

"The university of my dreams": Harry McWilliam tells us all about applying to the University of Oxford - interview conducted by Callista Quadling

**1. What made you want to apply to the University of Oxford?**

For me really, applying to Oxford has always been the goal. For years, I've wanted to go to the best university in the country (in my opinion at least) and to succeed there. I know that at Oxford I would receive the best and most rigorous education and I really couldn't imagine it any other way.

**2. How did you arrive at the decision to study Chemistry? Were you always certain of what you wanted to do?**

I started year 12 with the intention of pursuing a career in medicine. However, I soon realised that I wasn't fully committed to it and was in it for all the wrong reasons. I panicked! I spent months agonising over the subject choice, flipping almost daily between biochemistry, maths, chemical engineering and chemistry itself. Eventually, I realised that I wanted to pursue something directly related to chemistry as this was the subject that I enjoyed the most at school and even more when I read around the spec outside of school. For me, Chemistry is a bridge between practical and theoretical science and I find that really gratifying.

**3. What were the main factors you considered when making your decision between the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge?**

First and foremost, Cambridge doesn't really offer chemistry. At Cambridge, they teach natural sciences, which is kind of a combination of all 3 sciences, maths and other related subjects like geology and material science. Whilst this does provide a broad, synoptic view of science, it just isn't for me. The thing about university that I'm most looking forward to is the deep dive of my subject, jumping in at the deep end and just exploring. Oxford simply provided that for me.

**4. How would you say the application process for the University of Oxford varies from the process at other Russell group universities?**

The main difference is the Interview process. The personal statement is largely the same, except that for Oxbridge, they really are looking to see passion for the subject as well as that in depth level of understanding and a lot of evidence of those things. The interview, however, is so different to anything else I've ever experienced. It's less of an interview and more of an opportunity to talk to some of the brightest and most accomplished people in your field. They ask you a specific question about a topic and keep adding on or asking why until they find something you don't know and then they keep going even further to see how good you are at picking up new information and applying that information. It's really strange and it does require a practice or two. They aren't trying to catch you out but rather trying to see if you can work well in their tutorial system.

**5. Could you talk us through some of the key moments from your interviews?**

In my interview specifically, I was asked about argon for the second interview. Firstly, I had to explain its properties (why it's unreactive, why it's a gas at room temperature and other things about it) and then they gave me this ridiculous equation. I was so confused but after the interviewer explained it, I was onboard. I then had to work out the units of the constants and then I had to draw a sketch of the graph of the function. The hardest part, though, was when I had to find the minimum point of the curve using differentiation, which I didn't have too much practice of at that time. I did the best I could, but I did make a few mistakes, although the interviewers were really helpful in helping me find the errors and correct them. I was honestly just surprised

that they asked this sort of thing, but it showed me how much my maths skills would be used at Oxford, so it wasn't all bad!

#### **6. How did you prepare for the application process?**

My preparation for the application was a lot simpler than most, as I didn't have to do an entry test for my course. I only had to prepare for my interview and make sure that my personal statement was the best that it could be. I couldn't have done either of those things without the help of Mrs Dutt and Miss Waterfall. They read every draft of my personal statement to make sure it was up to Oxford's standards and to make sure all the chemistry was correct and interesting. They also gave me mock interviews over Teams to make sure I was ready for the style of question and that I could use the technology. The most important thing with applying is asking for help when you need it.

#### **7. How did you feel when your offer came through?**

I remember the morning the offer came through quite vividly. It had just gone 9 and I was in Mrs Dutt's form on Teams, and the moment the email came through I just screamed. I was genuinely shocked that I had even got an interview so to hear that I had an offer... it was just amazing. I felt a massive sense of relief that everything I had worked towards had paid off and that I could go to the university of my dreams. Even now, months later, I still can't believe it!

#### **8. What are your goals for the future?**

In terms of a career, I'm still not sure on the details. I would very much like to stay at university and get a PhD afterwards, but beyond that I'm not sure. I think I would like a career in research, but I'm also considering becoming a professor and teaching chemistry at university. When applying to any university, you don't need to know the specifics of your career and you probably won't need to for years to come, so don't panic if you don't know already.

#### **9. If you could give three tips to someone aiming to apply to the University of Oxford what would they be?**

My three main pieces of advice to any Oxbridge hopefuls, is to apply to do some summer schools, make sure your personal statement is fully checked over and is absolutely perfect, and not to panic. All of the other Russell Group universities are amazing in their own right, and Oxbridge isn't for everyone. If you don't get in, then you'll likely have offers from loads of other amazing unis across the country, all of which can provide an excellent education! Good luck to any future applicants, and I hope you find success!