

A Student's Guide to Oxbridge - The Application Process and Student Life

Former Ashby School student Hannah Willett successfully gained a place to read Natural Sciences at St Catharine's College, Cambridge.

Here she shares some of her experiences - and dispels some of the misconceptions - of the application process and student life.

Cambridge – what's it really like?

There are lots of rumours about Cambridge – some are true, some are a bit twisted, and others are definitely made up.

Maybe you've heard about having to eat in Harry Potter-type gowns every night: this is a twisted one. Yes we do have 'formal halls' where you have to dress up a bit and wear your college gown, but in most colleges this is optional, and people tend to go for birthdays or special occasions. And flapping around like Batman does actually feel pretty awesome.

Maybe you're thinking, 'why would I want to go to Cambridge? Everyone will be dead stuck-up and posh!' But hardly anyone I've met is like that – a southern accent doesn't automatically indicate a snobby type who's going to judge you for not being from the 'right' background. See 'The first term' and 'The social life' for more on countering this stereotype.

Maybe you (or perhaps this applies more to your parents!) have heard that Oxbridge is more expensive than other universities – definitely not true. For a start, the length of our Full Term is only eight weeks, a good two weeks shorter than most other places, and as most colleges provide accommodation for all three (if not four) years of your course, you only have to pay rent while you're living at university. We don't have to find houses to rent from second year onwards, when you'd have to pay for a full year, not to mention the hassle of finding a house in the first place! For general living costs, Cambridge certainly isn't the most expensive place to be. There are also loads of scholarships and bursaries available from the university (on top of the government loans and grants), so cost doesn't have to be a barrier.

The application process

Start early! The deadline for Oxbridge applications is mid-October so start looking at courses and going to open days at the end of summer term, and start writing your Personal Statement over the summer too. Rushing a last-minute application is not going to impress admissions tutors.

Firstly, make sure you've picked the right course for you. This is the most important thing as you'll be following it for three years! Look into course guides so you know what you'll be in for – there's no point applying to Cambridge or Oxford for the sake of it if there isn't a course that's going to suit you. For example, Cambridge doesn't offer single science courses – you take Natural Sciences with four subjects in first

year and then specialise throughout the course. While this was perfect for me, it won't be to everyone's taste.

Once you know the course you want to apply for, then you can pick a college. This decision isn't incredibly important – you can put in an open application if you like and your application will be assigned to a college for you. However you will be living there for three, maybe four years so it's certainly worth reading about them in the prospectus, if not going and having a look yourself – I chose St Catharine's because it was near the middle of the city, not one of the massive colleges, and it looked pretty! Going to any university and seeing if you can imagine yourself living there is always a good way to help you decide where to apply to. Things to consider when choosing a college are:

- Location – there are a few colleges over half an hour's walk away from the centre of town
- Size – both physical and the number of students
- Girls/graduate/mature students only – the prospectus tells you which colleges have a restricted intake
- Facilities – catering, libraries, computer rooms, sports pitches/halls, what the rooms are like... Look at student-written prospectuses for the opinions of those who have been there.

Wherever you end up, I'd be willing to bet that you'll end up feeling like you've been there forever. And even if you do find yourself feeling unhappy (and I hope you don't), there are plenty of people to turn to for help.

Once you've chosen all the universities you want to apply to, it's time for the UCAS form. The trickiest bit is the Personal Statement. You'll get advice on this until it's coming out of your ears, but my main tip would be to write as yourself – don't put in things you think admissions tutors want to see, or that you wouldn't be able to back up in an interview (e.g. books that you claim you've read). It needs to tell them why you are amazing: blow your own trumpet!

For Cambridge you'll need to fill in an extra, online form, which gives you a chance to write specifically about why you want to be at Cambridge. This means you don't have to tailor your Personal Statement to Cambridge – make sure that your Statement applies to all your other universities as well. Once you've filled in this form and clicked submit, all you can do is wait! If you've put a lot of effort into your application, you'll know you'll have given yourself the best chance possible.

The interview

Yes, it's nerve-wracking. Sorry, there's no two ways about it, but it is possible to prepare! There are usually two interviews, one academic and one that'll be more general (although mine were both academic). Have a look at websites, or email your college to find out what is likely to be expected of you. Arts students might be given a paper to read half an hour before the interview that you'll be asked your opinion on. Make sure you've reread your Personal Statement, and you could also have a flick through A Level topics to brush up for your academic one. See if you can find

someone to do a mock interview with you so you can practise coping under pressure.

On the day, make sure you're on time so you don't have to rush and arrive flustered. Try and be as calm and confident as you can. The academic interview is kind of like a mock supervision (in Cambridge we have lectures and then supervision sessions in very small groups) so don't worry if you don't know an answer – they'll be looking to see how you can attack a new problem using the knowledge you have (speaking from a scientist's point of view) rather than expecting you to know everything, and they'll help you along if you're looking blank. The website and prospectus are helpful sources of subject-specific information.

First term

Heading off to university is a bit scary, but everyone is in the same boat. Nobody knows anybody else and you strike up a conversation with anyone who's around. Freshers' week is spent in a blur of 'What's your name?' and 'What subject are you doing?' and not remembering any of the answers (no matter how little you may have drunk), but by the time second week rolls around you find yourself with a new set of friends to head off to lectures with and sit with in hall, feeling like you've never been anywhere else! You'll also end up with a ton of spam in your inbox from all the things you signed up to at the college and university freshers' fairs. Most of these you will never go to, but I definitely recommend joining at least one university-wide society (and lots of college ones) to spread out your social life from just your subject/college group.

Colleges organise Freshers' week with loads of events for you to get to know your fellow first years. You'll also meet your Director of Studies and tutor (both of whom you can go to with any problems you may have throughout the year), and the Dean (in charge of discipline) and various other important college people. There'll be flyers and leaflets and adverts in your pigeonhole, student finance to sort (make sure you do this, it saves a lot of hassle) and registration with a doctor to do. Make sure you have a list of the important things, and note events down in a diary (including times/places of your lectures and supervisions) – keeping yourself reasonably organised is the best way to stop yourself from being overwhelmed by it all!

The work/life balance

The rumour that Cambridge is a LOT of work is one of the true ones: after all, it is one of the best universities in the world. Make sure you aren't expecting to be able to coast along, or even to be able to do all of the work. Eight week terms mean a lot is crammed in, and supervisors will be expecting to have to explain things to you – you don't have to be able to do everything perfectly. The best way to cope is to get to all your lectures and supervisions (preferably not hung over) and pay attention! Plan your time – work takes a good proportion of time if you're going to have a good stab at it, but it is still possible to have a social life as well. Going out every night isn't exactly feasible unless you're planning on failing, but you can fit sport, music, pub quizzes, shopping and Facebook in and still get all your work done without having to resort to the small hours the day before a deadline.

The trick is not to take on too much. Cambridge offers a lot in the way of clubs and societies (the university/college websites will offer lists of these, including the more weird and wonderful ones) and it's easy to start going to loads of them, before finding out that you don't have enough time for work. Only take up a few things until you know you have time to spare to do more. I can assure you that you will not have to spend every waking moment working your fingers to the bone – there is plenty of time for friends as well.

Hannah Willett