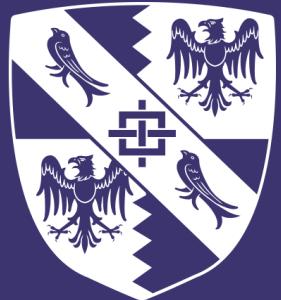


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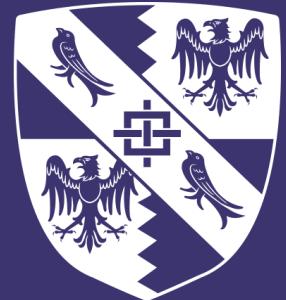


# Teacher and Advisors: Supporting Applicants to Oxbridge

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Natalie Thompson  
Widening Participation Officer  
Magdalene College  
University of Cambridge

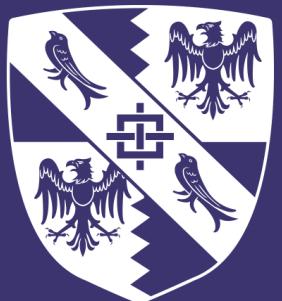


# This session will cover:

Predicted A Level grades  
UCAS References  
New Personal Statements  
Admissions Assessments  
Interviews

# Predicted grades

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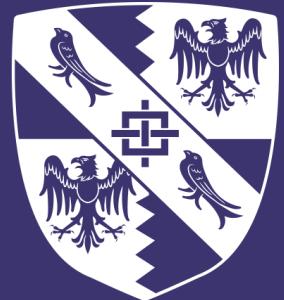
- Predicted grades are the best indicators universities have for how the student might achieve at A Level.
  - GCSEs are also used as a performance indicator, but we know how much students can progress between GCSE and A Level.
- Schools will have their own processes for predicting grades, and these can be outlined in the UCAS reference.
- Ideally, predicted grades should meet or exceed the minimum offer level of the applicant's chosen course.
  - For Cambridge, this will be A\*AA or better.



# UCAS References

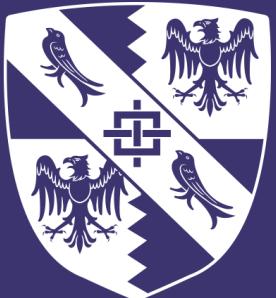
- You do not need to write a reference which is specific to Oxford or Cambridge – this advice applies to all universities.
- Section 1: School Context
  - Intake demographics
  - Progression rates to Higher Education
  - Qualification provision (e.g., not offering A Level Further Maths)
  - Any significant staff changes or other disruptions (e.g., RAAC, cyber attacks with long-term effects)
  - Internal processes for predicting A Level grades (e.g., internal assessments)

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# UCAS References

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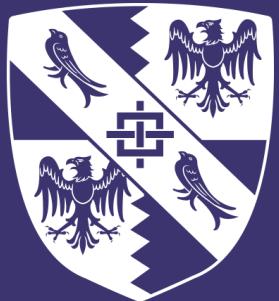
- Section 2: Applicant-specific extenuating circumstances
  - Disability, neurodivergence, long-term illness
  - Reasons for disparity between GCSE grades and A Level predictions
  - Support mechanisms put in place by school which the university should be aware of
- You must be clear whether any extenuating circumstances were taken into consideration by awarding bodies for GCSE qualifications.
- You should seek the applicant's consent for any personal information to be shared.
- If this section is particularly confidential or lengthy, consider submitting an Extenuating Circumstances Form.



# UCAS References

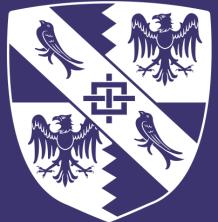
- Section 3: Other supportive information
  - Focus on academic performance and potential in subjects relevant to chosen course
  - Evidence of willingness to explore outside of curriculum
  - Estimated ranking in class / cohort
  - Concrete statements and comparisons are useful:
    - ✓ ‘In tests at the end of Year 12, Anisha was ranked second out of 63 students in Biology.’
    - ✓ ‘Our Head of Geography rates Jack among the top three students he has taught in his 25-year career.’
    - ✓ ‘Neha was our only student to attain a gold award in the Cambridge Chemistry Challenge.’
    - ✓ ‘Henry’s History essays have been consistently assessed as being at A or A\* standard.’

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# Personal Statements

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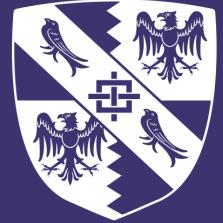


- UCAS have introduced a new personal statement structure for 2026 entry (current Year 12s).
- The traditional essay format will be replaced by a series of three thematic questions:
  1. Why do you want to study this course or subject?
  2. How have your qualifications and studies helped you prepare for this course or subject?
  3. What have you done to prepare outside of education and why are these experiences useful?

The overall character limit is 4000 characters, which does not have to be distributed equally across all three questions. We would advise focusing on giving more detail in question 2.

# Personal Statements

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1. Why do you want to study this course or subject?

E.g.,

- Subject-specific skills, giving examples of how students have developed and used them.
- Showing understanding of what the course involves, and a clear passion for the subject.

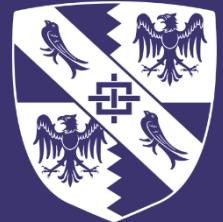


## Engineering

My interest in Engineering really took hold during a summer school at the University of Oxford in Year 12. I developed a project proposal to offer a new solution to house flooding using civil engineering techniques. I was selected to present my designs to Welsh Government representatives. The experience helped me to realise how my designs and solutions can be applied to solve societal problems, which motivated me to study Engineering at university level. I developed my interest during work experience at a software company, where I coded data analysis programmes, and at a cheese factory, during which I learned about process flows and helped to repair a whey pump. The amount of automation was astounding, and I was excited by the integration of mechanical and electronic engineering.

## Medicine

My scientific interests and abilities, and inquisitive and compassionate nature, fuel my ambition to study medicine. The study of the human body and its ever-changing conditions will satisfy my appetite for continual learning and interest in interacting with people. The first experience that confirmed my aspiration to be a doctor was a workshop at Surgeons' Hall Museum. There, a keyhole surgery simulator illustrated surgical practice. I learned how to do surgical sutures, which I found fascinating, so I bought a suture practice kit and have learned knots and stitches like running and vertical mattress sutures. To improve these skills and my manual dexterity I play violin, knit, and crochet regularly.

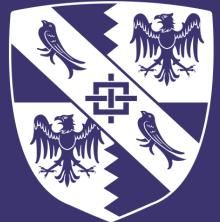


# Law

I see law as a vehicle for positive change in a wide variety of areas, including those personally important to me such as human rights and environmentalism. I'm excited to pursue these two interests from a legal perspective, as well as explore the more theoretical and conceptual elements of law that an academic degree can provide. My existing [interest in human rights](#) was developed further having read about [A and others v The Home Secretary \(2004\)](#) in [What About Law?](#) by Catherine Barnard et al. It came as a surprise to me that such a case could arise in the UK, as [detention without trial wasn't something I associated with this country](#) given its status as a modern liberal democracy. But after having [read further into the topic](#), it became apparent that conflict between parliamentary sovereignty and the protections of habeas corpus have occurred with some regularity in our history, including The Troubles in Northern Ireland and world wars.

# Personal Statements

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2. How have your qualifications and studies helped you prepare for this course or subject?

E.g.,

- Super-curricular activities – wider reading, activities, and/or work experience completed outside of school.
- Reflect critically on what students have gained from these experiences.

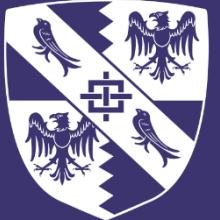
UCAS have confirmed that 'studies' should be conceptualised as a broad journey of academic development, both inside and outside of school.

Universities already know what qualifications applicants are taking, and are more interested in 'studies' in terms of super-curricular activities.

We would advise this should be the longest section.

# English

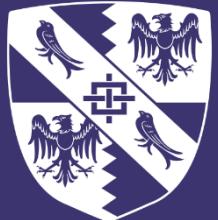
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I am fascinated by drama as a literary medium; when I saw 'Hadestown' as part of the National Theatre's New Views Playwriting Competition I was struck by how the classic myth was adapted to be so politically relevant whilst still maintaining its original timelessness. The performance epitomised my love of classical literature, as I am fascinated by the modern relevance of these narratives. I am particularly interested in texts such as Miller's 'Circe' and Atwood's 'The Penelopiad', which retell classic narratives from female perspectives. I wrote an essay for the Mary Renault Prize entitled 'Circe: A Metamorphic Woman', exploring how the character of Circe has evolved throughout literature, a project which I enjoyed due to the opportunity to closely focus on a single character throughout a wide range of texts. I have also relished the opportunity to study the original classical texts, due to their complex forms and composition. Analysing their literary techniques has provided me with a deeper appreciation for poetry, and I recently completed an online course run by the University of York called 'How to Read a Poem', which has allowed me to explore many other cultures' techniques and traditions and gain more of an understanding of aspects such as form and metre.

## Biological Natural Sciences

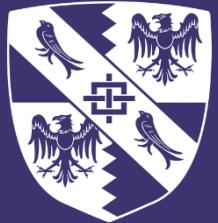
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For my EPQ, 'The Role of Telomerase in Telomere Regulation and Cellular Senescence, and its Potentials in Cancer Therapy', I was able to investigate further the biological basis of cancer. In 'The Telomere Effect', Elizabeth Blackburn detailed her Nobel Prize-winning discovery of telomerase; reading this provided me with understanding of how such critical discoveries are made. I investigated, and was fascinated by, the biological mechanisms related to telomeres and telomerase in human bodies and cancer growth. Through engaging with scientific publications, I explored how telomerase inhibition is used as a pioneering method to inhibit cancer growth by preventing indefinite cell division; within my EPQ I proposed theoretical therapies to target cancer growth through telomerase inhibition, applying my extended understanding. Following this project, I explored further the importance of telomerase expression, researching Hutchinson-Gilford Progeria Syndrome (a progressive rapid ageing disorder) and was intrigued to discover the significant relationships between different areas of biomedical research. By reading 'Old Before My Time', an autobiography centred on progeria, and academic journals, I gained knowledge on the biological basis of the disease, which I found fascinating. Completing my EPQ and further reading enhanced my independent research skills and allowed me to explore areas of biomedical science that really captivated me.

# Architecture

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I was introduced to the work of [Carlo Scarpa](#) and, in particular, his design for the cemetery of the Brion family. I find his inventive use of materials interesting, particularly the integration of organic elements and his sculptural application of concrete. His restorative work, opting to repair and build around historical architecture is increasingly relevant today. I read an [article by Charlotte Jansen for Wallpaper Magazine](#) citing the many signs of Japanese influence in his work and I [subsequently read: 'Traditional Japanese Architecture: An Exploration of Elements and Forms'](#) by Mira Locher. This book covers a range of Japanese architecture, from the ancient Nara period to contemporary design. Although it was the modern design that first interested me, the analysis of structural traditions in ancient buildings has helped me to understand the importance of history and tradition within architecture and how it still informs design today.

My continued interest in Japanese architectural philosophy and integration of outdoor space led me to the work of [Tadao Ando](#) and his philosophy of [Critical Regionalism](#). In Ando's work, this is represented through his use of concrete structures, which inspired me in creating my own architectural model based on the foundations of Critical Regionalism.

# Personal Statements

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3. What have you done to prepare outside of education and why are these experiences useful?

E.g.,

- Extra-curricular activities, and the transferrable skills gained which make them relevant for the course.

Oxbridge are primarily interested in super-curricular activities and academic skills. We will never make offer decisions based on an applicant's extra-curriculars (activities which do not relate to their chosen course). This section can be shorter if applicants prefer.

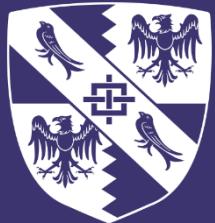
## Human, Social, and Political Sciences

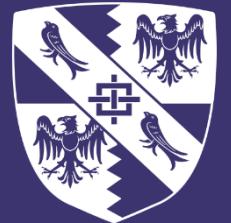
Outside academia, I speak regularly at Debate Society, where I have developed an insight into the vast array of controversies we face worldwide, and argued for topics such as the 'Legalisation of Performance Enhancing Drugs'. I am also a keen actress and perform in several productions annually, which has not only allowed my public speaking to flourish but has introduced me to texts focusing on a myriad of social issues and realities. Having recently attended 'Women Power Politics', my participation in youth activism has improved my ability to articulate and explore the concerns young women hold in our current society, and also developed my perspective of how the youth must procure change. I believe these activities have imbued me with the skills and determination to succeed in my degree.

## Biological Natural Sciences

Throughout Year 12, I helped tutor GCSE biology and chemistry students and enjoyed being able to assist others' understanding of subjects which I love. This year, I achieved awards in the RSC International Chemistry Olympiad and the UKMT Senior Mathematical Challenge. Participating in UNIQ Digital, provided by the University of Oxford further confirmed my passion for biological science and aim to study it at degree level.

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## Geography

A geographer should be skilled in data analysis, critical thinking, communication and leadership. In my position as **elected Head Girl, swimming mentor, teacher and team captain**, I have developed these fundamental skills. As a **maths tutor**, I have become a more confident, independent and articulate leader. Studying Maths and History at A-level has enabled me to **hone my analysis and interpretation skills**, both through contextual inference and data deduction.

## Engineering

Solving **hundreds of questions** on "Isaac Physics" and obtaining the **platinum award for the year 12 mentor scheme** has been enjoyable as I love solving demanding mathematical problems which require a deep level of understanding. I attended a **series of mathematical masterclasses** at my local **University which were difficult**, exciting and satisfied my thirst for a challenge. My academic achievements reflect my passion for maths and physics; having achieved the "Learner of the Year" award for the highest GCSE results in my year, full marks in mathematics, and **silver in the senior UKMT**.

# Reflection is key

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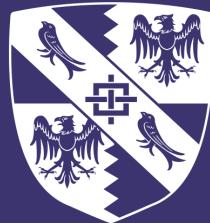
- **Write** about super-curriculars:
  - Keep a journal, look out for essay competitions, etc.
- Get used to **talking** about academic interests:
  - Friends, family, teachers, the mirror – doesn't matter, just talk. This will be great preparation for university interviews
- See super-curriculars as a **research journey**:
  - Have you encountered new topics? How have you solved problems throughout your research?
- Build **connections** between activities/resources
  - How do your readings relate to one another? Did one thing lead you to another? Has one activity changed your opinion on another?
- Take time to **challenge** what you're reading, critique it and think of alternative viewpoints.
- **If you get a chance:** Consolidate your work in a larger project or competition.

# Personal Statements

## My Cambridge Application

- The ‘My Cambridge Application’ portal gives applicants the option to submit a short additional personal statement.
- This is only viewed by Cambridge, unlike the UCAS personal statement which goes to all their university choices.
- It is completely optional – some applicants choose to give more details about why they are applying to the Cambridge course specifically, particularly when they are applying to slightly different courses at different universities.
  - E.g., applying to Natural Sciences at Cambridge but Biology at other universities.

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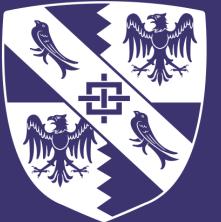
### 7.2) Enter your personal statement

Do not enter your UCAS personal statement again.

There is a 1200 character limit for this field.

# Admissions Assessments: Cambridge

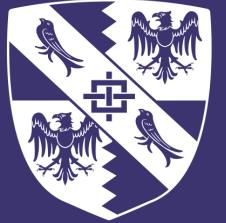
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Two categories:

- Pre-registration required  
Most STEM subjects, plus Law.
- College-registered  
Some humanities subjects, including  
Architecture, English, and Modern and  
Medieval Languages.



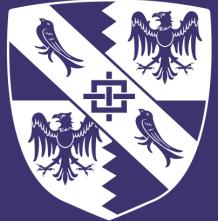


# University Clinical Aptitude Test (UCAT)

- Subject: Medicine
- Universities: most medical schools, including Cambridge
- Taken at Pearson Vue Test Centre – Bangor, Rhyl, Wrexham, Chester
- Booking opens 17<sup>th</sup> June, deadline 19<sup>th</sup> September
- Test dates: 7th July - 26th September 2025
- £70 entry fee - bursary vouchers available
- UCAT webinar available on Magdalene website

# Law National Admissions Test (LNAT)

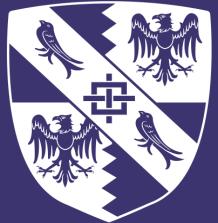
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- Subject: Law
- Universities: Cambridge, Oxford, Durham, LSE, Glasgow, KCL, UCL, Bristol, SOAS
- Taken at Pearson Vue Test Centre – Bangor, Rhyl, Wrexham, Chester
- Booking opens 1<sup>st</sup> August, deadline 15<sup>th</sup> September
- Test dates: 1<sup>st</sup> September - 15<sup>th</sup> October 2025
- £75 entry fee - bursary vouchers available
- LNAT webinar available on Magdalene website

# Engineering and Science Admissions Test (ESAT)

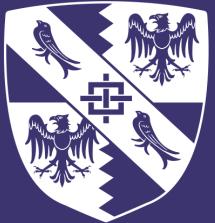
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- Subjects: Natural Sciences, Engineering, Veterinary Medicine, Chemical Engineering and Biotechnology (Cambridge)
- Universities: Cambridge, Imperial, UCL (some courses)
- Taken at Pearson Vue Test Centre - Bangor, Rhyl, Wrexham, Chester
- Booking opens: 31<sup>st</sup> July, deadline 29<sup>th</sup> September (Cambridge)
- Test dates: 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Oct 2025 (Cambridge, later sitting for other unis)
- £75 entry fee - bursary voucher available

# Test of Maths for University Admission (TMUA)

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- Subject: Computer Science, Economics (Cambridge)
- Universities: Cambridge, Imperial, UCL, LSE, Warwick, Durham (for some courses)
- Taken at Pearson Vue Test Centre - - Bangor, Rhyl, Wrexham, Chester
- Booking opens: 31<sup>st</sup> July 2025, deadline 29<sup>th</sup> September (Cambridge)
- Test dates: 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Oct 2025 (Cambridge, later sitting for other unis)
- £75 entry fee – bursary voucher available.

# Advice

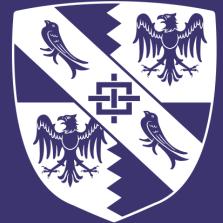
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- Revise relevant GCSE and AS Level subject knowledge. When faced with a question in the exam, try to consider which 'topic' it might be referring to – this strategy may help you recall methods of solving the problems.
- Read through the content specifications (available on the websites). Every question will relate to one of these topics, in some way.
- The questions are **not** ordered by difficulty. The 'easier' questions, or those which suit your interests/expertise, may be nearer the end.
- You **do not** lose marks for incorrect answers, so don't be afraid to attempt questions even if you are unsure.
- Focus on time management. Don't spend all your time on one tricky question.

# Admissions Assessments

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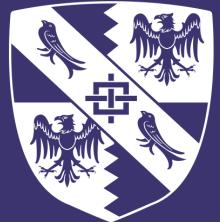


## Tips

- Dedicate some time to preparing for the admissions assessment, but don't neglect your A Level subjects! You most likely already have the skills being tested – familiarising yourself with the format of the assessment and trying practice questions under timed conditions will be enough preparation.
- Don't expect to get every question correct! The assessments are designed to be challenging.
- Don't panic if you don't think you performed very well. Admissions Assessments are just one part of the application process.
- You do not need to pay for any preparation materials – the University website contains all the information and practice papers you will need.

# Interviews

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Interviews allow us to assess:

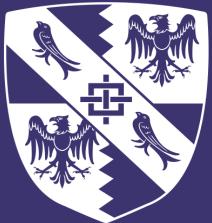
- How the applicant thinks and responds to being challenged
- If the applicant would enjoy and benefit from the teaching style of the university
- Whether the applicant's interests and aptitudes align with their chosen course

It is NOT:

- The only part of the application process that 'counts'
- A series of obscure and irrelevant questions
- An assessment of the applicant's accent, mannerisms, or personality
  - But interviewers often comment that successful applicants are able to talk 'articulately' about their subject

# Interviews

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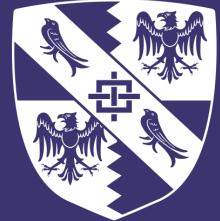


To prepare, interview candidates should:

- Revise relevant A Level subjects.
- Practise talk about their subject aloud – interviewers need to see their thought process when approaching questions.
- Be able to expand on the content of their personal statement and written work (if applicable).
- Keep up to date with current affairs in their subject.
- Practise debating skills – there may be opportunities to defend their argument and/or acknowledge the merits of an opposing argument posited by the interviewer.
- Practise talking to unfamiliar people (i.e., teachers who they don't typically interact with; alumni, etc) – formal 'mock interviews' aren't necessarily helpful, whereas developing communication and confidence are useful transferable skills.

# More from Magdalene College

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Magdalene College offers many opportunities designed to support students with elements of the application process:

- Subject Taster webinars
- Magdalene Residential
- Armstrong Arts and Humanities Essay Competition
- Personal Statement workshops
- Cambridge Open Days
- Interview workshops
- And much more from across the University of Cambridge

Sign up to our Teacher Mailing List by contacting [access@magd.cam.ac.uk](mailto:access@magd.cam.ac.uk)