Philosophy, Politics and Economics Admissions Feedback 2019-20

This year the University of Oxford had a high number of applicants for Philosophy, Politics and Economics. Many of the candidates who applied made very good applications and, as every year, many difficult decisions had to be made.

Throughout the process, contextual data for UK candidates, including school performance and postcode data, were used when assessing applications. You can find more information about contextual data on the Oxford University website here.

Unfortunately, not every applicant could be interviewed. Decisions about which candidates to shortlist were based on exam results and predictions, the UCAS academic reference and personal statement, and TSA results. TSA essays were marked by colleges. The different elements considered are afforded different weighting. High weight: TSA overall and TSA essay score, GCSE (or equivalent) profile, predicted or achieved A Levels (or equivalent); medium weight: UCAS reference; and low weight: UCAS personal statement.

Given the number of shortlisted applicants and their uneven distribution between colleges, a number of shortlisted candidates are reallocated from oversubscribed colleges to colleges with a lower ratio of candidates to places. All shortlisted candidates were invited for interviews in Oxford. After first-college interviews, additional interviews were arranged at second and sometimes third colleges, to give the strongest candidates the best chance of receiving a place.

As stated on the PPE website (https://www.ppe.ox.ac.uk/interviews), the interview is aimed primarily at assessing the candidate's potential for future development. Interviewers will be looking for evidence of genuine interests and enthusiasms, and the motivation to work hard at them. The candidates should listen effectively, absorbing facts and ideas presented to them and assessing their relevance. They should be ready to respond to problems and criticisms put to them. They should present arguments and reasoning in a clear and carefully articulated manner.

The interview is not primarily a test of existing knowledge, and in particular, is not a test of philosophy, politics or economics, unless these subjects have been followed at school. The candidates are expected to show reasons for their expressed interests in PPE. Candidates' general accomplishments are not relevant except insofar as they bear on one or more of the general admissions criteria.

Interviews, along with all other aspects of the application, are assessed according to the stated admissions criteria (https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/tests/tsa). Tutors were looking for evidence of the following three qualities: 1) application and interest: capacity for sustained study, motivation and interest, an independent and reflective approach to learning; 2) reasoning ability: ability to analyse and solve problems using logical and critical approaches, ability to assess relevance, capacity to construct and critically assess arguments, flexibility and willingness to consider alternative views; and 3) communication: willingness and ability to express ideas clearly and effectively on paper and orally; ability to listen; ability to give considered responses.

The below three graphs illustrate outcomes by TSA scores:
The competition for places was very high this year. Only 33% of applicants were shortlisted for interviews and only 12% of applicants were made offers.