

## UCAS FAQs

### 1. Will the A\* grade at A level lead to fewer offers for IB candidates?

This is very unlikely as the IB Diploma is a very demanding and broad qualification which is seen as quite distinct by admissions tutors. The A\* will potentially remove the anomaly of equating a 7 at Higher Level with an A at A level as the highest grades of each qualification.

### 2. Are there so-called soft Higher Level subjects, like soft A levels?

There are no 'soft subjects' in the IB; all subjects have rigorous academic content. However, admissions tutors of top universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, prefer candidates to have just one subject at HL out of the following: Theatre Arts, Visual Arts, Design, and Business Management.

### 3. How do universities feel about gap years?

Generally, universities take a favourable view of gap years as long as they are not just spent doing nothing. A structured gap year can enhance an applicant's Personal Statement, and being more mature and independent is also seen as an advantage.

This may not apply where the planned degree course involves the study of Mathematics as it is thought that students will forget what they have learned during a year away from its study.

### 4. Do universities take any account of IB SL grades?

The offers made by universities are usually in terms of overall diploma points and, where a specialisation in particular subjects is required, grades at Higher Level; for example, an offer for Medicine could be 36 points and 6s in Biology and Chemistry Higher Level. Sometimes there is a requirement for English for overseas students (HL or SL), for Maths or a subject most closely related to the degree applied for. This is often the case for Psychology, which we offer at SL.

## 5. Does Deferred Entry make it more difficult to receive an offer?

It depends on the university and the course. If a course is vastly oversubscribed or has a very small intake (as is often the case with Oxbridge colleges), admissions tutors are inclined to give preference to candidates for the next academic year. Where students take gap years, they can, of course, apply after they have achieved their IB diplomas – an option which makes them more popular with admissions tutors. When in doubt, it is best to email the university department in question and ask where they stand on DE.

## 6. How many universities now interview apart from Oxbridge?

Not many, with the exception of Medicine, Vet. Science and Dentistry applicants. Candidates for Modern Languages are likely to be interviewed as are applicants for Drama, Music and Architecture, but it depends on the universities and the character of the course. UCL has a number of subjects where they interview while other universities invite students they wish to make an offer to for an Open Day and an 'interview' which is more an informal chat.

## 7. How should prospective applicants for Medicine approach their applications?

Medicine is an extremely competitive subject so it is important to research all Medical Schools very carefully. They roughly fall into the following groups:

- Old vs. new
- Large vs. small
- PBL (problem-based learning) vs. traditional
- City vs. campus
- BMAT or UKCat required

Medical applicants can only put 4 medical courses on their UCAS forms, plus one other, related course, such as Biomedical Sciences. This makes it important to 'spread one's bets' in terms of location and application ratios. Bristol, for example, had 15 applicants per place last year, while Belfast had 3. The latter is unlikely to receive many applications from independent schools in the South East of England offering the IB, improving our students' chances. Further, one can increase one's chances by not choosing only Medical Schools which require the BMAT test (Oxford, Cambridge, UCL, Imperial – in case of no more than an average expected score) or are located in London (because they attract lots of good applicants from around the world).

Although the application ratios at Cambridge and Oxford appear favourable, these institutions are looking primarily for students who are excellent scientists and have the potential for doing medical research. The pre-clinical course is also highly theoretical with very little patient contact so it attracts a particular kind of student. If one does not fit this type, an offer from Oxbridge is unlikely and an application there is a waste of a choice.

#### 8. Do admissions tutors understand the IB?

The IB has become a much more widespread qualification with a consequent increase of students with this educational background. Admissions tutors have been briefed by the IB about the content of the IB, and IB offers are now listed alongside A-level requirements in the vast majority of university prospectuses. The admissions policy and entry requirements are set by universities as a whole and follow guidelines intended to guarantee fairness; this is monitored by an organisation called SPA (Supporting Professionalism in Admissions).

A problem may arise where an admissions tutor is new or in a university which attracts few IB applicants. In that case the school contacts the admissions office with information about the IB. We also react to the offers which our applicants receive and which appear disproportionately high.

#### 9. Are there scholarships for university study in the UK?

The financial help available from UK universities is based on financial need, rather than academic excellence, i.e. they offer **bursaries**. Some scholarships are awarded for excellence in sports or music, and some professional bodies provide scholarships for shortage subjects (for example, Engineering or Sciences). Small awards are made by some Oxbridge colleges for top students after the first-year exams.

#### 10. To what degree do school and social background affect the outcome of applications?

The government has for a number of years pursued the goal of 'widening participation' in higher education. This means that universities have to be seen to be open to applicants from all social backgrounds and actively seek to encourage less privileged students to apply by offering talks, workshops and preparation courses. However, when it comes to considering applications

universities' overriding interest is to attract the best students, from whatever background. There is no evidence that independent school applicants are disadvantaged. (See ppt. presentation HE Education talk for figures relating to Sevenoaks School).

#### 11. How important is work experience for a univ. application?

It is essential for Medicine, Vet. Science and Dentistry and advisable for other vocational degree courses, such as Law, Business/Economics, Engineering and Architecture. For other courses work experience can underline the applicant's commitment to the subject but it is not expected.

#### 12. How accurate are the university league tables?

University league tables might be reliable in the statistical sense in as much as the data were collected and calculated accurately but they are not necessarily valid. As a research paper (see Parent Page link to assessment of League Tables) puts it:

'The measures used by the compilers are largely determined by the data available rather than by clear and coherent concepts of, for example, 'excellence' or 'a world class university'. Consequently, some of the measures used are poor proxies for the qualities identified. This brings into question the validity of the overall tables.'

From our perspective, league tables are a good starting point for research into one's university and subject choices but they have to be taken with a large pinch of salt.

#### 13. Is HL Maths necessary for an Economics degree?

Yes and no. Oxford, Cambridge, LSE and Warwick plus a number of other top universities require it but there are many other excellent ones which do not, for example Nottingham, Durham, York and Lancaster. For information on all entry requirements go to [www.ucas.ac.uk](http://www.ucas.ac.uk) and Course Search. When you look up the entry requirements for the Economics courses, the IB is listed under 'Other qualifications'.

#### 14. How important are GCSE results in a university application?

Very important for those applicants who have taken them, as they provide admissions tutors with a universal measure of academic excellence. Predicted grades may be equally or more important but any discrepancy in achievement would have to be explained. Also, many schools are poor predictors of final results; this leads some admissions tutors to be sceptical about predictions and to rely more heavily on the 'hard currency' of GCSE results. Where a student has improved significantly between GCSE and the IB, we recommend PQA (see below).

#### 15. Which Oxbridge colleges are the easiest to get into?

There is no easy way into Oxbridge, whatever the college. All colleges are looking for academic excellence and enthusiasm for the proposed degree subject. Both universities operate policies to ensure a fair chance for all applicants. Oxford redistributes applicants from oversubscribed colleges to others during the interview period, while Cambridge uses a 'pool' where students who could not be taken because of numbers are offered to other colleges.

Students may wish to consult the university websites to see which college had a more favourable applicant to places ratio in the previous cycle but, with this information available to everybody this could change dramatically the next year. While there are league tables for colleges (Norrington and Tompkins tables), these are based on the exam results of the students already at the college and do not reflect differences in quality. However, colleges at the bottom of these tables attract fewer applicants so might be 'easier'.

#### 16. What are the advantages and disadvantages of applying after the receipt of results (PQA)?

There are several advantages: A student with his/her grades in hand can target university courses more successfully and university offers are unconditional. Furthermore PQA applicants are often preferred by admissions tutors as they can be sure that the candidate has already achieved the necessary points. It gives students who are undecided about their degree or course another year to make up their minds. If their GCSE results were disappointing, these will largely be ignored by admissions tutors if the IB results reflect a significant improvement.

A PQA application requires the student to take a gap year. Gap years are not always recommended for a number of reasons (for some, see above) and in a single application season a student can only apply **once** through UCAS, and not re-apply for Deferred Entry.

#### 17. How important are co-curricular activities and achievements in admissions' tutors' minds?

Admissions tutors base their offer decisions on the basis of students' academic achievements and potential as well as their interest in the subject they are applying for. Non-academic activities, in and out of school, are only important as a reflection of a student's ability to manage time, work in a team etc. They are also a welcome indication of social skills/adaptability which makes full commitment to and good performance in a course more likely.

#### 18. How much weight do the Personal Statement and school reference carry in universities' decision on offers?

Despite recent publicity about Cambridge's attitude to Personal Statements (which was quickly denied), both are very important in a student's application. Most universities do not interview and therefore admissions tutors have to rely on the PS and reference, along with GCSE and predicted IB grades, to find the best qualified and motivated students. The PS allows a student to 'sell' himself/herself, especially necessary for the sort of oversubscribed courses our sixth formers apply for. The school reference, too, gives an insight into the student's qualities, both academic and personal, which are not revealed by exam grades. Where achieved or predicted grades are equal, admissions tutors have to rely on this extra information to make their choices.

#### 19. What evidence is most useful in determining the quality of a university course and department?

There is no substitute for researching the content of a course and visiting the university on an Open Day. If the course does not meet one's interest and the department is unwelcoming, for example, it is not a 'good' course. Beyond this individual assessment there are some measures, such as quality of research (RAE) and student satisfaction, which will go some way towards defining the quality of a university course. Other measures are more contentious – see Question 12.