



factors affecting
applications to Oxford and
Cambridge – repeat survey

executive summary with statistics

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Executive summary with statistics

This research follows up a study conducted in 1998 by the National Foundation for Educational Research (Brooks, 1998) to investigate teachers' and students' views on the factors affecting students' choices of whether or not to apply to Oxford and Cambridge universities. It identifies what has changed since 1998 and areas in which the universities could seek to bring about further change.

The methodology for the study was designed to follow that used in the 1998 study, in order to maximise the degree of comparability between the two studies.

The purpose of the 2004 survey was to follow up the 1998 study with the same sample of 654 maintained schools, in order to see how attitudes may have changed over the six-year period. The study comprised a questionnaire to schools, intended for the member of staff responsible for university entrance, as well as five questionnaires to be given to a selection of high-achieving students in the last year of their advanced level studies.

The questionnaires asked respondents to comment on sources of information about Oxford and Cambridge, application and admission procedures of the two universities, perceptions about Oxford and Cambridge, and reasons for applying or not applying to Oxford or Cambridge. The teachers were also asked to comment on the success, or lack of success, of their students when applying to Oxford and Cambridge.

Teacher questionnaire

A total of 236 teachers completed questionnaires: 101 teachers from comprehensive schools, 80 from grammar schools, and 55 from post-16 colleges (sixth-form colleges, further education colleges and tertiary colleges) completed questionnaires. Overall, teachers' views in 2004 were similar to teachers' views in 1998, but some changes have occurred.

Information about the schools and colleges

- In 2004, a higher proportion of teachers (51 per cent) reported that most (between 81 and 100 per cent) of their students go on to higher education than in the 1998 study (42 per cent).

- Teachers at grammar schools reported that a higher number of their students apply to Oxbridge, receive offers and gain places at Oxford and Cambridge, than teachers from comprehensive schools or post-16 colleges.
- Comprehensive schools were less likely to offer some of the support mechanisms to students such as Advanced Extension Awards, advice on choosing colleges, visits from Oxford or Cambridge representatives, and mock interviews.
- Teachers at comprehensive schools were less likely (11 per cent) to say that they knew a lot about the application and selection procedures at Oxbridge than teachers at grammar schools (42 per cent) and post-16 colleges (44 per cent).

Sources of information about Oxford and Cambridge

- The most common sources of information about Oxbridge that teachers encouraged students to use were prospectuses (99 per cent), open days (93 per cent) and websites (95 per cent for the UCAS website and 88 per cent for Oxford/Cambridge website). Since the 1998 study there has been a large increase in teachers encouraging students to use websites.
- Teachers thought that the most useful sources were open-day visits, the Oxford or Cambridge University prospectus and visits organised by the school - between two-thirds and three-quarters said these were very useful (see Table 1).
- The majority of teachers (60 per cent) thought that getting information about Oxford and Cambridge had become easier in the past five years. Teachers were asked to suggest ways that information could be improved. Of the 134 teachers who made a comment, 34 said that the information was already adequate, 23 teachers suggested more openness on selection criteria was desirable, 14 teachers suggested that the universities be seen to be more accessible and 13 suggested additional help in choosing a college.

Perceptions about Oxford and Cambridge

- The main differences between Oxbridge and other universities with high entry requirements were perceived to be the tutorial/supervision system (38 per cent) and college system (33 per cent). Comparisons with the 1998 study found that teachers in 2004 (10 per cent) were less likely to think the public school image was a distinctive difference (16 per cent in 1998). Teachers in 2004 were more likely (20 per cent) than those in 1998 (7 per cent) to refer to Oxbridge as being very competitive to get into and / or for the elite.

Table 1 Teachers' views on the usefulness of sources of information about Oxford and Cambridge

Source of information:	N	Very useful %	Useful %	Not useful %	Not at all useful %
UCAS website	226	48	50	3	0
UCAS handbook	175	27	63	9	1
Oxford or Cambridge University prospectus	233	76	24	0	0
Oxford or Cambridge Departmental prospectus	198	65	35	0	0
Oxford or Cambridge College prospectus	210	66	33	1	0
Oxford or Cambridge website	209	64	35	1	0
Open day visit	219	78	22	1	0
Visit organised by school	118	75	25	0	0
Visit organised by student	124	57	42	2	0
Higher Education fair	184	21	58	20	1
Information for ethnic minorities	190	33	61	7	0
League tables	79	13	65	22	1
Visits from Oxford and Cambridge staff	104	64	36	0	1
Oxbridge student visiting school	138	68	30	1	0
Oxbridge regional conference	74	58	34	7	1
Shadowing scheme	202	74	15	9	3
Summer school	74	73	24	2	0
Other HE prospectus	90	36	61	3	0

A series of single response items. Not all respondents indicated a response for all the items, because of this the number varies for each item. Due to rounding errors percentages may not always sum to 100. This table appears as Table 3.4 in the main report.

- Teachers at comprehensive schools were more likely than those from other schools to think that it costs more to study at Oxbridge than at other universities (43 per cent of teachers at comprehensives said it cost more compared to 22 per cent at grammar schools and 15 per cent at post-16 colleges).

- Teachers at comprehensive schools thought that a lower proportion of state school students attend Oxbridge than teachers at grammar or post-16 colleges. These differences were statistically significant. (The average percentage of state school students attending Oxbridge, according to teachers at comprehensive schools, was 41 per cent. This compared to 46 per cent, according to teachers at grammar schools and 47 per cent according to teachers at post-16 colleges.).
- In 2004, a smaller proportion of teachers (49 per cent) thought that there were differences between Oxford and Cambridge than in 1998 (61 per cent); in 2004 teachers stressed the structure of the courses and the location of the universities, whereas in 1998 teachers referred to differences in the courses offered and the areas of specialism.

Issues influencing applications

- The main issues that teachers thought often discouraged students from applying were a lack of confidence that they could cope (45 per cent) and concern that they would be uncomfortable in the social situation (41 per cent).
- Teachers from grammar schools were less likely to say that the social context and the attitude of family and friends had discouraged students than other teachers, and more likely to say that the course not being available had discouraged students. Comprehensive school teachers were more likely to say that the cost of going to Oxbridge had discouraged students (see Table 2).
- Teachers commonly felt (24 per cent) that Oxford and Cambridge were already doing enough to make themselves attractive to students, though it was suggested that the universities should emphasise that state school students are not disadvantaged in the application process (13 per cent). Fourteen per cent suggested that the universities develop the programme of representatives visiting schools. Teachers in 2004 were less likely to suggest that the universities change their image (4 per cent) than in 1998 (11 per cent).

Success in applying to Oxford and Cambridge

- Where students had been unsuccessful in applying to Oxbridge, the interview process was said to be the main reason (27 per cent said that students were not confident/forceful enough in interview and 25 per cent mentioned a poor interview but did not specify the reason). In 2004, a greater proportion of teachers mentioned that students lacked confidence in their interviews (just over a quarter), than had done in 1998 (a fifth).

Table 2 Knowledge about selection procedures

		% of teachers within school type			Overall % of teachers
		Comp.	Grammar	Post-16	
Uncomfortable in the social context	Often discouraged	54	23	46	42
	Occasionally	45	70	48	54
	Never	1	8	6	4
Course/subject not available	Often discouraged	15	20	15	17
	Occasionally	61	73	75	69
	Never	24	6	10	14
Attitude of family/friends	Often discouraged	15	9	19	14
	Occasionally	56	46	60	54
	Never	29	45	21	32
Cost	Often discouraged	20	9	8	13
	Occasionally	61	43	58	54
	Never	19	49	35	33
Earlier closing dates for UCAS	Often discouraged	4	5	4	4
	Occasionally	42	31	65	43
	Never	54	64	31	52
N =					236

This table does not include teachers that did not answer and so the N's are different for each part (not shown). This table appears as Table 3.14 in the main report.

- The majority of teachers (66 per cent) thought that the interview process had placed students from their school at a disadvantage when applying to Oxford or Cambridge. This largely related to the nervousness of students (of the 144 teachers who mentioned the interview process, 69 teachers mentioned nervousness). Similar results were found in the 1998 study.
- Teachers were asked to make suggestions for improvements to the selection process. These were varied but the main suggestions were for more information about what the selection process involved (21 of the 155 teachers who made suggestions mentioned this) and for Oxford and Cambridge to take greater account of the background or context of the applicants (19 teachers).

Student questionnaire

A total of 906 students completed the questionnaire: 383 students from comprehensive schools, 339 from grammar schools, and 184 from post-16 colleges. Overall,

students' views have remained largely similar to those of students in 1998, but some changes have occurred.

Higher education choices

- A greater proportion of students in 2004 (49 per cent) said that going on to higher education was a natural progression (42 per cent in 1998).
- Students in 2004 were more likely to be intending to apply to Oxford or Cambridge (51 per cent) than in the 1998 study (37 per cent).
- Students continue to apply to Oxbridge because of the prestige (44 per cent) and the courses on offer (41 per cent). In 2004, students were more likely to refer to teaching methods as being a deciding factor (24 per cent), than in the 1998 study (18 per cent).
- Of those students who were not intending to apply to Oxford and Cambridge in 2004 (443 students), the main reason was that they thought they would not get the necessary grades (44 per cent). This was a greater proportion of students than in the 1998 study (31 per cent).

Sources of information about Oxford and Cambridge

- University prospectuses are still the most commonly used sources of information about Oxford or Cambridge (72 per cent used these in 2004), but since 1998 many more students are using the internet as a source (in 2004, 60 per cent used the Oxford/Cambridge website and 51 per cent used the UCAS website, while in 1998, 74 per cent of students had not used any website as a source of information).
- The sources of information found most useful by the largest number of students were visits to the universities, university prospectuses and departmental prospectuses (see Table 3).
- When asked how sources of information could be improved, 465 students made suggestions: 83 students suggested there should be more detailed information about courses or departments, 63 students suggested more information on colleges, and 46 said that information should be more user friendly. In 2004, students were less likely than in 1998 to mention that information on student social life should be improved.
- Some students reported they could not get enough information about Oxford and Cambridge. The main areas were in relation to the application process and the interview structure (13 per cent).

Table 3 Students' views on the usefulness of sources of information about Oxford and Cambridge

Source of information:	N	Very useful %	Useful %	Not useful %	Not at all useful %
UCAS website	458	25	57	15	2
UCAS handbook	130	21	55	18	5
Oxford or Cambridge University prospectus	648	57	39	3	0
Oxford or Cambridge Departmental prospectus	421	56	39	4	0
Oxford or Cambridge College prospectus	399	48	44	6	1
Oxford or Cambridge website	531	45	49	4	0
Open day visit	392	75	21	3	1
Visit organised by school	214	67	25	5	1
Visit organised by student	193	62	34	2	1
Higher Education fair	363	13	44	33	8
Information for ethnic minorities	17	29	35	24	12
League tables	435	23	55	18	3
Visits from Oxford and Cambridge staff	173	34	48	16	2
Oxford or Cambridge student visiting school	206	37	47	14	2
Oxford and Cambridge regional conference	140	45	38	12	4
Shadowing scheme	19	79	16	0	5
Summer school	34	82	12	3	3
Other HE prospectus	125	39	46	14	1
Other	45	39	46	14	1

A series of single response items. Not all respondents indicated a response for all the items, because of this the number varies for each item. Due to rounding errors, percentages may not always sum to 100. This table appears as Table 4.6 in the main report.

Perceptions about Oxford and Cambridge

- The main differences that students saw between Oxbridge and other universities with high entry requirements were the prestige of the universities (26 per cent) and the good academic reputation (24 per cent). In the 1998 study, grammar school students

were more likely than other students to mention the academic reputation, but in 2004 the responses were very similar for all students.

- In 2004, a greater proportion of students described Oxbridge students as ‘motivated’ (37 per cent) than had done in the 1998 study (23 per cent).
- In 2004, a lower percentage of students (32 per cent) than in 1998 (43 per cent) said it cost slightly more to go to Oxbridge than to other universities.
- A higher percentage of students in 2004 (53 per cent), than in 1998 (46 per cent), felt that Oxbridge received more applications per place than other universities.
- In 2004, a much greater proportion of students (30 per cent) reported that there were no general differences between Oxford and Cambridge than did in the 1998 study (16 per cent). Of those that said there were differences there was a lot of variation in response, but Cambridge was said to be science based whilst Oxford was arts/humanities based.
- Students in 2004 were more likely to know whether there are differences in the Oxford or Cambridge selection procedure than students in 1998 (in 1998, 54 per cent said they did not know and in 2004 only 36 per cent did not know).

Issues influencing applications

- The issues that made students more likely to apply to Oxbridge included the career prospects (77 per cent), the way teaching is organised (64 per cent), the content of the courses (54 per cent) and league tables (60 per cent).
- Those issues that made students less likely to apply included the difficulty in getting a place (57 per cent), the perceived social mix (35 per cent), the interview process (34 per cent) and additional tests (29 per cent).
- Comparisons with the 1998 study showed that students in 2004 were more likely to mention the organisation of teaching (from 46 per cent in 1998 to 64 in 2004), the content of courses (from 34 per cent in 1998 to 54 in 2004) and graduate career prospects (from 65 per cent in 1998 to 77 in 2004) as factors that made them likely to apply, whilst the perceived social mix was less likely to influence their decision to apply (from 47 per cent in 1998 to 35 in 2004).

Further statistical analysis

- Taking into account academic ability (using statistical regression), in terms of which groups of students were intending to apply to Oxford or Cambridge, in 2004 there was

no significant difference between students from different types of school, whereas in 1998, comprehensive students were significantly less likely to be applying than those from grammar schools.

- In the 1998 study, parental qualifications were found to be related to whether students were applying to Oxbridge; however, this was not the case in 2004.
- Using factor analysis to examine the issues influencing applications to Oxford and Cambridge, issues surrounding life as an Oxbridge student and economic issues were more of a positive influence on students who attended grammar schools than those at comprehensives or post-16 colleges. The application and selection process was more of a negative influence on students who attended comprehensives or post-16 colleges. Grammar school students were more positively influenced by perceived future prospects than comprehensive students when making a decision.

Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, both teachers' and students' views in 2004 had many similarities with the 1998 study, but there were some interesting differences and patterns that suggest that teacher and student perceptions of the universities have shifted since 1998.

Applicants

Whilst a greater proportion of the students in our sample from grammar schools were applying to Oxbridge than those from comprehensives and post-16 colleges, in 2004 the gap was smaller than in 1998 and was no longer statistically significant. Parental qualifications were no longer related to whether students were applying. These findings suggest that students from a wider variety of backgrounds were applying to Oxford and Cambridge in 2004 than in 1998.

Teaching methods

Students in 2004 seemed to place greater importance on factors such as course content and teaching approaches when making decisions about higher education. For example, students in 2004 were more likely to take into account the way teaching is organised (from 46 per cent in 1998 to 64 in 2004) and the content of the courses (from 34 per cent in 1998 to 54 in 2004) when deciding whether to apply to Oxford or Cambridge than those in 1998.

Academic

Both students and teachers placed an increased emphasis on the academic rigour and high expectations of the universities. For example, in 2004 students from all types of school noted that prestige and good academic reputation were the main differences between Oxbridge and other high-entry universities (in 1998, grammar school students were more likely than other students to mention the academic reputation, but in 2004 the responses were very similar for all students). Also, in 2004 students were more likely than in 1998 to mention that doubt about achieving the right grades was their primary reason for not applying to Oxbridge (from 31 per cent in 1998 to 44 in 2004).

Social mix

Perceptions of the social mix at Oxbridge appeared to have altered slightly since 1998. Students in 2004 were less likely to report that the social mix at Oxbridge discouraged them from applying (from 47 per cent in 1998 to 35 in 2004) or that information on social life needed to be improved. Also, teachers were less likely to suggest that the universities needed to change their image (from 11 per cent in 1998 to 4 per cent in 2004). However, it should be noted that some concerns were still raised about the social background of students and the need for the universities to emphasise that state school students are not disadvantaged. Overall, the findings suggest that Oxbridge have gone some way to addressing issues surrounding the perceived social mix of students.

Differences between Oxford and Cambridge

Since 1998, perceived differences between Oxford and Cambridge have reduced. Both teachers and students were less likely to believe that differences existed, and those mentioned tended to relate to the courses on offer. It was notable that in the 1998 study many respondents (30 per cent) referred to STEP papers as being a difference, but in 2004 this was not the case (less than 1 per cent). This was probably due to a change in the application procedures, suggesting that students and teachers are aware of the change.

Information available

Prospectuses and visits to the universities were the main sources of information drawn on. Since 1998 there has been a huge increase in the use of the internet to access information about Oxford and Cambridge. In general, teachers and students were happy with the information available about Oxford and Cambridge. The main areas of concern, both for

teachers and students, related to the need for further information about the application and interview process, and on choosing colleges.

Overall

On many issues, the findings of the 2004 study were very similar to those from the 1998 study. However, the pattern of findings suggests that since the 1998 study was carried out, there has been a subtle change in the way that Oxford and Cambridge are perceived. This relates to an increased emphasis on the academic requirements and provision of the universities, and a reduced concern about social factors and issues surrounding state school students. There is still further work to be done, and some recommendations are listed below, but it does appear that the attitudes of teachers and students have shifted slightly in relation to the way they think about Oxford and Cambridge.

Recommendations

- Oxford and Cambridge appear to have been clearly successful in trying to shift perceptions about the universities and in trying to encourage prospective students to focus to a greater extent on the academic rather than the social-class aspects of the universities; this work should continue.
- Current methods of providing information about the application and selection processes are not meeting the needs of all users. To minimise the extent to which these are seen as barriers to students being successful, further information was requested. Oxford and Cambridge may wish to consider greater consultation with prospective students and their teachers about what information they would like to see.
- It was clear that on a range of issues the perceptions of teachers in comprehensive schools were different from those of teachers in grammar schools. Oxford and Cambridge may wish to address this perceived information gap and increase further their proactive targeting of comprehensive schools.
- Higher education fairs were not seen to be as useful, either by teachers or students, as other sources of information, such as open days and visits to the universities. Oxbridge may want to consider either trying to find ways to improve their presence at higher education fairs, or instead to focus their efforts on open days and arranging visits to the universities instead.
- As websites are being increasingly used, then the effort that is put into maintaining and developing them needs to be proportionate. Oxford and Cambridge may wish to

explore more innovative uses of their websites in order to address some of the other issues raised in this report.

- Further work needs to be done to provide information about the types of student that attend Oxbridge, and to reassure prospective students that they would feel comfortable with the social setting at Oxbridge.
- Continued efforts are required to assure students that studying at Oxbridge is no more expensive than studying at other universities.
- There was evidence that comprehensive schools provided fewer support mechanisms for prospective Oxbridge students. The universities may therefore wish to consider targeting more support mechanisms at these schools, for example, mock interviews.
- Further work needs to be done to help students decide on which college to apply to and to support teachers in helping students making this decision, or on convincing students that all colleges are essentially similar and that college choice is not the most crucial part of their application.
- The current interview procedure was said to be difficult, and teachers thought that the interview, and in particular nervousness, was the reason that students were not successful in gaining places. Oxford and Cambridge should continue to attempt to make the interview process less stressful for students in order to ensure that university staff are able to gather the best possible information about prospective students.



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