Admissions procedures for Physics at Oxford University

Oxford Physics operates a centrally coordinated admissions process which rests on two fundamental principles: that each candidate is considered following equivalent procedures regardless of the candidate's background and that the probability of getting a place at Oxford does not depend on candidate's choice of college. The Department of Physics takes responsibility for the initial stages of the admissions process (1-4) and helps coordinate the later stages, but all interviews are performed in and by the colleges and all final decisions on admissions are made by colleges.

1. Applications

Applications to read Physics or Physics & Philosophy at Oxford are made in the same way as applications for any other undergraduate degree at Oxford, with the exception of arrangements for the written physics aptitude test (PAT). The PAT is a two hour paper which covers mathematics and physics with marks split between the two subjects 50-50. All applicants are required to take the test. By now, many subjects have similar tests. Since 2011 the Department of Physics has been working in partnership with the Admissions Testing Service (formerly Cambridge Assessment) which administers the test. The test is set and marked by the Department of Physics. Candidates need to register with the Admissions Test Service to take the test. Information on how to register and further details, including syllabuses, sample papers, and reports on previous tests are available on the department website at **http://www2.physics.ox.ac.uk/study-here/undergraduates/applications/physics-aptitude-test-pat**

2. Short-listing

Due to the high and steadily growing number of applicants per place (approximately 5.4 in 2011), Oxford Physics has introduced a short-listing process to reduce the number of candidates to around 2.5 per place. The primary short-listing criterion is performance on the PAT. A small number (about 10-15% of those finally short-listed) of additional candidates are added to the short-list, either because their test score may not reflect their true ability (such as candidates with medical certificates) or because their application materials show other quite exceptional evidence of excellence, such as candidates with 9 or more A* grades at GCSE from schools where such achievement is unusual. However these additional candidates, the best of those who did not make the initial short-list based on PAT marks only, only seldom receive offers indicating that short-listing based on PAT marks selects practically all strong candidates with good prospects of getting offers.

In addition, following the University initiative on widening participation, extra candidates who fulfil criteria set by the University are added (by the Admissions Coordinator) to complete the short-list. In 2011, 6 candidates were added to the short-listed candidates. These extra candidates do not displace any candidates who normally would be short-listed.

3. Reallocation

Reallocation, that is reassigning candidates from more popular to less popular colleges, has been practised by Oxford Physics for many years and by now has been formalised as part of the short-

listing process. It is carried out after short-listing to ensure that the number of candidates per place is as far as possible the same across the collegiate university. In 2011, 79 candidates were reallocated.

4. Assignment of second colleges

All short-listed candidates are assigned to a second college, which is responsible for providing a second opinion based on one interview. This second college is chosen at random except for candidates with relevant disabilities or medical certificates (second choice colleges for those candidates are chosen such that they are located geographically not far from the first choice colleges).

5. Interviews at first college

Candidates are interviewed at their first college on Monday and Tuesday of the interview week. In most cases colleges will provide two separate interviews, each marked out of 10, although in some cases colleges may give one long interview or three short interviews, and then marks are combined to give two final marks. Interviews are essentially academic in nature, and will largely concentrate on discussions of topics in physics and mathematics. Philosophy interviews for Physics & Philosophy candidates are provided in addition.

6. Interview at second college

Candidates are interviewed at their second college on Tuesday of the interview week. In most cases colleges will provide one interview marked out of 10, although in some cases colleges may give two interviews with one combined mark. Interviews are essentially academic in nature, and will largely concentrate on discussions of topics in physics and mathematics.

7. Post-interview scoring and banding

At the end of the interview process each candidate is assigned a total score calculated from the test scores and interview scores, with the two components given equal weight. This score is used to rank all applicants, but as the score does not incorporate all relevant information (such as examination results, references and personal statements) this rank is not used directly as an admissions criterion. It is, however, used to place all candidates in 3 bands: **A**, the top 100 candidates, who will normally be offered a place; **B**, the next 200 candidates who might be offered a place; **C**, remaining candidates, will not normally be offered a place.

8. Final decision

Final decisions are made by the colleges and confirmed in a joint meeting of all College physics tutors. All decisions not to offer a place to band A candidates, or to offer a place to band C candidates, must be approved by this meeting. The departmental team coordinates the decision process to ensure that strong candidates are not overlooked.

9. Open (pool) offers

Each year a small number of candidates decline their offer, or accept their offer and then fail to achieve their offer conditions, and so it is necessary to make a small number of additional offers so that these vacancies can be filled. Due to the small number of places at individual colleges these offers are made by the department, with no college specified. These open offers, sometimes known as pool places, guarantee a place at Oxford, but the college will not be determined until the admissions process is completed in August.

The list of open offers and corresponding underwriting colleges is made at the final meeting of all college physics tutors.

10. Standard offers

Oxford Physics has a standard offer at A level of A*AA including physics and maths with A* for either of the two. Offers may include further conditions, such as the subject of the third A grade, but do not usually include a fourth A level or AEA results. Our standard IB offer is 39 points (including core points) with 7 at higher level physics and higher level maths. Offers for candidates studying under other examination systems are set at a level broadly comparable to the IB offer.

11. Overseas and mature candidates

Oxford Physics welcomes applications from all sources, including overseas and mature applicants. All applicants are required to take the aptitude test. Information on past and predicted examination results is interpreted in the light of guidance from the central admissions office. Short-listed candidates from Europe will normally be invited for interview in Oxford. Candidates from more distant countries are interviewed by Skype (preferred) or phone.

12. Deferred offers

Candidates applying for deferred offers are treated in the same way as candidates seeking direct entry, except that the standards required for deferred entry are slightly higher. For this reason candidates in band A need not necessarily be offered a deferred place.

13. Physics & Philosophy

Applicants for the joint school of physics and philosophy are assessed for their suitability to study physics in very much the same way as applicants for the single honours physics course. Their suitability to study philosophy is also assessed through additional interviews and submitted written work. Significant differences include:

a) As many colleges do not offer physics and philosophy applicants are only reallocated to colleges which do.

b) The first college will also provide one or more interviews in philosophy. The second college *may* also provide further interviews in philosophy.

c) After interview physics and philosophy candidates are banded by the physics department as if they were physics candidates, ignoring the results of philosophy interviews. Thus physics and philosophy candidates placed by physics in band A will not receive an offer unless their philosophy marks are also of sufficient quality.

d) Open offers are not made in physics and philosophy.

Applicants for physics and philosophy may also nominate physics as a second choice course, and will be considered for both courses at the same time. If a candidate is considered suitable for both courses, then only an offer for physics and philosophy will be made. Applicants for physics and philosophy who have nominated physics as a second choice may be made open offers in physics.

14. Materials Science

Applicants for physics may also nominate materials science as a second choice course. The two applications will be considered separately, and so candidates may be short-listed for either course, both courses, or neither course. If a candidate is considered suitable for both courses, then only an offer for physics will be made. Candidates who are short-listed for materials science but not short-listed for physics will be reallocated to a college which offers materials science if necessary.

15. Monitoring

At the end of each admissions round the process is assessed to determine how it can be improved in subsequent years. Data is collected on the different indicators used, and is subsequently compared with the results obtained by successful applicants in university examinations.

16. Complaints

Applicants who wish to complain about any aspect of the application process should write to the Tutor for Admissions at the college handling their application. If an applicant has been reallocated then they should write to the college they have been reallocated to. Where the complaint includes matters handled by the department, or by a second college, the handling college will refer enquiries to the appropriate authorities.

If a complaint is upheld this will not necessarily alter the final decision on the offer of a place. In the event that the final decision is changed it is not usually possible to offer the applicant a place for the coming year, and a deferred place for the following year may be offered instead. In the same way, candidates who do not achieve their offer conditions, but who subsequently have this decision overturned on appeal, may be offered a deferred place.