context, place them in their cohort using quantitative statements, broken down by subject, year group and your experience as a teacher. For example, "Top 5% of students I have taught in 10 years of teaching; Top student of this highly able Chemistry cohort." It is also important to indicate how confident you are in your A-Level predictions. If it is appropriate, an introductory paragraph into school policy can also be useful. For example, informing us if all students are taking external AS exams and are encouraged to think of them as mocks, if students are discouraged from taking a fourth A-Level subject etc., or letting us know of any teaching difficulties they may have experienced.

The examples below (all for medicine) are good, they use quantitative statements to place the applicant in context and mention supra-curriculars (though more detail would have been better in some cases). They also have flagged up some extenuating circumstances.

It is with great pleasure that I write in support of [redacted] application to study Medicine. [redacted] is a determined, hard-working and modest young woman with an outstanding academic record. She gained the best GCSE results in her inner city school; this is all the more impressive when one considers she came to the UK as a refugee at the age of 12 and English is her second language. Her family are members of a persecuted religious minority in Pakistan and she is a first generation University applicant. [redacted] received free school meals at school and, since her family are on a very low income, she receives the College bursary. [redacted] ranks in our top 2% of Science candidates. In her mock exams, she came 5th out of 461 candidates and in Chemistry 20th out of 483. The context of her Maths result does need to be considered; during the build up to her summer exams [redacted] father lost his job. As the second of four siblings [redacted] took it upon herself to work 3 hours a night and full days Saturdays and Sundays to supplement the modest family income. Her results really are impressive considering the lack of time [redacted] had to revise. Her Maths teachers assure me she is well capable of an A\*, so do please consider these circumstances. I would also like you to note that last year, [redacted] took on the challenge of taking four subjects, opting for Spanish as a fourth.

[redacted] attends The Radcliffe School, a mixed comprehensive school, located in an area of relative deprivation; 30% of our 1231 pupils are Pupil Premium; additionally, there is a high proportion of EAL students. The school has a small but growing Sixth Form, with 86 students currently on roll in year 13. The school was designated as RI by Ofsted in September 2017 and was previously identified as an 'Aim Higher' school. There has, historically, been a significant lack of aspiration from many students and parents. The overall ALPs score for this year is a 7.

[redacted] is a gifted chemistry student who exudes enthusiasm for the subject. She is able to work independently and with others and I recommend [redacted] for a medical degree because of her continuous diligent reflection and problem solving skills which has put her in the top 1% of our school achievers in all her subjects. She is a mature young lady who is self-motivated to learn and achieve her goals.

An example which demonstrates some of the pitfalls of references that need to be avoided is below. This was a post-qualification applicant for Music who had achieved A\*AB at A-Level, with the B in Spanish, and had therefore missed the standard offer. In these circumstances, we would look to see that their teacher explained why the student had not achieved the required grade in Spanish, but the reference only said:

Well expressed language essays on a variety of themes over the course of the two years showed that [redacted] has a genuine interest in the cultural aspects of Spanish and he gave an interesting and independently researched presentation in Spanish on the themes of the film Celda 211. In his written work, his ideas are cogently articulated and he also pays great attention to grammatical detail. His commitment to his language studies is borne out by his willingness to research the culture and idiosyncrasies of Spain and Latin America.

Within his boarding house, [redacted] took a great interest in the well-being of others, acting as an excellent prefect and always

Equally problematic was the school's comments on the student's strengths, which were vague and quickly moved away from focusing on the subject applied for:

For information on the school's 6th form curriculum for 2017 leavers visit: <http://tinyurl.com/VICur>. The perfect example of the all-rounder, [redacted] has excelled in every area of school. His D2 in Music and D3 in English provide evidence of his intellectual ability and capacity to produce work at a very high level, while his musical performances on organ, viola or voice always impress. That he also manages to commit to rugby and cricket, as well as maintaining his own Land Rover Defender shows his willingness to commit fully to every undertaking.

The comment, "the perfect example of the all-rounder", could be read with a not-so-positive connotation; we want to know that they are excellent academically, not that they play sports several times a week. Note also that because the Cambridge system still produces paper documents for admissions staff, the URL at the top does not come up as a hyperlink for us and it is incredibly unlikely that any admissions tutor will ever type it in to a search bar. It is, in short, a waste of space.

### Supplementary Application Questionnaire (SAQ)

The Supplementary Application Questionnaire (SAQ) was developed to ensure that we have complete and consistent information about all applicants. It also enables us to collect information that is not part of the UCAS application but is helpful when assessing applications, such as:

- UMS marks obtained in AS/A-Level units (now largely removed by qualification reform).
- Topics already covered as part of your AS/A Level (or equivalent) courses (which helps our interviewers decide which questions to ask).
- Contextual information, such as class sizes and whether students were able to take all the subjects they wanted to at A-Level or equivalent (which helps us view each application in context).
- Students also have the option to tell us about any teaching issues they feel they have experienced and an open section where they can simply tell us anything else they think is relevant.

The SAQ also has a section for a separate Cambridge-specific personal statement of 1,200 characters. If students wish to add anything specific about their application to Cambridge that they could not write in their general UCAS personal statement, this is their opportunity. We would be particularly interested to know what aspects of the Cambridge course attracted them to apply here. Please note that this statement is not “assessed” in the same sense as the general UCAS statement and that not providing an additional personal statement will not disadvantage their application in any way.

For further information please see here:

- <https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/applying/saq>
- <https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/sites/www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/files/publications/saq.pdf>

### Extenuating Circumstances Form (ECF)

If there are extenuating circumstances that have caused significant educational disruption or disadvantage for a student, it may be appropriate for the school/college referee to complete and submit the Extenuating Circumstances Form. The ECF has been designed to ensure that the Cambridge Colleges have the information they require to accurately assess any applicant who has experienced particular personal or educational disadvantage. The information provided on the form gives Admissions Tutors context against which they can consider the academic record of an applicant (whether the student has excelled in spite of, or been hindered due to their personal/educational circumstances), and, if appropriate, their performance at interview.

The ECF should be used where an applicant's education has been seriously disrupted or disadvantaged through health, disability, difficulties with schooling, or challenging personal or family circumstances. These include:

- A serious, acute or chronic medical condition (especially since the age of 14) which caused significant educational disruption.
- Living independently of the family (estranged students) or any kind of serious disruption due to adverse family circumstances.
- Significant caring responsibilities, or recent bereavement / serious illness within close family
- Serious disruption to educational provision or other circumstances where serious disruption has occurred – the school/college is welcome to contact the relevant College's Admissions Office to discuss an applicant's particular circumstances.

The form must usually be completed by the school or college. If the circumstances are such that the school is not aware of the circumstances, a doctor or social worker can validate the form for the student in their place, but otherwise it is usually best that the teachers are responsible for any further enquiries.

It is important that any extenuating information is provided to the relevant Cambridge College at the point of application and use of the form will never disadvantage a student's application.

More information on the form can be found at:

<https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/applying/decisions/extenuating-circumstances-form>.

## Preparing for Admissions Assessments

Most applicants are now required to take a course-specific written assessment, either pre-interview or at interview, depending on the course applied to. These have been introduced as an alternative to the AS-levels we were previously reliant on and they are not pass/fail tests! They are designed to supplement the information in their application and provide a gauge of their existing abilities – to assess both skills (such as comprehension and thinking skills) and, where appropriate, levels of current knowledge and understanding relevant to the course applied for. They are also intended to introduce applicants to new information beyond their current syllabi and see how they try to address it. They provide a universal, benchmark assessment of all applicants for a subject, regardless of the particular qualifications being studied at their school. However, as they are different to any exam they've ever sat before, they will be challenging and unfamiliar if the student hasn't looked at the papers in advance.

It must be emphasised that these written assessments form part of our holistic assessment of applicants, they are not a stand-alone mechanism for interview selection – the written assessment performance is taken into account alongside all elements of their application. Pre-interview admissions assessment performance **can** affect whether an applicant is invited to interview or not, but it is rarely decisive on its own.

Students can find information about the written assessment in the Entry Requirements section of the relevant course pages here <https://www.christs.cam.ac.uk/subjects-0>. Other than revision of relevant recent subject knowledge where appropriate and/or having a go at a practice paper where available, no advance preparation is needed for the Cambridge written assessments. All information can be found online and includes full assessment specifications for every assessment, past papers with answer sheets and explained answers, and extensive information, advice and guidance. Applicants are advised to download all of the relevant documents and discuss them with their teachers. It is also often very helpful for them to practise under exam conditions because many applicants struggle to complete enough questions to do well in the assessments.

***Please note that we're aware of private companies and individuals who offer, at a charge, information and advice on our admissions process, assessments and interviews. We DO NOT support or encourage any of these commercial enterprises. None of these companies/individuals has access to any information that's not already available free of charge to all schools, colleges and individual students from College admissions office, the Cambridge Admissions Office or Cambridge University Students' Union (CUSU); and we're unable to verify the accuracy of the information these companies/individuals may provide.***

## Pre-Interview Assessments

The pre-interview assessments are organised by the Cambridge Assessment Admissions Testing, and are taken at a local authorised centre. For many students, this is their school or college (see below for more information on how school/colleges can become an authorised centre). Applicants who won't be able to take their pre-interview assessment at their school/college must find an open authorised centre instead. Students can use the search facility on the [Cambridge Assessment Admissions Testing website](#) to find their nearest authorised centre.

With the exception of the BMAT, there is no entry fee for Cambridge applicants to take the pre-interview written assessments, but some open assessment centres may charge candidates an administration fee.

Only BMAT and ELAT results will be available to assessment centres and candidates. These results will be accessible through Cambridge Assessment Admissions Testing's secure Results Online system for a limited time after admissions decisions have been released (usually from mid-January). For other pre-interview assessments, an indication of performance in the written assessment will be included as part of the feedback about unsuccessful candidates.

## At-Interview Assessment

For courses requiring a written assessment at interview, these are taken when applicants attend their interview (if interviewed), which usually take place during December. Details of at-interview assessments are normally supplied to shortlisted applicants together with details of their interview. Students can find information about which courses use at-interview assessment in the Entry Requirements section of the relevant course pages here <https://www.christs.cam.ac.uk/subjects-0>. There are no charges associated with taking any written assessments at interview in Cambridge.

### Example Arts/Humanities Assessment: History

#### *Section 1: Reading comprehension (60 minutes):*

Consists of four tasks with multiple choice questions based on recently-written source excerpts. The questions require candidates to identify and analyse ideas present in the sources, determine the writer's purpose, make inferences and draw comparisons between sources. There is no specialist knowledge required.

#### *Section 2: Critical response to texts (60 minutes):*

Here the student is asked to provide an essay wherein they compare two passages of text (primary or secondary) on historical themes with a designated focus for the answer. Strong answers will display analytical thought and the abilities to select evidence and deploy it in a coherent argument to answer a specific question, making connections and comparisons between sources and handling historical concepts and mentalities appropriately. It is essential to spend time reading the sources and planning an answer.

### Example Sciences Assessment: Natural Sciences

#### *Section 1 (80 minutes):*

Five parts of 18 multiple choice questions, candidates answer three parts. These are Maths, Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Advanced Maths/Physics. Maths is compulsory and candidates choose two others based on their knowledge. There is no calculator allowed.

#### *Section 2 (40 minutes):*

Six questions with multiple parts, two each on Biology, Chemistry and Physics. Candidates choose two questions to answer. The answers will be handwritten; candidates may also be expected to draw diagrams and analyse data (including drawing graphs). Calculators are allowed.

Note that this assessment is designed to be challenging and it is usual for many candidates not to finish it. Typical applicants will score around 50%.

## Registering for Written Assessments

Details for how to register candidates can be found here, with more details included below:

<http://www.admissionstesting.org/administering-our-tests/register-test-takers/>

Students don't need to register or be registered for **at-interview** written assessments – the colleges provide details of arrangements in the letters inviting applicants to interview.

Applicants must register online to take the relevant **pre-interview assessment** in advance, separately from their UCAS application. The assessment centre must register each individual applicant – students cannot register themselves – through the online Cambridge Assessment Admissions Testing Entries Extranet, a secure website that allows Exams Officers at authorised centres to register, view, modify and withdraw candidate entries. Assessment centres can usually access the Entries Extranet and start to register candidates from the beginning of September. Assessment centres must register each candidate by the appropriate deadline, given here: <https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/find-out-more/teachers-and-parents/teachers-written-assessment>. If an applicant isn't registered by their assessment centre by the relevant deadline they won't be able to take the appropriate pre-interview assessment, which will mean that their application to the University of Cambridge won't be valid.

The information required to register candidates is:

- UCAS Personal ID
- name exactly as it will appear on their UCAS application
- gender
- date of birth
- details of any access requirements/arrangements
- the university/institution they're applying to
- the course (including UCAS course code) they're applying for

It is very important to ensure that these details are accurate and match what the student puts in their UCAS application, so that the student's results can be sent to the correct university. Log into the Entries Extranet and enter the candidate's information. Make a note of the candidate number once you have successfully registered their details. Then, let the candidate know they have been successfully registered for the admissions test, by providing them with the candidate number generated by the Entries Extranet.

Please note that from the 2018-19 academic year onwards, failure to register for the relevant admissions assessment will be grounds for colleges to treat applications as invalid, so please work with your exams office in school to ensure that your students are registered on time.

### **Authorised Centres**

Schools/colleges that are already authorised to offer the Biomedical Admission Test (BMAT) and/or University of Oxford's pre-interview tests will automatically be registered to offer the Cambridge pre-interview written assessments as well. Otherwise, the school/college must apply to Cambridge Assessment Admissions Testing to become an authorised centre, done here: <http://www.admissionstesting.org/administering-our-tests/become-a-test-centre>.

### **Preparing for Interviews**

Interviews are discussion-based, and predominantly academic and subject-related, so applicants will be asked questions relevant to the course they applied for, and about the information provided in the written elements of their application. They are designed to largely mirror the type of teaching that occurs in supervisions, and are often much more subject intensive than those given at other universities, as they are testing academic ability (not knowledge!) of students rather than getting a picture of their character.

The interviews usually take place from the last week of November and through the first two weeks of December, and we interview roughly 75% of applicants. The applicants who reach this stage will be notified in November. Everyone we feel has a realistic chance of being offered a place is invited to attend an interview. Unless the applicant is international, each student will be interviewed at the college they are being considered for (if an open application is made, they are assigned a college and then treated the same as any other applicant). Usually, all the interviews will occur on the same day, and students will usually have two interviews of about 20-25 minutes each. Variations on this are not an indication on how a student has performed in any way. Not all candidates who are interviewed will be successful/made an offer of a place, but all those who are made an offer will have been interviewed.

It is important for applicants to realise that interviewers will not be trying to 'catch them out', but will be challenging them to think and show how they can apply their existing knowledge and skills laterally to less familiar problems. Offers are based solely on academic criteria – the student's ability and their potential – and interviews are one of the methods used to assess this. It is also important for students to understand that, as with the written assessments, their performance at interview alone does not determine the outcome of their application. Admissions decisions are made holistically, taking all available information into account.

The best method to help students prepare, is to encourage them to talk with confidence and enthusiasm about their subject and wider interests. A mock interview **can** be helpful to give the experience of expressing ideas and opinions in response to unknown questions. However, students are not expected to have ready-prepared answers, and often over-rehearsed answers can be counterproductive if students are preoccupied with recalling set speeches on general topics rather than listening to the interviewers' questions and responding accordingly.

Students should be encouraged to read broadly in the areas of their A Level/IB Higher Level (or equivalent) subjects and must be prepared to think quite hard in their interviews, but should be reminded that often there are no right or wrong answers to the questions they are asked. It is the process of reaching their answer that is generally of most significance, rather than the answer itself. Like in Maths exams, students should "show their working" by explaining their thought processes as they go, rather than trying to come up with a "perfect" answer in silence.

They also are **not** being assessed on their clothes or appearance, so there's no need to dress formally, and it's not necessary to wear a suit! It is usually best for them to wear whatever they feel comfortable in and not be put off by what other people have chosen to wear. They may wish to bear in mind that Cambridge in December is often very cold, but interview rooms are often warm (to keep the interviewers happy!), so layers might be a good idea.

### Mock Interview

Mock interviews are one of thing you can do to help prepare a student for an interview. This does **not** entail coaching, as some external agencies offer; in fact as stated above, this is most often counter-productive as students will inevitably struggle when faced with new and unexpected questions. Instead the mock interview should involve familiarising the applicant with the challenge of conducting academic conversation, in a slightly unfamiliar topic with someone they have never met before. Along these lines, students should always be made aware that Cambridge interviews might end up being a significantly different experience than a mock interview in many ways though, and should be prepared for this. If schools are interested in providing mock interviews for applicants, they may find the following guidelines helpful:

- The interviewer should be an unfamiliar figure. While Cambridge interviewers do not set out to intimidate applicants, the interview process can be daunting. To better reflect this, we'd recommend that the interviewer be someone relatively senior in the school who has never taught/tutored the applicant. Maybe consider an exchange with a neighbouring school, with students from each school being interviewed by staff at the other. This way, the applicant is unfamiliar with both the interviewer and the location, giving a more realistic experience.
- The interviewer does not have to be a subject specialist. It helps if they are not totally out of their depth with the subject, but they don't need highly detailed knowledge. All they really need is enough familiarity with ways of thinking about the subject to push the applicant to explain their take on the subject. A historian can probably successfully challenge an English applicant's stance on Macbeth, while a biology teacher should be able to make a medicine applicant feel stretched.

The interview itself should be:

- Not too formal. A lot of Cambridge interviews are conducted on squishy sofas, and the tone is generally more casual than a job interview. However, while the interviewer will not be too stern, they are likely to tend towards the professional rather than the chatty.
- Twenty to thirty minutes long. This is the normal range of length for an admissions interview. The interviewers are likely to greet the applicant and may introduce themselves, but will move on to the interview very quickly. A small amount of time will be left at the end for any questions the applicant may have.
- Challenging but not aggressive. Part of the point of the interview is to test the limits of the applicant's capabilities and their ability to respond well when put under pressure or presented with unfamiliar challenges, as a student will often have to do in a supervision. Interviewers will push applicants, often to the point where they are struggling. However, it is not the purpose of the interview to humiliate or upset applicants. If an applicant begins to struggle, the interviewer is likely to provide a hint or to switch to an alternative topic or line of questioning.

- The types of questions asked should be primarily academic, with the interview focussing on their academic ability in terms of both their current knowledge and their ability to apply that knowledge to unfamiliar problems. The discussion will most often cover the students recent academic work and other details from their written application, prominent issues in the recent news related to the subject (as mentioned above, we do not expect in depth knowledge of the news in general, but we would expect applicants to display an interest in news stories relevant to their subject) and questions on some “prompt” material (e.g. a written passage or experimental evidence) that will be given to the student either in advance of or at the interview. With science-based subjects, it is quite likely that the applicant will be asked to consider some relevant mathematical or scientific problems, whether pen-and-paper calculations, estimations or simple thought experiments. A line of questioning based on a prop (e.g. an animal bone for an aspiring Vet, a piece of machinery for an engineering applicant) is also quite common. The university’s online video resources should give you a good idea of the sorts of exercises that might be used.
- There are often examples of ‘odd’ questions that have been asked in the media and these can worry some applicants. These do not come out of nowhere, and often make much more sense in the context of the discussion! Equally, the students are usually not expected to come up with a conclusive answer – it is about looking at how they respond to new information, their thought process and ultimate approach.
- It is often a good idea to start with the familiar – e.g. a discussion of something from their personal statement – to help relax the student into the interview, before questioning moves to a greater depth and takes them to and past the ‘I don’t know’ point. Students need to realise that ‘I don’t know’ is not a failure; the important factor is how they respond past this point. If an applicant answers a certain question poorly, you may wish to encourage them to reconsider, or ask a question that approaches the issue from a different angle. Reassure them that it is okay to ask for extra information or for time to think. If an applicant answers well, try following with a question that leads on in some way - you might ask them simply to clarify a point they’ve made in more detail, or challenge a point and ask them to defend it, or present them with a different scenario or some additional information and ask how their response would change to suit it. Allow the applicants time and space to answer the questions you ask, but a gentle nudge may be in order if they seem to be struggling too much. The key goal is to take the applicant out of their comfort zone and get them thinking on their feet. Because Cambridge interviews are based on discussion of quite complex issues or ideas, it is not unusual for an interviewer to prompt an applicant or ask leading questions. This is not necessarily a bad sign!
- Make notes. Many interviewers take short notes during the interview, and this can be disconcerting to some applicants. Make sure you jot something down, even if it’s just your shopping list, so that the applicant is prepared for this. Notes could also be useful in reviewing the interview.
- Remember that the purpose of these mock interviews is to make applicants feel more comfortable with the interview process, rather than less. However, you should be wary of making the mock interviews too easy, as this will most likely lead to a shock when they attend their real interviews. You should try to strike a balance between panicking your applicants and mollicoddling them.
- Obviously, the more experience applicants get the better. However, we appreciate that teachers are generally very pressed for time and may struggle to find time for mock interviews. We would strongly encourage you to try and provide at least one practice interview per Cambridge applicant, if at all possible.

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## Other ways to prepare

There aren't any special tricks to preparing for interviews, and interviewers can usually tell if an applicant has been over-rehearsed by well-meaning teachers or parents. On the other hand, there are some things students can do beforehand which will, at the very least, make them feel more confident.

- **Help them know what to expect**

Being familiar with what's likely to happen during an interview can help to calm a lot of nerves. To give applicants an idea of what to expect on the day, they may find it useful to watch our Interview films, which they can find here: <https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/applying/interviews>.

- **Identify obvious possible questions**

Students should keep in mind that they'll be asked questions relevant to the course they've applied for, and about the information they've provided in the written elements of your application. Therefore, it is possible to help them to think about questions that might be asked and how they could answer them – such as why they want to study at Cambridge, why they've chosen this particular subject, and if they have specific areas of interest.

- **Re-read personal statements and any written work**

Similarly, students can re-read all submitted documents and think about the subject-specific topics which arise from these documents. They might also want to make sure they are familiar with things they say they have read or done, as these are likely to be asked about.

- **Read around their subject**

Students can also think about particular topics they'd like to talk about – they can to some extent direct the interview by showing interest in specific topics that you're asked about. This is another reason why the supra-curricular reading/keeping up to date with current affairs in their subject mentioned above is important.

- **Practise talking about their subject**

As suggested earlier, formal mock interviews are not the only way to prepare. Simply practising talking and answering questions about their subject and wider interests with friends, family and/or teachers is a very valuable thing to do. So, if possible, making the time to have semi-regular conversations with your students, or agreeing, for example, both to read a book or article and then to meet and discuss it, is something your students will certainly benefit from. However, as with mock interviews, please note again that students are not expected to have ready-prepared answers and that over-rehearsed answers can be counter-productive if the applicant is preoccupied with recalling set speeches on general topics rather than listening to the interviewers' questions and responding accordingly.

- **Think about whether they want to ask questions**

At the end of the interview, applicants will have a chance to ask any questions, so, if there's something they want to know that hasn't been covered, this will be their chance to find out. Help your students to consider if there is anything they would like to ask. However, don't worry; they don't need to ask something just for the sake of it!

- **Encourage them to relax**

Probably the most important tips are for students to be on time, to be as relaxed as possible, and, above all, be themselves, so talk to your students about their plans to attend interview and how they are feeling about the whole thing. Remember that they can always contact their college and ask for guidance or help if they are encountering difficulties.