



# Destination University:

## Widening Participation post-18

A toolkit of *strategies* and *case studies* from schools and colleges to support access to selective universities for young people



# Introduction

The purpose of this online toolkit is to support and enable young people from less-advantaged backgrounds to access selective universities successfully.

This collation of hints and tips has arisen from a collaboration of over 20 schools, colleges, universities and organisations concerned with social mobility. The contributors come from all four corners of England, and they are drawn from state-maintained and independent schools. Each writer offers insider knowledge, expert advice or a quick-fix tip which can be implemented in schools or colleges to support the widening participation agenda.

The intended readership of this resource is Headteachers, Deputy Headteachers, Heads of Sixth Form and Heads of Careers.

# Overview

The toolkit covers four themes:

- Making successful applications to university for less-advantaged young people
- Starting the widening participation message early and focusing on key transitions
- Developing a school culture which supports less-advantaged young people in aspiring towards university
- Reaching out to networks and organisations who can help

Student voice:

- A collection of testimonies from less-advantaged young people who have gone on to selective universities

# Foreword

from the CEO of the  
Social Mobility Foundation,  
Sarah Atkinson

This resource is a great example of the determination and hard work of educationalists from all settings, united in a desire to share their knowledge and advice to help level up higher education. It has been created through a powerful collaboration and it is full of insights, practical tips and real life examples to engage and inspire.

I know first hand, from our work, the difference it makes when you share this kind of knowledge and advice with young people, building their confidence and helping them to believe in their own potential. It can be truly life changing – and they will never forget it.



This toolkit is the result of a collaboration between universities, schools (state and independent) and organisations concerned with social mobility. We are grateful to the following individuals for their contributions and hope that users find it helpful.

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## Section 1

Making successful applications to university for young people

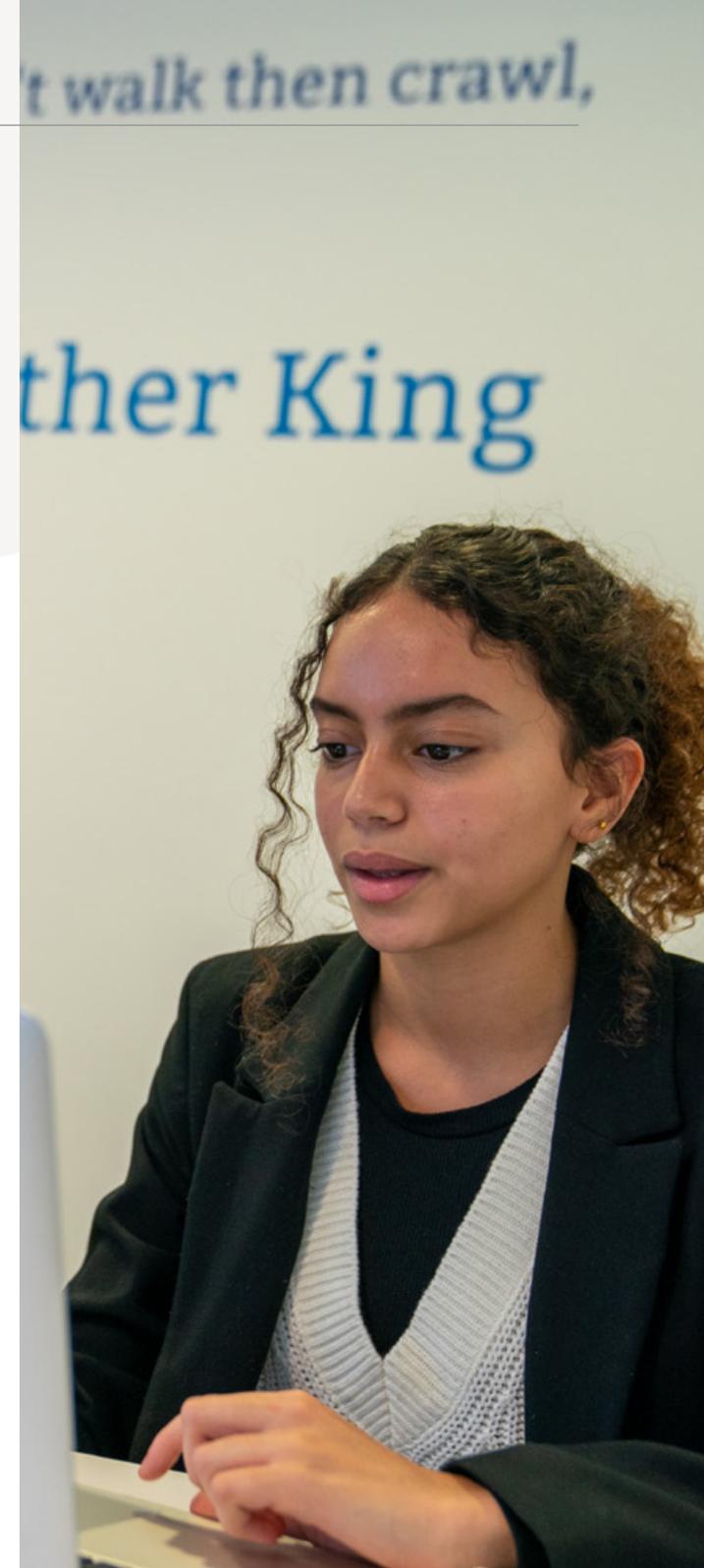
# 1. Make the most of the UCAS reference

References for students from their teachers are always considered as a key part of university applications and are highly regarded by university admissions teams, who are always grateful for the time and effort taken by teachers to support their students. The limited space for the UCAS reference is best used to address the individual applicant and their skills, achievements and qualities relevant to the student's chosen subject. However, schools and colleges have the opportunity to share contextual information via the reference. For instance a short paragraph about the school might be important if there are particular issues that may have had a direct impact on the applicant (e.g. subject staff shortages for a key subject). Below are other examples of contextual information that can be included where relevant as this will help universities understand any influence of a student's socio-economic background on their education.

If the applicant:

- is now or has ever been in care
- is or has been a child in need
- is a carer for others
- is eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) or has been eligible at any time during their education
- will be the first generation in their family to go to university
- has experienced significant disruption to their learning due to for example a bereavement or a long-term illness.

All the above information is incredibly useful for admissions teams to know and will not disadvantage an application.



## 2. Support students to make their own informed choices

**Target Oxbridge** is a programme that supports Black African and Caribbean students to secure places at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

It is run by diversity specialists Rare. Since 2012 over 280 students of Black African and Caribbean heritage have been supported to secure Oxbridge places.



51%

of students agreed that their teachers picked them to participate in opportunities similar to Target Oxbridge

### A Level requirements

Many students accidentally make themselves less competitive for their chosen university course by choosing the wrong A Level combination. The most common examples are students who want to study Engineering, Economics or PPE, but are not studying Maths at A Level, or students who want to study Mathematics, Computer Science or Natural Sciences, but are not studying Further Maths at A Level.

By providing students with information on the relationship between A Level subject choices and university course

requirements as early as Year 10, schools will be able to support students to make choices that keep their options open. The Target Oxbridge Year 10 Programme has been recently launched with Trinity College Cambridge with the hope of providing this information to Year 10 students of Black African and Caribbean heritage.

### Support students to aim high, even if there is a risk of failure

Whilst 71% of the 2021 Target Oxbridge students agreed that their

teachers encouraged them to consider selective universities, only 51% agreed that their teachers picked them to participate in opportunities similar to Target Oxbridge. Over the years, Target Oxbridge has also supported students whose schools have told them they are 'not Oxbridge material' or that they should 'be more realistic' about their university choices. Many of those students have gone on to secure Oxbridge interviews and places.

An unsuccessful Oxbridge application does not have any impact on the chances of a school's future applications, and it very rarely has a

long-lasting negative impact on the student in question. Students are glad to have given themselves a shot at Oxbridge, whatever the outcome.

Good advice is therefore that if a student meets the grade requirements for Oxbridge, wants to apply, and is fully informed of the relevant risks, support them to make the application. Whilst the process is competitive, it is the student's right to make their own informed choice to give it a try.

### 3. Consider a foundation year course

There are foundation year courses available at various universities which may provide a suitable alternative route to top tier universities for students who are not able to meet the high entry requirements at Undergraduate level. For example, the Cambridge Foundation Year is a one-year course — aimed at an entirely new stream of applicants who have the ability to succeed at Cambridge, but have been prevented from reaching their full potential by their circumstance. This prepares students for further learning and offers them the chance to progress straight to an undergraduate degree at Cambridge.

Some Foundation Years — such as the Cambridge Arts and Humanities Foundation Year — are free to students, while others might charge usual levels of tuition fee.

Among the groups that Foundation Years aim to reach are those who have

been in care, refugees, those estranged from their families, and those who have missed significant periods of learning because of health issues. Encourage students to explore these options as many students are surprised to find out that they are eligible. Awareness of this route can be low, and many applicants and their families are unclear what they are or what they involve which could mean they miss out. Aiming very high and narrowly missing the target may still mean achieving high!

The academic entry requirements may be substantially lower than those for direct-entry degree courses. For example, the Cambridge Foundation Year requires 120 UCAS Tariff Points, which is equivalent to BBB at A-Level, while the usual Cambridge offer is at least A\*AA. The Foundation Year also accepts a wide range of qualification types not usually accepted for direct entry.



Cambridge Foundation Year requires 120 UCAS Tariff Points, which is equivalent to BBB at A-Level

## 4. Make your students' UCAS applications stand out from the crowd

When applying to a popular university it is not always enough to be able to demonstrate high grades and a passion for the subject. Engaging with the subject outside of the school curriculum is also key — how can your students do this?

The easiest thing is for them to keep a close eye on what is going on in their local area: the public lectures at their local university; local interest societies that run courses (for example an archaeology applicant attending an excavation or the lectures of the local history society); or a place of interest that might have an open day. These days, of course, many resources are available online which is especially useful if your school or college is outside a metropolitan area.

Not all students have opportunities like this near at hand but more and more experiences are available online. Examples include Gresham College who put on online lectures on a wide variety of subjects as do many of the top universities (e.g. [events.st-andrews.ac.uk/event-type/lecture/](https://events.st-andrews.ac.uk/event-type/lecture/)). University society talks often need registering for as they are streamed live and not always available on demand so your students may need to follow their short list of universities on social media and keep a close eye out for opportunities such as these.

Both Oxford and Cambridge encourage this type of activity and regularly publish subject resources and suggestions for Sixth Form students to explore their interests. This can be done via Extended Projects for

example, and also just by engaging in some deeper reading in a subject area — they could find a research paper or project in an area of interest that intrigues them, and find out more about it. Deeper engagement in Maths and Sciences can be furthered by online resources such as Isaac Physics or the competitions put on by the UK Mathematics Trust.

Finally, suggest that they look closely at what the different modules are for the course they are applying to. Is there a common thread that they could draw out in their personal statement? They could perhaps link that to some work experience, travel or activity that they have undertaken in the past and emphasise how it has affected the way they approach the subject.

## Section 2

Developing a school culture which encourages less-advantaged young people to consider applying to university

# 5. Create a culture of aspiration

A culture of aspiration is one which normalises excellence, which expects all students irrespective of background or personal circumstance to set high goals and to work hard to reach them.

Teachers set the tone with lessons that take as their domain the whole of a subject's specialist knowledge and not simply the syllabus. Exams inevitably lie at the end of A level study, but they are markers on the road to excellence, things to be passed through and passed by rather than the goal of the study in themselves.

Learning is wider than exams and students should be encouraged to explore further, voluntarily, eclectically and in their own time, and in doing so they should develop their aspiration informed by the example of adults from a wide range of professions. There can be role models for widening participation amongst the alumni of the school as well as parents, governors, local businesses and other families connected with the school.

## 6. Make access to university visible in your school's goals and culture

Those who work to provide opportunity for underrepresented groups frequently come back to one challenge: you can't be what you can't see. This is why it can be so important to have accessible, relevant role models for students to follow...

But what happens when you are trying to create those role models from scratch?

To do this requires at least two things:

- Embracing university preparation as a core mission of the school
- Normalising university access

Where for some students attending a selective university could be seen as anything but normal, schools face a challenge to make access feel not just that it is possible but that 'this is

what happens here'. Defining a school vision that ties directly to university can ensure that the whole of the school community becomes familiar with and excited by university access. This can be done by stating university admission when communicating the mission and vision of the school; and by being explicit in developing the character, skills and qualifications needed for university (and in life). By defining university access in the vision of your school, the myopic focus on this year's examination results can be avoided, allowing the quality of post-18 destinations to serve as the most important indicator of performance.

Normalising university access stems from a clear vision but involves careful planning of the school. Naming form groups after the university of their teacher can give teachers the opportunity to talk explicitly about how important their university experience has been to them. Alternatively, why not name form groups according to universities to which alumni of the school have moved — or maybe just naming them after a range of great universities!

Creating opportunities not just to briefly pass through universities but to feel at home and successful in learning at

a university at a young age can also be transformational. And once those university role models exist, alumni of the school with academic success can be deployed to amplify their story. With these role models established, students can aspire to be what they can now see before them.

## 7. Build a culture of winning behaviours among staff

In order to ensure that we get the best out of all students, particularly those who are the most disadvantaged, we have to ensure that we have a high performing and motivated staff. We are far more likely to see our young people academically stretched and challenged if the staff who teach them thrive within a culture that supports them to perform and expects them to deliver teaching at the very highest level. Anyone who has worked within a school will have encountered a teacher or teachers whose 'heart is not in it' or doesn't want to be there; these colleagues are unlikely to motivate our disadvantaged children. Working in a school where there is a strong sense of a team culture, with a drive for continuous improvement clearly communicated with a narrative about the importance of serving the most disadvantaged will drive up teacher performance levels.

### Steps along the way include

- Meaningful CPD — particularly in subject knowledge and subject pedagogy so that continual improvement becomes an expectation
- Reminders of the mission and successes of the school — what are we here to achieve and when have we done it
- A commitment from leadership to have colleagues' backs, to accept mistakes and learn from them
- Leaders who throw themselves into the ethos rather than step back from it — it needs to be lived, not just talked

Finding routes for young people to do things that nobody in their family or community has done before requires a team, ingenuity, and hard work. A school where the staff pulls together will be better equipped to plot these paths.



## 8. Actively undermine the transactional approach to learning

Society tells young people that their education is in order to gain grades and jobs, and that they should seek the most efficient way to satisfy their teachers, examiners, interviewers. This is not an attitude that opens doors from disadvantage to selective universities; what students need is a desire to learn for its own sake.

### Key points for widening participation:

- Maximise lesson time that develops learning and understanding of the subject and minimise time spent on mark schemes (except in the final stages of exam preparation).
- Offer and publicise opportunities for students to learn and do more, voluntarily and in their own time, and reward them for doing so.

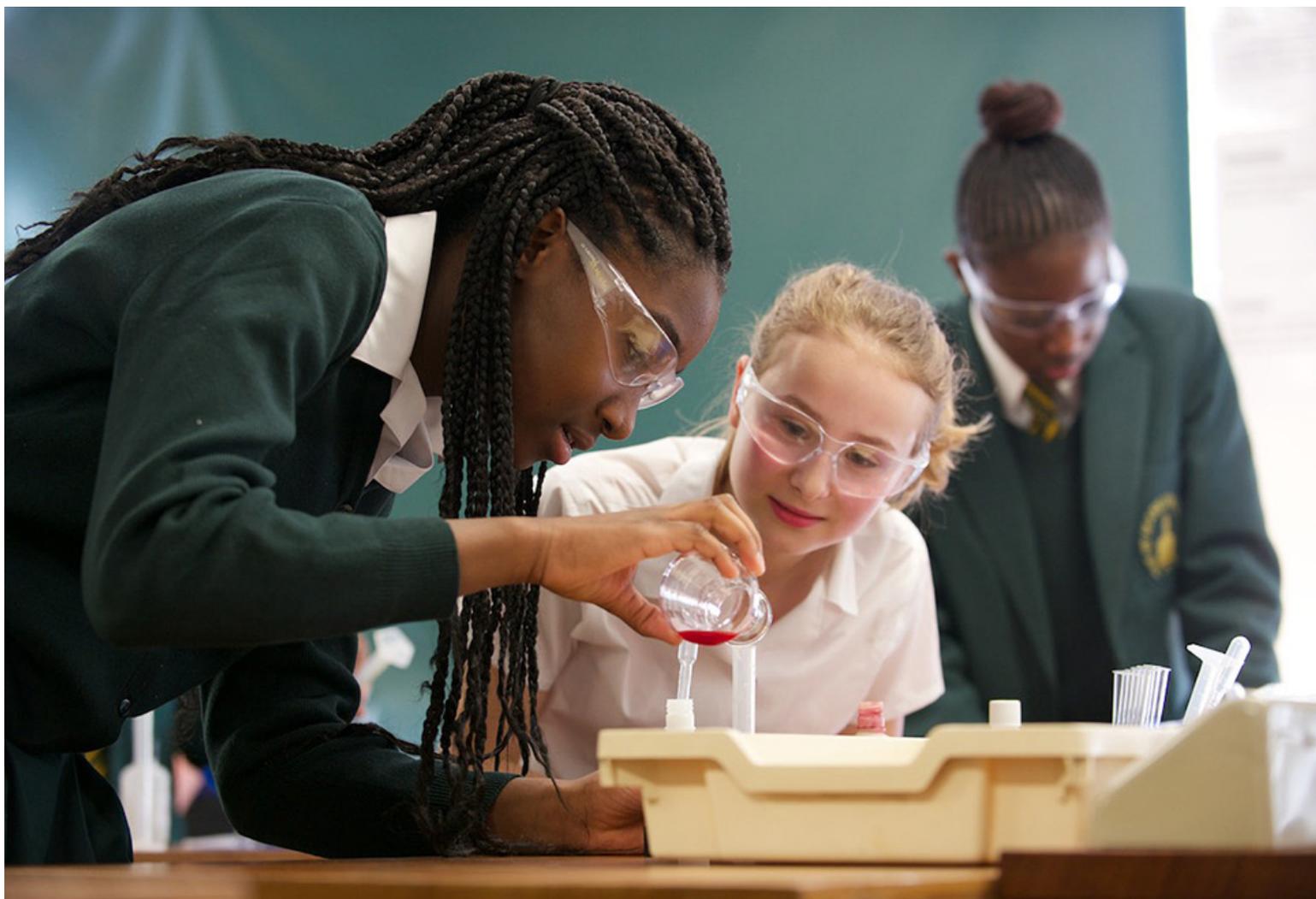
Explicitly tell students that the more time they spend studying and thinking and learning the better they'll do — finishing compulsory tasks early is an opportunity to take on discretionary extension work. Students cannot think of their learning as stopping at the classroom door, and by the end of Year 11 at the latest, students need to value and commit time to their study beyond the curriculum.



## 9. Develop the specialist subject knowledge that your students need

Teaching the A Level specification will help our students get the grades they need to meet entry criteria for elite institutions. Teaching beyond it enriches their thinking so that they can achieve their desired academic and/or career path. For example, the Advanced Mathematics Support Programme is a government-funded scheme, which encourages participation in AS and A level teaching by offering resources and training.

Providing real world experience through clubs and extra-curricular courses broadens their understanding so that they are ready for whatever is thrown at them. Alumni and community partners share their stories so that students know what is possible and how to achieve it.



# 10. Understand your community

Some of the first advice that should be given to new teachers is “know your students”. This includes their background, and it needs to underpin our programmes at all levels.

Universities need support from schools to identify more accurately students who might be applying from less-advantaged backgrounds. Here is what schools need to know and what they can do.

In Higher Education admissions, home postcodes are hugely significant in flagging what are known as “Widening Participation” or simply WP applicants. The levels of deprivation in the geographical community where your students live are assessed by using the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) which is provided to universities by the Department of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

In addition, the Office for Students sets targets for universities based on a dataset which measures how likely young people are to engage with Higher Education based on their home address. This dataset is called POLAR and it reveals patterns of historic participation in Higher Education for large areas with often a very diverse make-up. In reality, the POLAR data offers perhaps a better metric than it does a target, but it is important to universities and schools would do well to become aware of the POLAR categorisations of their local areas.

ACORN is another postcode-based tool which categorises the UK’s population by level of socio-economic advantage. It is not focussed on education but gives far more precise area based identification. Geography matters too; different deprived areas share some barriers but also have real contrasts based on culture, location and isolation. Once again, this is a dataset which schools can also use.

Educational context is important to universities too and post-16 cohorts may have had very different early experiences. Disadvantaged students are of course individuals, and this personalised level of data has so far not been as available to universities as it should have been — though this is now changing. Schools know Free School Meals history, Pupil Premium and bursary details, and schools should be sharing these with universities at the point of application. Some sensitive surveying by the schools can also provide insights into details of family education experience and employment. As a general rule it is good practice to share information with universities where this will enable them to make informed decisions about offers and tariffs.

Knowing your students is not just about reference writing. If you know the gaps you can target your advice, guidance and opportunities. In particular, supporting students in accessing the WP programmes offered by universities, both locally and further afield.

# 11. Adopt these three big ideas: great teaching, sound choices, clear understanding

Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds face plenty of obstacles when aspiring to, and accessing, higher education, particularly at the most competitive institutions. But whatever the nature of that disadvantage — cultural, socioeconomic, geographical or otherwise — all pupils need the same things: support to achieve the necessary grades, support to make the right choices about their higher education journey, and (something which is easily overlooked in favour of the practicalities of applications) support to see themselves as belonging to the world of a university.

The most important thing a school can do is teach its children well enough that those with the ability and motivation to access the top grades

are able to do so. The point is to allow them to achieve the same academic standards as their peers who have greater advantages.

The next most important thing is to ensure that pupils are making the right choices when it comes to subject and institution choice. Subject choice is key: pupils from backgrounds where it is rare for their peers or parents to attend university do not have the same understanding of the breadth and diversity of subjects that are available at top universities. As a result, they tend to default to the big-name degrees — Medicine, Dentistry, Law, Economics, Computer Science — which are extremely competitive and may not actually be what they want to do. When we ask,

“Why do you want to do Medicine?” the majority of pupils either do not have an answer or they say, “It’s what my parents want me to do,” or, “Because I want to help people,” with very little understanding of the myriad ways in which one can help others as part of a degree or career. Students need to be told explicitly about courses such as Biochemistry and Data Science in order to make informed decisions.

The last important thing (although there are of course lots of these) is to ensure that pupils understand that attending an excellent university is a privilege that, as long as they are prepared to work hard for it, belongs to them as much as it does to any single one of their advantaged peers. Here, regular exposure to the realities of university

life is important. Teachers should tell their classes regularly about their own university experiences, about moving away from home and in with groups of strangers, and how much fun it can be and how enriching and exciting it was; about going to lectures and writing essays and attending labs and just how normal all of these things are. Teachers should talk about how normal it is to feel nervous or afraid of these new experiences, particularly moving away from home, and how they navigated these issues. If you have alumni who have gone to university, these can also be used: get them back to talk to your Year 10s and 11s about how they found the experience of going away to university.

The most important thing a school can do is teach its children well enough that those with the ability and motivation to access the top grades are able to do so.

One final note: if a pupil is absolutely set on applying to a very competitive course, they have to understand the extent of the additional experience they will have to gain and the additional work they will have to put in to be in with a chance. A lot of pupils from families without an HE background do not understand this, and when it comes to applying are suddenly taken aback by just how much further their competition has gone in making themselves stand out from the field.

To that end, one might consider taking the pupils who have expressed an interest in these courses as early as Year 8 and map out for them what they will have to do to be in with a chance. They are always shocked at how much more there is to do. But they will only be able to do it if they know early enough the challenges ahead of them.



## 12. Go the extra mile

A personal account from the headteacher of an 11–16 school comprehensive school in a less-advantaged area of London:

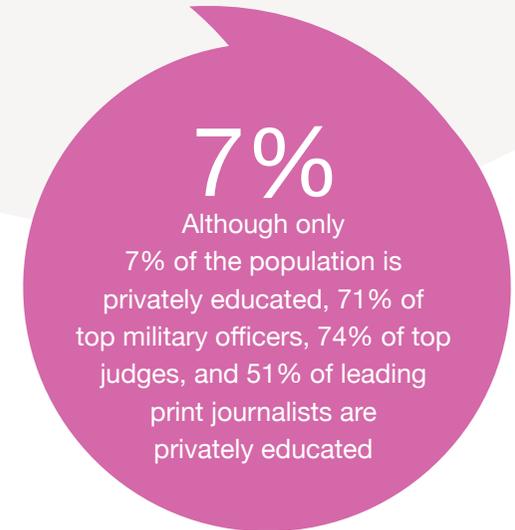


I could not have imagined, in my wildest dreams, that 1 in 20 of our Year 11 students last year would have got scholarships estimated at a collective total of one million pounds to some of the most prestigious independent schools in the world as part of our ‘prestigious colleges’ programme. Cumberland Community School is situated in one of the most deprived boroughs in London, but poverty is not a barrier to success in our school. However, more than half of children (52%) are judged to be in households in poverty, compared to 38% in the typical London borough.

When we select the students we put them through a rigorous process similar to what they would experience when they go through the real thing. Although we encourage all students to take part, we are realistic in our approach because we know that the ones that would ultimately qualify for full bursary are those who are either Pupil Premium or from low-income families. Once the selection process is concluded, we allocate each student a mentor and they receive etiquette lessons, tuition and interview preparation lessons all courtesy of the school. We go the extra mile for our students because we want to give them the best possible

opportunity to succeed in what will be a life-changing opportunity for themselves and their families.

Over the last three years since we started running this initiative in our school, many students have benefited from this successful programme. Some often ask, why bother? Why do we run this programme? The answer is easy, we want to beat inequality and we want to give our students every chance to succeed when it comes to going to Oxbridge or ending up with a top job. According to a survey conducted by the Sutton Trust, privately schooled people dominate law, politics, medicine and journalism. The report states that,



although only 7% of the population is privately educated, 71% of top military officers, 74% of top judges, and 51% of leading print journalists are privately educated; therefore we want to give our students a piece of this life-changing opportunity.

We are really proud of the partnerships that we have built over the years with the independent sector and we will continue to push boundaries to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor because we owe it to our students and the wider community that we serve.





## 13. Put in applications to Oxbridge — even if it is the first time for your school

Supporting any young person in making their university application is a significant responsibility. But supporting an Oxbridge applicant, particularly when you yourself are potentially unfamiliar with the process, can be something of a daunting prospect. Whilst applying to Oxbridge does share a number of aspects in common with applying elsewhere, familiarising yourself with the quirks of their requirements — including the October application deadline — is a worthwhile aim.

Firstly, there is no such thing as a typical Oxbridge candidate. Prospective students do, undoubtedly, need to have competitive predicted grades which align with given entry requirements, but admissions tutors are interested in gaining a broader understanding of the young person being presented to them and that is why the writing of a quality reference, which clearly and compellingly highlights the unique strengths of the applicant, is key.

Once you are sure that the course and the style in which it is delivered is right for your student, the reference provides you with the chance to celebrate their success framed by your own school context and enables you to spotlight just what it is that makes them exceptional. Here, any extenuating circumstances that could have derailed progress but haven't should also be emphasised as this will be a strong indicator of an ability to persevere and stay resilient.

In both the reference and in the personal statement, evidence of the student's genuine passion for their chosen subject must be tangible. Having aptitude and understanding will not be enough to make an application stand out; your first-hand knowledge and anecdotal evidence of a student's all-important passionate response to their subject is what is needed. This actually becomes a very useful way of deciding whether an Oxbridge application is the right route or not – if you cannot confidently and quickly articulate how this passion manifests itself, it may well be that it doesn't really exist.

Passion might be evident in work experience placements, attending outreach lectures, completing wider reading or undertaking online courses... the more, the better. You can encourage this independently explorative learning by identifying potential Oxbridge candidates long before the application cycle begins. How early this provision of super-curricular experiences begins and how it will be integrated will depend on your particular school context, but the advantages of implementing such an initiative will far outweigh simply boosting Oxbridge chances.

It is also worth integrating an explicit focus on oracy and articulacy into non-academic Sixth Form time for the benefit of all students, but especially those whose grades and references have secured them an Oxbridge interview. There is no way to second-guess the content of an interview and doing so will most likely prove unfruitful; if a student is invited to interview it will be because you have had the confidence and certainty in both their afore-mentioned aptitude and passion. If this can be bolstered by

regular chances to express themselves on a range of topical issues and pertinent subjects, as facilitated by their non-academic contact time, they will be able to present themselves as authentic, engaged and ready for the challenges Oxbridge will bring.

So, whilst there is no quick-fix and no 'tricks' to supporting a successful Oxbridge application there are certain aspects to take into consideration as outlined above. If you have a student who is invited to interview but not offered a place, this in itself may present a learning opportunity; both Oxford and Cambridge colleges will provide feedback if requested which may well inform future applications. It also may not – Oxbridge is about uniqueness and, therefore, the more you know of your students and the more chances they have had to explore their subject beyond the classroom the better.

The universities of Oxford and Cambridge both have sections of their websites designed to help teachers to navigate the admissions process to best support their students and there are events and mailing lists specifically for teachers at both institutions. Here are the links:

Cambridge • Teachers and Parents | Undergraduate Study:  
[www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/find-out-more/teachers-and-parents](http://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/find-out-more/teachers-and-parents)

Oxford • Guidance for teachers | University of Oxford:  
[www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/teachers](http://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/teachers)

# 14. “Talk yourself into it”

Many things loom in the gap between the young person from a disadvantaged background and their seat in a top university. One is having nothing to say, or something to say but not the language to say it. Given a topic or challenging question, and asked to discuss it with an adult they’ve not met before, or with peers who all appear to know more, there is a painfully obvious aural and visual difference between the articulate student who can lean confidently into the discussion, drawing synoptically on what they do know, and the student who is dumbstruck and retreats into a shrug or a frantic scramble for notes. Too often, aided by what GCSE English specifications appear to require, students are worried about being able to master rhetorical devices before they’ve armed themselves with an actual argument — something to say.

In order for this to support all students and not just the ones that volunteer for the debating society, something has to happen in lessons to:

- first help students know they have something to say, then
- enrich their linguistic confidence, then
- praise the content of what they say and their rhetorical skill.

Lessons can contain deliberately challenging statements that students are encouraged to formulate arguments against.

Examples include:

- “When there is racism in a text, it means the writer is racist” (English Literature)

- “Good people are born; evil people are made” (Religion, Ethics, Philosophy)
- “Theatre is not real. There is no point studying it” (Drama)

Facing this, students talk it out, test it out, listen to how others argue, then are pushed to stretch or counter their own arguments by making links, adding examples, noting pitfalls, emulating what they hear others do that’s effective. Where students struggle with self-confidence, acting a part can help: if you did have something to say, what would it be? Pretend you are the Head of Drama — what would you say? Imagine you’re the Minister for Health — what would you say? Take the student out of their self-conscious self and help them see that they do have something to say: they learn to talk themselves into it. And when it goes well, especially for those who find this hardest, praise their

effort, call their parent or carer and ask them to talk about it at home. And where it goes really well, use available forum to celebrate this further: students’ publications and podcasts, assemblies, ...

By default, this moves learning away from “what’s on the specification” to learning for learning’s sake, enabling students to question and challenge how and what they learn and to make links synoptically between topics and subjects. This also helps to get teachers and students to move away from the idea of education being a transaction (do x and in exchange you get a grade, do xxx and in exchange you get a better grade) and move explicitly towards education being an exchange of ideas, knowledge, skills and experiences. In this way, we all talk ourselves and our students into overcoming one barrier faced by those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

## Section 3

Starting the widening participation message early and focussing on key moments

# 15. Start Early, even at Key Stage 1

Many schools and colleges know that disadvantage is deep-rooted, and that it is usually well-established long before the age at which a young person applies to university. For this reason, some schools are working on university ambitions from a very young age. It is however vital to target different styles of outreach at different stages in order to keep the message fresh. This must form part of your curriculum planning.

Key principles for each of the younger stages you might work with:

### KS1

While it might seem absurd to talk to five year olds about university, that is exactly what many middle class and professional households do. The essence of working with very young children is just to open the words up, without discussing anything transactional about why you should go or what you should do. And make it fun!

### KS2

Children at this age group are filled with enthusiasm and curiosity — it is a key time to catch the interest of bright, disadvantaged pupils. Try out lessons in academic disciplines that contain advanced concepts and you'll be surprised at the level of engagement — in our programmes sociology, philosophy, psychology and genetics all have worked brilliantly.

### KS3

Critical thinking is an excellent focus at this stage. Big questions — like those on the Oxplore website ([www.oxplore.org](http://www.oxplore.org)) — and training in argument and debate give the foundation for more advanced discourse.

### KS4

Alongside the challenge (and rigid structure) of GCSEs, it can be very powerful to allow students freedom in what they study. Try exploring their own choice of topic, but back this work up by teaching study skills.

Take them into the university environment if at all possible to carry out their own research.



## 16. Engage pupils early and focus on transition points

Engage pupils as early as possible:

We know that if we want pupils to aim highly, then we need to help them aspire when they are in primary school. The sooner we can open doors in their minds, the better.

IntoUniversity works with primary school pupils to encourage them to think of themselves as future graduates. They also support pupils of all ages by providing homework support in their many regional centres. These centres are often run in partnership with local independent schools or Universities.

Some independent schools also run tailored programmes to raise both

attainment and aspiration among local pupils. These include Westminster, Godolphin and Latymer, and Magdalen College School.

Focus on transition points:

If schools are looking to have maximum impact, then programmes which focus on transitions are a good place to look. This can be the transition from primary to secondary, for which see above Engage pupils as early as possible. We can also target impact on a subject at GCSE in order to increase A level take-up, or University access. Schools can work in partnership to provide preparation for medical school applications, for example.



## 17. Make partnerships with universities from Year 10

Higher Education Institutions are keen to promote and actively encourage wider participation and access to more disadvantaged pupils. The Office for Students requires them to draw up access plans and to report annually on progress. Each university has outreach partnerships with schools and colleges; these include visits to schools by students or academics and invitations to talks, tours and courses for pupils.

Key points for widening participation:

Organise visits to university campuses in Year 10 and Year 12 — target pupils who are eligible for Free School Meals to take part in the visits. Some schools organise these visits for younger pupils in order to encourage high aspirations at an early age.

Ask your Head of Sixth Form or Head of Careers to contact either a local or a national university and to invite them to build a partnership together.



Organise visits to university campuses in Year 10 and Year 12

## 18. Work in Partnership, particularly in the hard-to-reach places

There is a distinct dividing line in the country between areas with schools which send numerous children to more selective universities, and areas which send very few. For example, 28 out of the 30 schools which see the highest number of young people admitted into Oxbridge are based below a line which runs from Bristol to the Wash. So the challenge comes — how to correct this regional imbalance?

Schools Together's ([www.schoolstogether.org](http://www.schoolstogether.org)) innovative publication, 'The Missing 2000', which came out in 2020, outlines numerous ways in which cross-sector partnerships can work together locally to support entry to top-tier

universities ([www.schoolstogether.org/publications](http://www.schoolstogether.org/publications)). It suggested that the best partnerships are moving from 'happenstance' partnership work to 'designed' work.



**Schools Together**



## Section 4

Reaching out to networks and organisations who can help

# 19. Get support from the Social Mobility Foundation

The Social Mobility Foundation's Aspiring Professionals Programme is designed to open up professions for those with the ability to join them in the future, but without the means or networks to get there. Over 2,000 students a year enrol in our free programmes and access four pillars of support:

- One to one mentoring from a volunteer professional
- University application support and guidance, including personal statement checking
- Tailored skills sessions and career workshops
- Work experience with top employers from law, business, medicine, STEM, politics, media, technology, banking & finance and accountancy

Students from anywhere in the UK can apply for our programmes in the autumn of Year 12, and continue to access advice and support until they graduate from university. Eligibility depends on socio-economic and academic criteria – detailed information about our programmes and application deadlines are available on our website.

**S\_CIAL  
MOBILITY  
F\_UNDATION**

## 20. Draw on the support that's out there, including free Sutton Trust programmes and research

Sutton Trust programmes are free to each of the 7,000+ young people who take part, wherever they are in the country:

- Our summer schools **summerschools.suttontrust.com** demystify life at highly selective universities and support young people in year 12 to make informed decisions about their next steps
- Our US programme **us.suttontrust.com** brings in reach of young people from lower income homes the prospect of studying at a great university across the Atlantic

- Our Pathways programmes **www.suttontrust.com/our-programmes/** offer support over two years to help disadvantaged sixth formers access great university courses and competitive professions such as medicine, law, banking, consultancy and engineering

Every student is supported to develop their employability skills and receives ongoing support with their applications and future careers through our new online platform, Sutton Trust Online.

Many of our partner universities make reduced offers to lower-income students,

to acknowledge the circumstances in which their grades were achieved. And if you want to understand more about the context in which all this is happening, dip into the research the Trust has done on the subject of widening access and social mobility – again, all free and available on the Sutton Trust website.





## 21. Get involved with The Elephant Group or similar organisations

**The Elephant Group**  
[www.theelephantgroup.org](http://www.theelephantgroup.org)  
was formed in 2018 by a group of headteachers committed to increasing access to 'top third' universities for their 'top third' students. The first meeting was held in Elephant & Castle — hence the name — and since then the group has grown to include 35+ state schools and many of the country's leading universities. With hubs in London,

the East Midlands, Yorkshire and the North East, the Elephant Access programme supports academically able Sixth Formers by building knowledge and resources in your school to support their aspirations and applications to top universities.



## 22. Information about accessing top universities is in the public domain

Teachers do not need to have been to top universities themselves to give effective support to applicants, nor do they need a little black book of contacts. What they need is time to gather information about the application process and to share it with their students. This information is freely available online on university websites and from admissions tutors who are only too happy to help.

A great shortcut is to ask colleagues at other schools, including your local independent school, for help — they have become expert not through dinners and personal contacts, but by having time to invest in researching information that is freely available to any school. This includes

gathering feedback when students are unsuccessful in applications.

Medical schools are brilliant at publishing their application criteria — students should be encouraged to research these carefully and work out which schools best match their individual profiles. Again, all the information is in the public domain.

If your students will need to have an interview for university, get them talking to each other about their academic interests. If they are the only one applying for that course, see if your local independent school can match them up with one of their students online and/or in person. It will be great for both students.



## 23. Engage with Royal Springboard

The Royal National Children's SpringBoard Foundation is a charity working to bring the transformational opportunities of bursary places at many of the UK's independent schools to young people who have faced complex and challenging home circumstances – whether due to social care intervention and/or living in low-income households in deprived areas with poor educational opportunities.

The foundation works in partnerships at community level to identify, prepare and support young people who deserve and desire the opportunity of a bursary place at an independent school and can support independent schools seeking to better target their bursary places for those for whom these opportunities can be most transformative.

Schools themselves need to meet the full cost of these placements, although the charity has a small grant fund to contribute towards the fee profile in some circumstances.





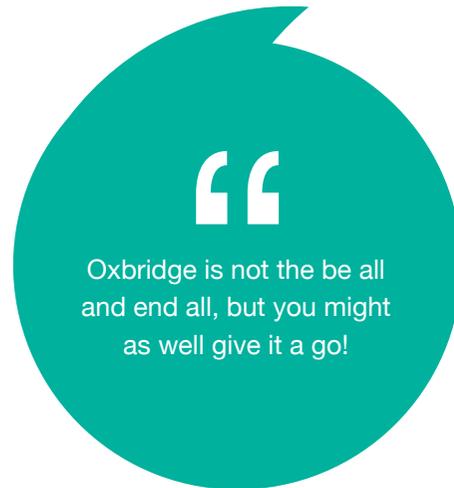
Student voice

# 24. Q+A with a Cambridge undergraduate

The student who gave these answers is now reading Modern and Medieval Languages at Selwyn College, Cambridge having previously attended a state comprehensive school in London and having come from a less-advantaged background. He is the first person in his family to attend university.

Why would you recommend applying to Cambridge University?

I'd recommend applying to Cambridge because it's just such a unique experience — its system of small-group teaching (supervisions) means that you get the near undivided attention of a world expert in the field you're passionate about. The opportunity to be a part of a college, attend formal halls and all the amazing societies and extracurricular events are added bonuses! That being the case, I don't doubt that many other universities are just as fulfilling and exciting to go to — Oxbridge is not the be all and end all, but you might as well give it a go!



What did you do to help you apply successfully?

My personal statement was bolstered by going to as many lectures and summer schools as possible — even just googling 'Oxbridge Summer School' can work wonders. Ask your friends what they've found or if they're going to anything, check the websites and social media accounts of the college you might want to apply to (or any!) to see if anything's being advertised. In your personal statement they'll want to see you construct an argument based on your research — so get reading! Hopefully it won't be too much of a chore as it should be a subject you love!

What did your school do to help you to apply successfully?

My school was a source of great support in my Cambridge application: my French teacher went above and beyond by giving up his own time to help me with extra speaking sessions and setting me past entrance exam papers to get me ready for my interview. The Sixth Form team organised mock interviews and checked my personal statement, helping me cut it down while making sure all the necessary information was there.

## 25. Q+A with an Oxford undergraduate

This account comes from a student of History and Politics at Magdalen College, University of Oxford. Before Oxford, this student attended a state school in Peterborough.

This student attended Oxford's UNIQ programme, a free summer school, with both academic and social activities for state school pupils in their first year of further education, and which aims to familiarise potential applicants with Oxford, to encourage them to apply. This student also took part in Opportunity Oxford, an academic bridging programme that helps Oxford's offer-holders from under-represented backgrounds to transition successfully from school to university.

Had anyone from your family attended university before you? Did this affect your decision to apply to University yourself?

Nobody in my immediate family had gone to university before me. Two of my cousins went, one hated it and one loved it, but they were doing very different subjects (Accounting and the History of Art).

It didn't really impact my decision as I wanted to do what I thought was best and most interesting for me.

What effect did attending an outreach event have on your decision to apply for a selective university?

The experience of being on UNIQ and later receiving support through Opportunity Oxford was very positive. Before I participated in UNIQ I was not going to apply to Oxford, but the amazing and academically stimulating week I spent here in the city changed my mind and made me feel like Oxford was right for me. They went above and beyond to accommodate my disability, and it really made me feel welcome. Seeing and meeting others similar to yourself can really make going to a selective university seem all the more possible.



My advice to anyone considering applying to a selective university is to just go for it!

What advice would you give to others thinking about applying to a selective university?

My advice to anyone considering applying to a selective university is to just go for it! You may never get the opportunity again so believe in yourself and your potential, work out what you need to show in the admissions process, and just try your best as you have nothing to lose.

## 26. Q+A with a graduate from Oxford and Harvard

This testimony, in his own words, is from a student who can be described as coming from a Widening Participation background and who progressed from school to Oxford University for Philosophy and Theology before joining Teach First and then earning a full scholarship to Harvard University in the USA.

Can you tell us a little about your own background?

I switched schools at 16+ because my Mum saw an advert in our local paper that the local private school was accepting applications for its Sixth Form, and there were scholarships and bursaries available. My Mum struggled financially for many years, not that I was particularly aware of our situation. For example, we were eligible for free school meals but she never claimed them and continued to make us packed

lunches so that we didn't stand out amongst our peers as the 'free school meal kids'. Although she worked full time, she relied on government support to make ends meet, but she never once gave us a cause for concern. I wasn't to know it at the time, and it sounds very cliché, but her coming across this advert in the local paper truly did change my life.

What was it that convinced you to 'have a go' and aim high?

My Mum was always my biggest supporter and the reason why I had such high aspirations. I was getting top grades at school from a very young age and she always said to me that I could go to Oxford with "grades like that". Coming across the opportunity at the local private school was offering was wonderfully serendipitous for me as she was already considering whether I should be looking to go



elsewhere for Sixth Form, such as the nearby grammar school. The school I was at before had only ever had one Oxbridge applicant, and it wasn't really a focus of theirs, so she was keen that I was supported adequately. The school where I took my A levels had lots of experience of how to apply and how to get students accepted.

What particularly did the school do to help you to apply and how did the school support you?

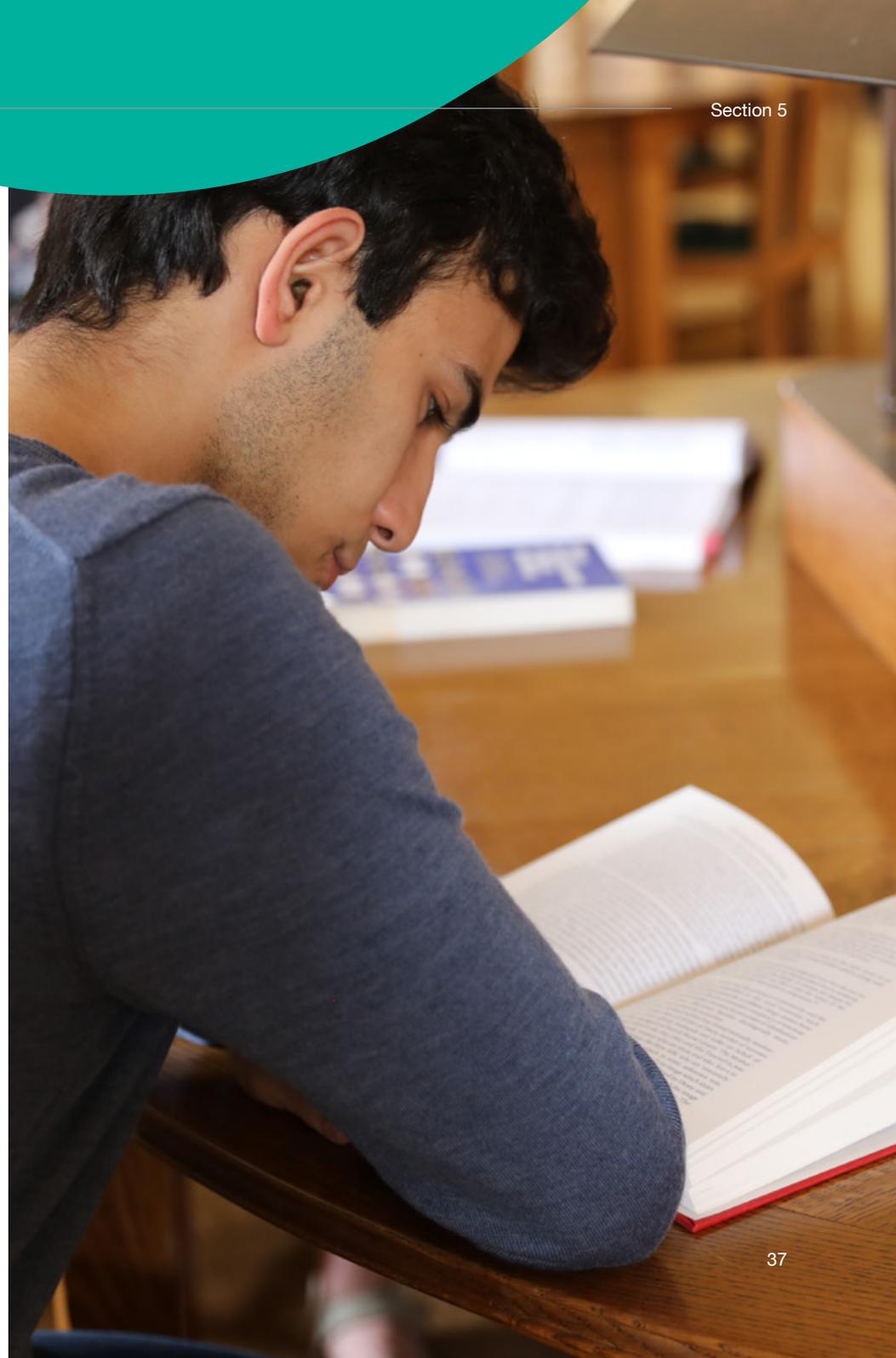
For me, simply being around people that had been to Oxbridge was hugely beneficial. People underestimate how important consistent exposure is to normalise something and make it seem achievable. Before going to this particular Sixth Form, I hadn't met anyone that had been to Oxbridge, or even really any university for that matter. Growing up, my family knew maybe one or two people that had been to university, but they were the outliers and often people we revered as being really accomplished. Whereas, during my time taking A levels, it became clear to me that going to university wasn't an exception for the students and families there — it was the norm.

In addition, the support I got from various members of staff was outstanding. I remember attending 'masterclass' sessions for the group of us that was applying to Oxbridge,

where the Head of Academics had brought in external capacity to help us craft personal statements, as well as prepare for interviews. I remember sitting in both my Religious Studies teachers' offices and going through my personal statement with a fine tooth comb, on multiple occasions, until it was perfect. This one-to-one support from them was so valuable to me. I remember having practice interviews before going for the real thing, and consequently not really finding the real thing too daunting. But really, what stands out the most was that outside the library there was a list of hundreds of engraved names of previous students from the school that had been to Oxbridge, and this acted as constant source of inspiration and aspiration.

What advice would you give to others in a similar context?

Work your hardest and do your best, but remember that your worth is not defined by a university. You will flourish no matter where you are.



## 27. A personal account from an undergraduate MSci student in Psychology at the University of Bath

My journey through the state schooling system was incredible, despite what you sometimes hear from other people. The support and encouragement that I received, empowered me to apply to top universities, and that includes those best ranked in the UK for my course.

My educational background began with a lot of self-doubt prior to my GCSEs until I encouraged myself to do better and work even harder. The success that I achieved at GCSE fuelled my A Level endeavours further and pushed me towards university applications. My discipline and self-belief led me to become the top performer in my year at school for A Levels, despite COVID-19 disruptions and despite even government grading algorithms. The next step in my academic career was attending higher education.

Being the first individual in my immediate family to apply for university made this process daunting; because it was unknown territory. Imposter syndrome appeared imminent if I was to go to university — would I feel like I belonged despite my background? My hometown was not one that was renowned for producing academic excellence and so this loomed as another pressure. I was keen to overcome the stereotype and earn the best results that I could.

To help in overcoming these fears, my Sixth Form (also my secondary school) designated us staff to assist with our UCAS applications. I was also selected to do an EPQ, which helped me to gather more support for my application; some universities provide lower entrance requirements with this qualification. Teachers familiar with the UCAS process detailed specific information to share on my application regarding my background which would help in reaching the next stages of the university applications. Additionally,

my personal academic efforts were recognised by the school and they gave high predicted grades for my A levels. I used league table rankings to pick my five UCAS choices, but, being unaware of many students from my school going to Bath, the process appeared intimidating once again. To overcome this, my school provided masses of support with personal statement writing, interview prep and frequent check-ups to track the progress of university applications. The outreach and widening

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Being the first individual in my immediate family to apply for university made this process daunting; because it was unknown territory.

participation team at Bath appeared very welcoming to new prospective students and for me, the decisive factor towards making Bath my firm choice, was a phone call I had with a current student at the time.

When I arrived at Bath, I was greeted with a diverse range of people from various backgrounds. Assisting me throughout my time at Bath is the Gold Scholarship Programme which provides financial and social support to students from underrepresented and underprivileged backgrounds. This programme has alleviated monetary worries whilst promoting a community spirit amongst these students with plenty of events.

When I look back at all I have achieved, I know that a team of staff has been supporting me all the way.

## 28. Q+A with a recent graduate of Imperial College, London

This student came from a widening participation background, she attended an independent school on a full bursary for seven years and went on to complete an MSc in Materials Science and Engineering at Imperial College, London.

### Tell us a bit about your family background

I am the youngest of three children raised by a single mother. My mother supported us by working part-time and receiving government benefits while also being a full-time mother. From Y7 to Y13, all three of us were fortunate enough to receive a full bursary from an independent school in the Greater Manchester area.

The bursary allowed us to attend school, and with additional requests, benefactors provided funds for school trips and experiences. Money is not the be-all and end-all; while it can

help and can provide some better opportunities, it is not necessary to live a successful life. I would say that the experiences, values, and relationships gained both from my upbringing and my time at school, were essential for my development.

### What was it that convinced you to 'have a go' and aim high?

My parents had always been strong advocates of the idea that with hard work, and a good education, you had the foundation to build a better life. Teachers at school encouraged all

students to take the traditional route of higher education. Based on my academic achievements and Imperial's reputation, I chose to study there.

Imperial, like many prestigious universities, offered competitive courses, in which you are surrounded by peers that will challenge you. With opportunities to learn about cutting-edge technology and research, a degree from Imperial also came with international recognition in many industries.

### What did your school do to encourage you to apply, and support you with your applications?

External STEM engagement at school was particularly good. I recall firms like Bentley teaching us about aerodynamics and participating in events like the Physics Olympics, science and maths Olympiads and other challenges. Being able to explore the subject outside the classroom was key to sparking interest in these subjects.

People from various universities were invited to give talks and mock interviews for Oxbridge applicants at school too. I was lucky enough that one of the lecturers was from the materials department at Imperial. Part of that talk was about aerogel, a very low-density material I had been researching as part of my extended project qualification (EPQ).

Whether coincidental or not, I was able to learn more about materials, the application, and the interview process in addition to getting to hold a really cool material. (Not literally, it's 99% air so it was at room temperature, but a very good insulator, and pretty cool to me).

What advice would you give to current Sixth Formers in a similar position to you?

Education whether at university or, more generally in life, can be very rewarding and at times it can also be very difficult. Truthfully, I often think of my time at university as the best and worst time of

my life. Remember everyone has their insecurities whether that's financial, educational, race, beauty (both internally and out) just to name a few. It's okay to be a work in progress (because we all are), to make mistakes, and not know what degree or path you want to take. Do your research and believe in yourself. As cheesy as it sounds it's all about the journey and the lessons you take from it. Find ways to make the learning process fun and dedicate your time to things that spark an interest in you personally. Good luck and keep being curious.

“

My parents had always been strong advocates of the idea that with hard work, and a good education, you had the foundation to build a better life.



## 29. A second personal account from an undergraduate at the University of Bath

### This student is studying Politics and International Relations at Bath

My journey to becoming a University of Bath student reinvigorated my passion for higher education despite the turbulence I have experienced throughout my life.

From a young age, my life has been quite unpredictable due to the many times I've had to move to different countries and cities because one of my parents is in the military. After eventually settling in the UK, the start of my adolescence took a dark turn due to the financial difficulties my family was facing, and other adversities which resulted in the deterioration of my mental health.

I was fortunate to have compassionate teachers at secondary school and

they gave me the resilience to revise effectively and to write a good quality UCAS personal statement. I was also fortunate to have been placed on the 'Access to Bath' course on FutureLearn, due to the university's Widening Participation Scheme. That course was an invaluable part of understanding the intricacies of the UK university system, as well as insights into living at Bath. Coming from a state school in a 'lower participation to higher education' area, I was prepared to come into the University with limited knowledge about what university would be like, but now I have many resources in which I can take solace in my day-to-day student life. Other than its stellar league table position, and the

beautiful city the university is in, I liked how much Bath university emphasised on the website and during the online Applicant Visit Days, that anyone, no matter your background, could belong at Bath. I was wowed with the variety of scholarships you could apply for, so that finances could not limit your higher education journey, and the extensive mental health support provided to their students, which made me feel very supported throughout the process of applying to the university. Receiving the email that I had an 'Unconditional Firm Offer' from the University of Bath was exhilarating, and I definitely made the right choice to study Politics and International Relations!

From reflecting on my journey, I think that schools should do more to foster genuine enthusiasm for future careers and higher education to their pupils. For me, having teachers passionately recommending universities to consider applying for, doing fun quizzes that reveal careers which best suit you, and listening to inspiring stories about university life from teachers really made me excited to start this journey.

## 30. A third personal account from an undergraduate at Bath University

This female student is studying for a BA in Applied Social Sciences at the University of Bath; she was a young carer and the first in her family to go on from school into higher education

At sixteen, teachers encouraged me to apply to university. My mum was a child bride and never had the opportunity to consider higher education. Informed by my history, a teacher showed me a University of Bath prospectus and said, “You belong here!” The university was campus-based fulfilling my desire for a community and inspiring me to become curious about higher education applications.

Alongside my encouragement was the numerous supports. The most significant support was when I was unsuccessful in my university interviews. My mum was diagnosed with cancer; I was suddenly

responsible for her and for my four siblings. It was an experience that inhibited my ability to do well in school and university interviews. The teachers recognised how my family circumstances became a barrier to my capacity to focus on my future and secured therapy to help me process my challenges. The school became a safe space to take a break from being a young carer. I became more convinced that my teachers were genuinely interested in offering opportunities to improve my quality of life. As a result, my curiosity about higher education became a commitment.

At eighteen, my mother was cancer-free; my job as the family’s caregiver

came to an end. I worked part-time as a support worker and enrolled in an Access Course to Higher Education. However, three months into the course, I was diagnosed with a life-threatening lung illness. My positive experience at school empowered me to ask for culturally-appropriate support and flexible teaching working around my treatment. My commitment to getting to university and the support meant I was cured of the illness and attained the grades necessary to attend the University of Bath.

Upon experiencing a challenging journey, I realised school taught me how to persevere. Now I’m in my final year of studying Applied Social Studies

with a potential graduate job from one of the best Asset Management companies in my city. All because a teacher gave me a prospectus, told me I belonged and secured culturally-appropriate therapy. To encourage other students, I would recommend three behaviours: Stay informed about their challenges, believe in them, and provide culturally-relevant support. Access to teachers and institutions that embody these traits means people like me can feel they belong in higher education — thus turning our curiosity into a life-changing commitment.

