

**National Foundation  
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**Factors Affecting Applications to Oxford  
and Cambridge – repeat survey**

**Final Report**

**Kate Ridley, Kerensa White, Ben Styles and  
Jo Morrison**

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## Executive summary

This research follows up a study conducted in 1998 by the National Foundation for Educational Research (Brooks, 1998) to investigate teachers' and students' views on the factors affecting students' choices of whether or not to apply to Oxford and Cambridge. It identifies what has changed since 1998 and areas in which the Universities could seek to bring about further change.

The methodology for the study was designed to follow that used in the 1998 study, in order to maximise the degree of comparability between the two studies.

The purpose of the 2004 survey was to follow up the 1998 study with the same sample of 654 schools, in order to see how attitudes may have changed over the six-year period. The study comprised a questionnaire to schools, intended for the member of staff responsible for university entrance, as well as five questionnaires to be given to a selection of high achieving students in the last year of their advanced level studies.

The questionnaires asked respondents to comment on sources of information about Oxford and Cambridge, application and admission procedures of the two universities, perceptions about Oxford and Cambridge and reasons for applying or not applying to Oxford or Cambridge. The teachers were also asked to comment on the success, or lack of success, of their students when applying to Oxford and Cambridge.

### Teacher questionnaire

A total of 236 teachers completed questionnaires: 101 teachers from comprehensive schools, 80 from grammar schools, and 55 from post-16 colleges (sixth form colleges, FE colleges and tertiary colleges) completed questionnaires. Overall, teachers' views in 2004 were similar to teachers' views in 1998, but some changes have occurred.

#### Information about the schools and colleges

- In 2004, a higher proportion of teachers reported that most of their students go on to Higher Education (HE) than in the 1998 study.
- Teachers at grammar schools reported that a higher number of their students apply to Oxbridge, receive offers and gain places at Oxford and Cambridge, than teachers from comprehensive schools or post-16 colleges.

- Comprehensive schools were less likely to offer some of the support mechanisms to students such as Advanced Extension Awards, advice on choosing Colleges, visits from Oxford or Cambridge representatives, and mock interviews.
- Teachers at comprehensive schools were less likely to say that they knew a lot about the application and selection procedures at Oxbridge than teachers at grammar schools and post-16 colleges.

### **Sources of information about Oxford and Cambridge**

- The most common sources of information about Oxbridge that teachers encouraged students to use were prospectuses, open days and websites. Since the 1998 study there has been a large increase in teachers encouraging students to use websites.
- Teachers thought that the most useful sources were open day visits, the Oxford or Cambridge University prospectus and visits organised by the school.
- The majority of teachers thought that getting information about Oxford and Cambridge had become easier in the past five years. The information was generally said to be adequate, but some teachers suggested more openness on selection criteria, to appear more accessible and to give additional help in choosing a College.

### **Perceptions about Oxford and Cambridge**

- The tutorial/supervision and College systems were regarded as the main differences between Oxbridge and other universities with high entry requirements. Comparisons with the 1998 study found that teachers in 2004 were less likely to think the public school image was a distinctive difference. Teachers in 2004 were more likely than those in 1998 to refer to Oxbridge as being very competitive to get into and / or for the elite.
- Teachers at comprehensive schools were more likely than those from other schools to think that it costs more to study at Oxbridge than at other universities.
- Teachers at comprehensive schools thought that a lower proportion of state school students attend Oxbridge than teachers at grammar or post-16 colleges.
- In 2004, a smaller proportion of teachers thought that there were differences between Oxford and Cambridge than 1998; in 2004 teachers stressed the structure of the courses and the location of the Universities, whereas in 1998 teachers referred to differences in the courses offered and the areas of specialism.



### **Issues influencing applications**

- The main issues that teachers thought discouraged students from applying were a lack of confidence that they could cope and concern that they would be uncomfortable in the social situation.
- Teachers from grammar schools were less likely to say that the social context and the attitude of family and friends had discouraged students than other teachers, and more likely to say that the course not being available had discouraged students. Comprehensive school teachers were more likely to say that the cost of going to Oxbridge had discouraged students.
- Teachers commonly felt that Oxford and Cambridge were already doing enough to make themselves attractive to students, though it was suggested that the Universities emphasise that state school students are not disadvantaged in the application process. Teachers in 2004 were less likely to suggest that the Universities change their image than in 1998.

### **Success in applying to Oxford and Cambridge**

- Where students had been unsuccessful in applying to Oxbridge, the interview process was said to be the main reason. In 2004, a greater proportion of teachers mentioned that students lacked confidence in their interviews, than had done in 1998.
- The majority of teachers thought that the interview process had placed students from their school at a disadvantage when applying to Oxford or Cambridge. This largely related to the nervousness of students. This was also the case in the 1998 study.
- Teachers' main suggestions for improvements to the selection process were for more information about what it involved and for Oxford and Cambridge to take a greater account of the background or context of the applicants.

## **Student questionnaire**

A total of 906 students completed the questionnaire: 383 students from comprehensive schools, 339 from grammar schools, and 184 from post-16 colleges. Overall, students' views have remained largely similar to those of students, but some changes have occurred.

### **Higher education choices**

- A greater proportion of students in 2004 said that going to Higher Education was a natural progression.
- Students in 2004 were more likely to be intending to apply to Oxford or Cambridge than in the 1998 study.

- Students continue to apply to Oxbridge because of the prestige and the courses on offer. In 2004 students were more likely to refer to teaching methods as being a deciding factor, than in the 1998 study.
- Of those students who were not intending to apply to Oxford and Cambridge in 2004, the main reason was that they thought they would not get the necessary grades. A greater proportion of students gave this as their reason for not applying than in the 1998 study.

### **Sources of information about Oxford and Cambridge**

- University prospectuses are still the most commonly used source of information about Oxford or Cambridge, but since 1998 many more students are using the internet as a source.
- The sources of information found most useful by the largest number of students were visits to the universities, university prospectuses and departmental prospectuses.
- Students suggested there should be more detailed information about courses, departments and Colleges and that information should be more user friendly. In 2004, students were less likely than in 1998 to mention that information of student social life should be improved.
- Students reported they wanted further information about applying to Oxbridge. The main areas were in relation to the application process and the interview structure.

### **Perceptions about Oxford and Cambridge**

- The main differences that students saw between Oxbridge and other universities with high entry requirements were the prestige of the Universities and the good academic reputation. In the 1998 study, grammar school students were more likely than other students to mention the academic reputation, but in 2004 the responses were very similar for all students.
- In 2004, a greater proportion of students described Oxbridge students as 'motivated' than had done in the 1998 study.
- In 2004, a lower percentage of students than in 1998 said it cost slightly more to go to Oxbridge than to other universities.
- A higher percentage of students in 2004, than in 1998, felt that Oxbridge received more applications per place than other universities.
- In 2004, a much greater proportion of students reported that there were no general differences between Oxford and Cambridge than did in the 1998 study. Of those that said there were differences there was a lot of variation in response, but Cambridge was said to be science based whilst Oxford was arts/humanities based.
- Students in 2004 were more likely to know whether there are differences in Oxford or Cambridge selection procedure than students in 1998.

**Issues influencing applications**

- The issues that made students more likely to apply to Oxbridge included: the career prospects; the way teaching is organised; the content of the courses and league tables.
- Those issues that made students less likely to apply included: the difficulty in getting a place; additional tests and the perceived social mix.
- Comparisons with the 1998 study showed that students in 2004 were more likely to mention the organisation of teaching, the content of courses and graduate career prospects as factors that made them likely to apply, whilst the perceived social mix was less likely to influence their decision to apply.

**Further statistical analysis**

- Taking into account academic ability, in terms of which groups of students were intending to apply to Oxford or Cambridge, in 2004 there was no significant difference between students from different types of school, whereas in 1998, comprehensive students were significantly less likely to be applying than those from grammar schools.
- In the 1998 study, parental qualifications were found to be related to whether students were applying to Oxbridge; however this was not the case in 2004.
- Using factor analysis to examine the issues influencing applications to Oxford and Cambridge, issues surrounding life as an Oxbridge student and economic issues were more of a positive influence on students who attended grammar schools than those at comprehensives or post-16 colleges. The application and selection process was more of a negative influence on students who attended comprehensives or post-16 colleges. Grammar school students were more positively influenced by perceived future prospects than comprehensive students when making a decision.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

Overall, both teachers' and students' views in 2004 had many similarities with the 1998 study, but there were some interesting differences and patterns that suggest that teacher and student perceptions of the Universities have shifted since 1998.

**Applicants**

Whilst a greater proportion of the students in our sample from grammar schools were applying to Oxbridge than those from comprehensives and post-16 colleges, in 2004 the gap was smaller than in 1998 and was no longer statistically significant. Parental qualifications were no longer related to whether students were applying. These findings suggest that students from a

wider variety of backgrounds were applying to Oxford and Cambridge in 2004 than in 1998.

### **Teaching methods**

Students in 2004 seemed to place greater importance on factors such as course content and teaching approaches when making decisions about Higher Education. For example, students in 2004 were more likely to take into account the way teaching is organised and the content of the courses when deciding whether to apply to Oxford or Cambridge than those in 1998.

### **Academic**

Both students and teachers placed an increased emphasis on the academic rigour and high expectations of the Universities. For example, in 2004 students from all types of school noted that prestige and good academic reputation were the main differences between Oxbridge and other high entry universities. Also, in 2004 students were more likely to mention that doubt about achieving the right grades was their primary reason for not applying to Oxbridge.

### **Social mix**

Perceptions of the social mix at Oxbridge appeared to have altered slightly since 1998. Students in 2004 were less likely to report that the social mix at Oxbridge discouraged them from applying or that information on social life needed to be improved. Also, teachers were less likely to suggest that the Universities needed to change their image. However, it should be noted that some concerns were still raised about the social background of students and the need for the Universities to emphasise that state school students are not disadvantaged. Overall, the findings suggest that Oxbridge have gone some way to addressing issues surrounding the perceived social mix of students.

### **Differences between Oxford and Cambridge**

Since 1998, perceived differences between Oxford and Cambridge have reduced. Both teachers and students were less likely to believe that differences existed, and those mentioned tended to relate to the courses on offer. It was notable that in the 1998 study many respondents referred to STEP papers as being a difference, but in 2004 this was not the case (probably due to a change in the application procedures, suggesting that students and teachers are aware of the change).

### **Information available**

Prospectuses and visits to the Universities were the main sources of information drawn on. Since 1998 there has been a huge increase in the use of the internet to access information about Oxford and Cambridge. In general, teachers and students were happy with the information available about Oxford and Cambridge. The main areas of concern, for both teachers and students,

related to the need for further information about the application and interview process, and on choosing Colleges.

### **Overall**

On many issues the findings of the 2004 study were very similar to those from the 1998 study. However, the pattern of findings suggests that since the 1998 study was carried out, there has been a subtle change in the way that Oxford and Cambridge are perceived. This relates to an increased emphasis on the academic requirements and provision of the Universities, and a reduced concern about social factors and issues surrounding state-school students. There is still further work to be done, and some recommendations are listed below, but it does appear that the attitudes of teachers and students have shifted slightly in relation to the way they think about Oxford and Cambridge.

### **Recommendations**

- Oxford and Cambridge appear to have been clearly successful in trying to shift perceptions about the Universities and to encourage prospective students to focus to a greater extent on the academic rather than the social-class aspects of the Universities; this work should continue.
- The application and selection process and interviews were seen as the biggest barriers to students applying to Oxbridge and them being successful. Current methods of providing information about these processes are not meeting the needs of users, and further information about these processes was requested. Oxford and Cambridge may wish to consider greater consultation with prospective students and their teachers about what information they would like to see.
- It was clear that on a range of issues the perceptions of teachers in comprehensive schools were different to those of teachers in grammar schools. Oxford and Cambridge may wish to address this perceived information gap and increase further their proactive targeting of comprehensive schools.
- HE fairs were not seen to be as useful, by both teachers and students, as other sources of information such as Open Days and visits to the Universities. Oxbridge may want to consider either trying to find ways to improve their presence at Higher Education fairs, or instead to focus their efforts on Open Days and arranging visits to the Universities instead.

- As websites are being increasingly used, then the effort that is put into maintaining and developing them needs to be proportionate. Oxford and Cambridge may wish to explore more innovative uses of the website in order to address some of the other issues raised in this report.
- Further work needs to be done to provide information about the types of student that attend Oxbridge, and to reassure prospective students that they would feel comfortable with the social setting at Oxbridge.
- Continued efforts are required to assure students that studying at Oxbridge is no more expensive than studying at other universities.
- There was evidence that comprehensive schools provided fewer support mechanisms for prospective Oxbridge students. The Universities may therefore wish to consider targeting more support mechanisms at these schools, for example mock interviews.
- Further work needs to be done to help students decide on which College to apply to and to support teachers in helping students making this decision, or on convincing students that all Colleges are essentially similar and that College choice is not the most crucial part of their application.
- The current interview procedure was said to be difficult and teachers reported that the interview, and in particular nervousness, was the reason that students were not successful in gaining places. Oxford and Cambridge should continue to attempt to make the interview process less stressful for students in order to ensure that university staff are able to gather the best possible information about prospective students.







# 1 Introduction

The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge are committed to admitting the best applicants, irrespective of their social, regional, ethnic or educational background, and are aware of the need to encourage and support applications from groups which are currently under-represented. The issue of widening participation strategies for Oxford and Cambridge Universities is still as much of a concern to these universities as it was in 1998, when the Universities commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research to conduct a survey of teachers and a survey of students, to investigate the factors affecting young people's decisions whether or not to apply to Oxbridge (Brooks, 1998).

The NFER report, (Brooks, 1998), concluded that although students and teachers were positive about several of the factors affecting their decision making, there were still areas which Oxford and Cambridge may have wished to consider in relation to their commitment to selecting the most able candidates, regardless of their background. For example, teachers and lecturers felt that the interview process had discouraged students to apply and suggested ways of improvement. Students reported that they were not applying to Oxbridge because they did not believe they would obtain the necessary grades.

Prior to the 1998 survey, a number of initiatives such as the access scheme and target schools scheme had been put in place in an effort to ensure that young people with the potential to benefit from Higher Education (HE) were not deterred from applying because of misconceptions or lack of information. These, and a wide range of other initiatives continue to run at Oxford and Cambridge to encourage students from state schools, inner city areas and those of minority ethnic background to apply to Oxbridge.

This research looks at teachers' and students' views in 2004 on the factors affecting students' choices of whether or not to apply to Oxford and Cambridge and identifies what has changed since 1998 and areas in which the Universities could seek to bring about further change.

Since 1998, the Government has expressed an increasing commitment to widening participation to Higher Education. In September 2001, the Aimhigher Programme began (formerly Excellence Challenge), which has introduced a national policy aimed at widening participation in Higher Education generally. The focus is to improve partnerships between universities, colleges and schools to encourage young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to apply to Higher Education. The evaluation to date shows that the programme has led to improved cooperation among participants and has had a positive effect on the target group of students (West *et al.*, 2002).

As well as being involved with the Aimhigher Programme, Oxford and Cambridge have also been involved with more targeted initiatives that have originated from charitable bodies such as the Sutton Trust, the Goldman Sachs Foundation and the John Lyon's Charity. In 1997, the Sutton Trust funded a Summer School at Oxford and in subsequent years Cambridge, Bristol and Nottingham Universities have hosted Summer Schools along with Oxford. The aim of the Summer Schools was to encourage students from non-privileged backgrounds to apply to leading universities. In 2004, NFER looked at the students' views and experiences of the 2002 Sutton Trust Summer Schools and found students were generally very positive about their experiences (White *et al.*, 2004). Nevertheless, half of the respondents said that the Summer School had not changed their views about Higher Education nor influenced their decision as to whether or not to apply to university, but had merely confirmed their view.

Oxford and Cambridge are engaged in a very wide range of initiatives including visits to schools and colleges, arranging visits to the Universities, and many other activities. For example, in addition to several hundred open days at Oxford and Cambridge each year, over 11,000 students and teachers attend regional one-day admissions conferences around the country, organised jointly by both Universities.

“The Future of Higher Education”, the Government White Paper published in January 2003, included a clear commitment and focus to widen participation in Higher Education. As universities will be allowed to vary the level of tuition fees from 2006, an ‘Access Regulator’ was introduced to ensure access to Higher Education is broadened and not narrowed. This is undertaken by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) which is ‘an independent, non departmental public body which aims to promote and safeguard fair access to Higher Education for under-represented groups in light of the introduction of variable tuition fees in 2006-07’ (Office for Fair Access, 2004). Universities wanting to raise tuition fees will have to demonstrate to OFFA that admissions are based on students’ achievements and potential, irrespective of class, background or type of school attended.

In 2004, the debate surrounding which students attend leading universities became increasingly visible. Research conducted by the Sutton Trust showed that:

*there are 3,000 pupils from independent schools entering our leading universities each year who would not be there if higher achieving state pupils were taking up their fair share of places (Lampl, 2004).*

It was reported that ‘while 45 per cent of independent school students who obtain the equivalent of an A and two Bs go to a leading university, only 26 per cent of state school students achieving the same grades do so’ (Lampl,

2004). The report concluded that the leading universities need to reflect the whole ability of the student population, not just the small minority who can afford to go to independent schools. It does not suggest that universities are discriminating against state school students, but rather that these young people are not getting the same opportunities to fulfil their potential as students in the independent sector (Sutton Trust, 2004).

In the context of the changes that have occurred since 1998, this research reports on what factors teachers and students in 2004 feel affect students' decisions on whether or not to apply to Oxford and Cambridge.



## 2 Methodology

The methodology for the study was designed to follow that used in the 1998 study, in order to maximise the degree of comparability between the two studies.

The purpose of the 2004 survey was to follow up the 1998 study with the same sample of schools, in order to see how attitudes may have changed over the six-year period. The survey comprised a questionnaire to schools, intended for the member of staff responsible for university entrance, as well as five questionnaires to a selection of high achieving students in the last year of their advanced level studies. The questionnaires were administered in the autumn term of 2004.

The questionnaires for the 2004 survey were broadly similar to those from the 1998 study, but there were some new questions added and some of the wording and options were altered to reflect changes and areas of current interest (for example, in the list of sources of information about Oxford and Cambridge, 'Summer Schools' and 'league tables' were new additions in the 2004 survey).

The surveys were administered by the Research Data Services team, a specialist group within NFER. In order to increase comparability with the previous survey, those schools and colleges that were originally selected to take part in the 1998 study were approached to be involved (both those that had returned questionnaires and those that had not). Four schools from the original sample had closed leaving a total of 654, 43 schools had merged (these were included under their new identities). The sample included grammar schools, comprehensive schools with sixth forms, and FE colleges/sixth form/tertiary colleges (which we refer to as post-16 colleges).

In a change from the 1998 study, it was decided that the questionnaires should be available online to provide respondents with a choice of completion methods.

LEA liaison officers were written to in the middle of August and were asked to inform NFER if any of the schools or colleges drawn in the samples were unsuitable for this type of work. Only one school was withdrawn from the survey this way. Two weeks prior to the dispatch date, headteachers were informed of the intention to send questionnaires to their schools at the end of August 2004.

One teacher questionnaire and five student questionnaires were dispatched to schools on 14 September, with a link given in the letter to access both of the questionnaires online. Headteachers were asked to pass them onto the teacher

responsible for giving advice to students on university entrance, who in turn was asked randomly to select five high achieving second year A-level students who had at least five or more GCSEs at grades A or A\* to complete the questionnaire.

Written reminders were sent to non-responding schools and colleges in early October. Following this there was an extensive telephoning exercise between 12 and 20 October: this was followed by a faxed reminder. Table 2.1 shows the response rates for both the teacher and school questionnaires.

**Table 2.1 Questionnaire response rates**

	Teacher questionnaire		Student questionnaire	
	number	%	number	%
Dispatched to schools	653	-	3265	-
Received (paper copies)	221	34	894	27
Received (online)	15	2	12	-
Refused	8	1	40	1
No response	400	61	2325	71
<b>Overall response</b>	<b>236</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>906</b>	<b>28</b>

It is interesting to compare the response to the 2004 survey with that of 1998, not only as a means of seeing if responses have changed for each survey administration over time, but also because of differences in the administration of the survey. In the 1998 study, schools were sent an invitation letter asking them whether they wanted to take part; only those that did were sent questionnaires. In the 2004 study all schools in the 1998 survey sample were sent questionnaires.

For the student questionnaire, it was decided that the response to the 1998 study was much larger than was necessary and it was agreed to only send five questionnaires to each school rather than ten, so that a smaller sample would be achieved.

Table 2.2 shows the responses for both the 1998 study and the 2004 study.

**Table 2.2 Comparisons with the 1998 response rates**

	Teacher questionnaire		Student questionnaire	
	1998	2004	1998	2004
Schools in sample	658	654	658	654
Questionnaires sent	377	653	*3770	**3265
Questionnaires received	248	236	2098	906

\*10 each sent to the 377 schools that agreed to take part

\*\*5 each sent to all 653 schools

The questionnaire for the member of staff asked questions on the following main issues:

- information about the school/ college and the pattern of applications to Higher Education in general and Oxford and Cambridge in particular
- sources of information about Oxford and Cambridge
- the application and admission procedures of the two universities, and their perceived impact on young people
- the success, or lack of success, of their students when applying to Oxford and Cambridge.

The student questionnaire focused on the following issues:

- background information on the students
- students' Higher Education choices
- sources of information about Oxford and Cambridge
- perceptions about Oxford and Cambridge
- reasons for applying or not applying to Oxford or Cambridge.

The questionnaires sent to teachers and students can be found in Appendix 1.





### 3 Teacher questionnaire

A total of 236 teachers completed questionnaires: 101 teachers from comprehensive schools, 80 from grammar schools, and 55 from post-16 colleges (6<sup>th</sup> form colleges, FE colleges and tertiary colleges) completed questionnaires.

#### 3.1 Information about the schools and colleges

Teachers were asked what proportion of their students had gone on to Higher Education in the previous three years: 2002, 2003 and 2004. About half of the teachers reported that between 81-100 per cent of their students had gone on to Higher Education (42 per cent in 1998); a further 30 per cent of the teachers reported that between 61-80 per cent had (30 per cent in 1998).

When teachers were asked whether any students had applied to Oxford or Cambridge in the past three years, almost all (95 per cent) indicated that they had. In the 1998 study a similar proportion (93 per cent) indicated that students had applied to Oxford or Cambridge in recent years<sup>1</sup>.

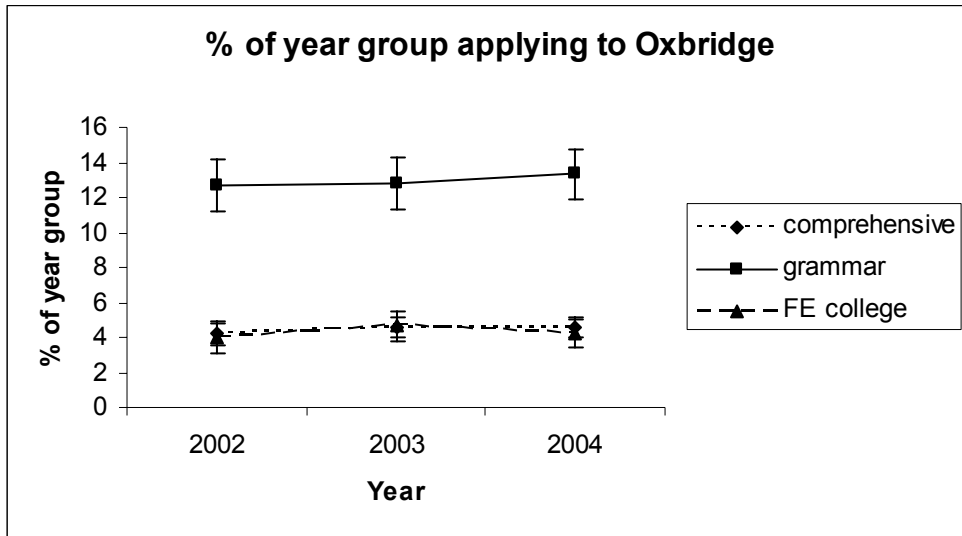
In terms of the number of students that had applied to Oxford and Cambridge between 2002 and 2004, there were an average of 13 applications a year per school, with an average of five students receiving offers and four or five being successful in gaining a place. The data on applications and their success was analysed (as a proportion of the total number of students in the year group) in order to examine whether there was any variation by the type of school or any change over the three years. In every case (applications, offers and gaining places), there was a significant difference between the proportions in the different school types, but no significant change over the three years. The difference was between grammar schools and the other two categories (comprehensive and post-16 college). Teachers at grammar schools were more likely to report that a higher proportion of their year group applied for places, received offers and were successful in gaining places. The differences are summarised in Figures 1 to 3<sup>2</sup>. There were not found to be any significant changes over time; the only significant result was in relation to the difference between grammar schools and other schools and colleges. The plots show data covering a three year period.

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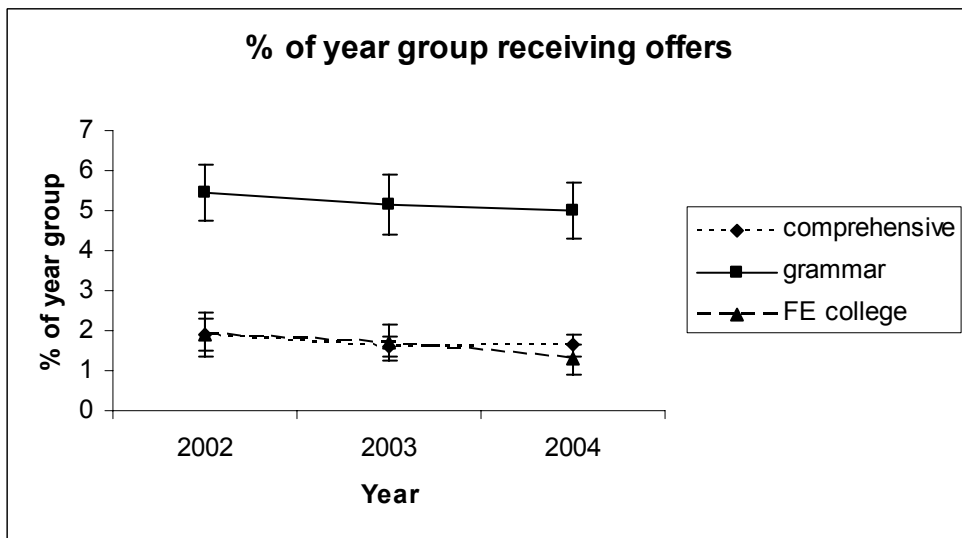
<sup>1</sup> In the 1998 study teachers were asked to comment on the past five years rather than the past three years as in the 2004 study.

<sup>2</sup> Error bars represent 1.4 times the standard error. This means that proportions are significantly different at the 5% level if the error bars are non-overlapping.

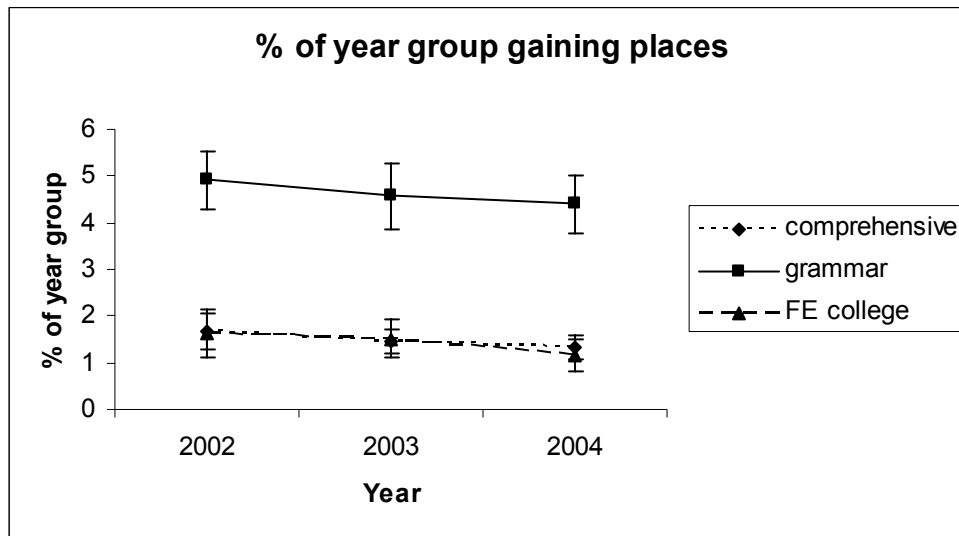
**Figure 1** Percentage of year group applying to Oxford or Cambridge, by school type



**Figure 2** Percentage of year group receiving offers of places at Oxford or Cambridge, by school type



**Figure 3** Percentage of year group gaining places at Oxford or Cambridge, by school type



The subjects that students had most commonly applied to study were English, history, law and natural sciences. Teachers from grammar schools listed medicine as the second most common response, whereas this did not appear in the top five responses from comprehensive or post-16 colleges.

### 3.2 Methods for identifying and supporting potential Oxbridge applicants

Three quarters of the teachers reported that their school or college had mechanisms in place for identifying potential Oxford and Cambridge applicants. This figure was similar to that from the 1998 study. There was hardly any difference between the responses of teachers from the three types of school.

Those who reported that mechanisms were in place were asked to provide details. Using GCSE results was the most common mechanism; the most common mechanisms are shown in Table 3.1. The results were similar to those from the 1998 study, except that the use of a register for the students identified as gifted and talented was a new response. This may reflect an increased national emphasis on gifted and talented provision since 1998.

**Table 3.1** The five most common mechanisms for identifying potential Oxford and Cambridge applicants

<b>Mechanism:</b>	<b>% of teachers</b>
GCSE results	44
Teachers/tutors recommendations	28
Module results	17
Self-selection by students	12
Able and gifted / gifted and talented register	9
<b>N =</b>	<b>236</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 188 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer*

Teachers were also asked what methods their school employed to support students who were thinking of applying to Oxford or Cambridge. The most common responses, from the list provided, are shown in Table 3.2. The results were very similar to the 1998 study, with advice on application forms, mock interviews and encouragement to attend open days being the most commonly mentioned methods. A total of 49 teachers indicated ‘other’ methods were used and the most common were contacts with former students currently at Oxford and Cambridge and attendance at an Oxbridge Regional Conference.

An analysis of the results according to school type identified that comprehensive schools were less likely to use some of the methods than the other types of school, in particular, Advanced Extension Awards, advice on choosing Colleges, visits from Oxford or Cambridge representatives, and mock interviews.

**Table 3.2** The methods used to support students considering applying to Oxford and Cambridge

Method of support	% of teachers, within school type, citing method			% overall of teachers citing method
	Comp.	Grammar	Post-16	
Advice on application forms	92	98	91	94
Encourage/help with open days	87	94	86	89
Mock interviews	77	93	87	85
Advice on choosing colleges	59	78	75	69
Visit from O or C representative	47	64	75	59
Encourage to attend summer schools	55	60	58	57
School-organised visit to O or C	55	54	58	55
Advice on entrance tests/STEP	41	51	47	46
Advanced Extension Awards	22	50	35	34
Special classes/tuition	21	33	46	31
Commercial sources of advice	16	21	9	16
Mock tests	10	10	7	9
Other	15	24	27	21
No response	2	0	4	2
<b>N=</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>236</b>

*A multiple response item. A total of 1572 responses were given. 232 respondents gave at least one response.*

### 3.3 Sources of information about Oxford and Cambridge

Table 3.3 shows that the sources of information that teachers most commonly encouraged students to use in order to find out more about Oxford and Cambridge were prospectuses, websites and open days. The main change from 1998 was the increased encouragement to use websites.

**Table 3.3 Sources of information which teachers encourage students to use**

<b>Source of information:</b>	<b>% of teachers</b>
Oxford or Cambridge University prospectus (printed or internet)	99
UCAS website	95
Open day visit	93
Oxford or Cambridge website	88
Oxford or Cambridge College prospectus (printed or internet)	87
Oxford or Cambridge Department / subject prospectus (printed or internet)	84
Higher Education fair	79
UCAS handbook	71
Oxford or Cambridge students visiting the school / college	59
Visit organised by student / parents	55
Visit organised by the school / college	49
Visits from Oxford or Cambridge staff	43
Other Higher Education handbook / prospectus	40
Summer school visit to Oxford or Cambridge	31
League tables	31
Oxford or Cambridge Regional Conference	31
Information for ethnic minorities	20
Shadowing scheme visit to Oxford or Cambridge	14
Other	7
<b>N=</b>	<b>236</b>

*A multiple response item. A total of 2541 responses were given. 233 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer.*

In terms of the usefulness of the various sources of information, the results are summarised in Table 3.4. Teachers thought that visits to the Universities (both Open Days and visits organised by the school), and the University prospectuses were the most useful sources of information (this was also the case in the 1998 study). Higher Education fairs and league tables were perceived as the least useful information sources.

**Table 3.4 Usefulness of sources of information about Oxford and Cambridge**

<b>Source of information:</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Very useful %</b>	<b>Useful %</b>	<b>Not useful %</b>	<b>Not at all useful %</b>
UCAS website	226	48	50	3	0
UCAS handbook	175	27	63	9	1
Oxford or Cambridge University prospectus	233	76	24	0	0
Oxford or Cambridge Departmental prospectus	198	65	35	0	0
Oxford or Cambridge College prospectus	210	66	33	1	0
Oxford or Cambridge website	209	64	35	1	0
Open day visit	219	78	22	1	0
Visit organised by school	118	75	25	0	0
Visit organised by student	124	57	42	2	0
Higher Education fair	184	21	58	20	1
Information for ethnic minorities	190	33	61	7	0
League tables	79	13	65	22	1
Visits from Oxford and Cambridge staff	104	64	36	0	1
Oxbridge student visiting school	138	68	30	1	0
Oxbridge regional conference	74	58	34	7	1
Shadowing scheme	202	74	15	9	3
Summer school	74	73	24	2	0
Other HE prospectus	90	36	61	3	0

*A series of single response items. Not all respondents indicated a response for all the items, because of this the number varies for each item. Due to rounding errors percentages may not always sum to 100.*

### **3.3.1 Suggestions for improving the information**

The majority of teachers (about 60 per cent) felt that getting information about Oxford and Cambridge has become easier in the past five years, with most of the remainder thinking that it had stayed the same.

Teachers were asked to suggest ways that information about Oxford and Cambridge could be improved and the suggestions were very varied. Most commonly, 14 per cent of teachers thought that the information was already adequate. Where suggestions for improvement were made, these referred to more openness about selection criteria (ten per cent), to appear more accessible (six per cent) and to give more help on how to choose a College (six per cent). Over 40 per cent of the teachers did not respond to this question.

## **3.4 Applying to Oxford and Cambridge**

### **3.4.1 Differences between Oxford and Cambridge and other institutions**

Over a third of teachers thought that the main difference between Oxbridge and other institutions with high entry requirements was the tutorial or supervision system (38 percent). Other common responses were the collegiate system and the separate selection process. The most common ten responses are shown in Table 3.5. The responses varied slightly in their ordering from the 1998 study, in particular being competitive / for the elite had moved up the ordering (from tenth place with seven per cent) but the public school image has moved down (from fourth, 16 per cent).



**Table 3.5 Common differences between Oxbridge and other institutions with high entry requirements**

<b>Difference:</b>	<b>% of teachers</b>
Tutorial / supervision system / method of teaching	38
Collegiate system	33
Separate selection / entry process	27
Very competitive to get in / for the elite	20
Prestigious	16
Interview all applicants	15
Good academic reputation	14
Public school image/ preference for public school pupils	10
Employment levels / future contacts	9
Better resources / facilities for students	7
Have particularly able / very clever students	7
<b>N=</b>	<b>236</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 221 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer.*

### 3.4.2 Cost of going to Oxford or Cambridge

In general teachers tended to think that it costs about the same amount to go to Oxbridge as to go to other Universities. However, when examined by school type, teachers at comprehensive schools were more likely to think it costs more to attend Oxford or Cambridge than those from grammar or post-16 colleges. This difference was found to be statistically significant (using a chi-square test, at the one per cent level). The results (for those who answered this question) are shown in Table 3.6.

**Table 3.6 The cost of going to Oxford or Cambridge**

<b>Response:</b>	<b>% of teachers within school type</b>			<b>Overall % of teachers</b>
	<b>Comp.</b>	<b>Grammar</b>	<b>Post-16</b>	
Much less	0	4	4	2
Slightly less	14	21	26	19
About same	42	54	56	49
Slightly more	37	19	11	25
Much more	6	3	4	4
<b>N =</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>233</b>

*This table does not include those schools that did not answer this question and so the N's are different to the other tables.*

*Due to rounding errors, percentages may not sum to 100.*

As Table 3.7 shows, a third of the teachers said that information about the costs of going to university came from the universities themselves (through prospectuses, admissions tutors and open days). Another source of information, mentioned by just under a quarter of teachers, was past students who had gone there. The same sources of information were reported in the 1998 study.

**Table 3.7 Sources of information about the costs of Oxford and Cambridge**

Source	% of teachers
Universities themselves/ prospectuses/ admissions tutors/ open days	32
Past student who had gone there	23
Own experience at Oxford or Cambridge	9
Assumed it	9
Press/media	8
Students currently at Oxford or Cambridge	7
General sources	6
Oxbridge regional conference / event	5
Friends, family or acquaintances	4
University guides	4
Websites / internet	3
Hearsay	2
Other	2
No response	11
<b>N =</b>	<b>236</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 210 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer*

### 3.4.3 Proportion of state school students attending Oxbridge

On average, teachers thought that about 44 per cent of students at Oxford and Cambridge come from state schools. Most teachers gave a figure between 30 and 55, but the figure did range from five to 70 per cent. Table 3.8 shows the results by school type (for those who answered this question). Also shown in Table 3.8 are 95 per cent confidence intervals for the mean, indicating the range in which we are 95 per cent confident that the true population mean lies (i.e. amongst all teachers, not only those in our sample).

Teachers from comprehensive schools thought that a significantly lower percentage of students from state schools go to Oxford and Cambridge than did teachers from other schools. The views of comprehensive teachers varied more than those from the other schools, in that they were more spread around the mean score than the views of teachers from the other groups (as shown by the larger standard deviation). The differences between the three groups of

teachers were found to be statistically significant (using an ANOVA test). A post-hoc homogenous Duncan test revealed that the significant difference was specifically between comprehensive and the other teachers (there was no differences between the grammar school and post-16 college teachers).

**Table 3.8 The proportion of state school students at Oxford and Cambridge**

Response:	Estimated % of students			
	Comp.	Grammar	Post-16	Total
Mean	41	46	47	44
Standard deviation	16	11	10	13
95% confidence interval - lower band	37	43	45	42
95% confidence interval - upper band	44	48	50	46
<b>N =</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>224</b>

*This table does not include those schools that did not answer this question and so the N's are different to the other tables.*

### 3.4.4 Differences between Oxford and Cambridge

A greater proportion of teachers thought that there were differences between Oxford and Cambridge (49 per cent) than those who thought there were no differences (31 per cent); the remaining respondents were either unsure or did not answer this question. In the 1998 study, a greater proportion of teachers (61 per cent) thought that there were differences between Oxford and Cambridge.

As Table 3.9 shows, in terms of details of these differences, most commonly teachers mentioned the structure of the courses offered. The second most common comment related to the towns in which the Universities are based; this was a change from the 1998 study, when comments about the location were less frequent. In the 1998 study, the main differences were related to differences in the courses offered and different areas of specialism.

**Table 3.9** Commonly mentioned differences between Oxford and Cambridge

<b>Difference:</b>	<b>% of teachers</b>
Difference in structure of courses / Tripos system	14
Town size / character	7
Some courses are exclusive	6
Cambridge science-based	5
Strengths in different subjects	5
More similarities than differences / no differences	5
Oxford more friendly to state school pupils	4
Cambridge more friendly to state school pupils	4
Cambridge courses more flexible	4
No response	46
<b>N=</b>	<b>236</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 128 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer. Not all responses are listed.*

### 3.4.5 Selection procedures

A total of 56 per cent of the teachers said that they knew a fair amount about the application and selection processes for Oxford and Cambridge, a further 29 per cent said they knew a lot, and 15 per cent said they knew a little (only one person said they knew nothing). These results were very similar to those from the 1998 study. Table 3.10 shows the results according to school type. Teachers at comprehensive schools were much less likely to say that they knew a lot about the selection procedures than teachers at the other schools. This difference in knowledge of selection procedures across school types was found to be statistically significant (using a Chi square test, at the 0.01% level).

**Table 3.10 Knowledge about selection procedures**

<b>Response</b>	<b>% of teachers within school type</b>			<b>Overall % of teachers</b>
	<b>Comp.</b>	<b>Grammar</b>	<b>Post-16</b>	
Nothing	0	1	0	0
A little	24	5	11	15
A fair amount	65	51	46	56
A lot	11	42	44	29
<b>N =</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>232</b>

*This table does not include those teachers that did not answer this question and so the N's are different to the other tables. Due to rounding errors, percentages may not sum to 100.*

Almost half of the teachers thought that there were differences in the selection processes between Oxford and Cambridge (a quarter did not and the remainder were either unsure or did not answer). When asked to give details, the teachers reported that interviews are longer at Oxford, that you only visit Oxford once and that you only apply to one College at Cambridge. In the 1998 study the most common comment was that STEP papers were only required at Cambridge; in 2004 this was only mentioned by six per cent of teachers. This may be due to the reduction in the number of subjects for which STEP papers are now taken. The results are summarised in Table 3.11.

**Table 3.11 Differences in the selection processes between Oxford and Cambridge**

<b>Difference:</b>	<b>% of teachers</b>
Extended / longer interviews at Oxford	15
Only have to visit Oxford once	10
Interviews at only one College in Cambridge	9
Tests/ written work requirements vary	8
STEP papers at Cambridge	6
No comment on differences between Universities but differences between subjects	5
Interview processes differ	4
More written tests at Oxford / fewer at Cambridge	4
Differences in pool systems	4
No response	48
<b>N=</b>	<b>236</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 124 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer. Not all responses are listed.*

In terms of the reasons why one process is better than the other, 12 per cent of teachers felt that Cambridge was, 16 per cent that Oxford was and eight per cent that neither was – however, 62 per cent of teachers did not answer this question. Table 3.12 lists the most commonly mentioned responses (not all responses are listed). In the 1998 study there was no clear preferred process.

**Table 3.12 Whether one selection process is better than the other**

<b>Reasons</b>	<b>% of teachers</b>
Oxford better – things are done quicker	4
Oxford better – longer interview process gives chance to prove oneself	3
Cambridge better – fairer	3
Oxford better – gives borderline candidates a second chance	3
Cambridge better – shorter interview so less stressful	3
Neither better	3
Neither better – both have strong points	3
No response	62
<b>N=</b>	<b>236</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 89 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer. Not all responses are listed.*

### 3.4.6 Standard offers

Three quarters of teachers thought that the standard offer for Oxford and Cambridge was three A grades at A-level. Eleven teachers thought that the offers differed for the two Universities and that it was AAA for Cambridge but AAB for Oxford; this was also a response in the 1998 study. There was some mention of the Universities asking for other factors or extra curricular activities and seven teachers thought that exceptional candidates might be offered a place with two E grades.

## 3.5 Issues influencing applications

The main three issues that teachers thought discouraged students from applying to Oxford and Cambridge were a lack of confidence that they could cope, concern that they would not feel comfortable in the social context and that the entry level was too high. The results were very similar to those in the 1998 study.



**Table 3.13 Issues discouraging applications to Oxford and Cambridge**

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Often discouraged %</b>	<b>Occasionally discouraged %</b>	<b>Never discouraged %</b>	<b>No response %</b>
Lack confidence they could cope	45	51	3	1
Would not feel comfortable in the social context	41	54	4	1
Entry level is too high	36	46	14	4
Prefer a more local university	21	38	36	5
Additional tests or exams	19	62	17	3
Course/ subject not available	17	67	14	3
Interviews	16	58	23	3
Dislike the courses / syllabus	15	55	27	3
Attitude of family/ friends	14	52	32	3
Cost	13	53	32	2
Additional application form and fee	7	28	62	3
The College system	6	23	68	4
Dislike the mode of teaching	5	37	54	5
Earlier closing dates for UCAS forms	4	43	51	3
Cannot apply to both Oxford and Cambridge	3	23	69	4
<b>N=</b>				<b>235</b>

*Due to rounding errors, percentages may not always sum to 100. 1 respondent did not respond to any part of this question.*

The responses about which issues have discouraged students to apply were analysed by the type of school to see whether there were any differences. There were found to be significant differences on five issues in the response of teachers from different types of school. The issues were: social context; the course not being available; attitude of family and friends; cost; and the earlier closing date.

Grammar schools were less likely to say that the social context and the attitude of family and friends had discouraged students, than the other teachers. Grammar school teachers were more likely to say that the course not being available had discouraged students than the other teachers. In comparison to the other teachers, comprehensive school teachers were more likely to say that the cost of going to Oxbridge had discouraged students. In relation to the earlier closing date, teachers at post-16-colleges were the most likely to say that this had occasionally discouraged students.

**Table 3.14 Knowledge about selection procedures**

		% of teachers within school type			Overall % of teachers
		Comp.	Grammar	Post-16	
Uncomfortable in the social context	Often discouraged	54	23	46	42
	Occasionally	45	70	48	54
	Never	1	8	6	4
Course / subject not available	Often discouraged	15	20	15	17
	Occasionally	61	73	75	69
	Never	24	6	10	14
Attitude of family / friends	Often discouraged	15	9	19	14
	Occasionally	56	46	60	54
	Never	29	45	21	32
Cost	Often discouraged	20	9	8	13
	Occasionally	61	43	58	54
	Never	19	49	35	33
Earlier closing dates for UCAS	Often discouraged	4	5	4	4
	Occasionally	42	31	65	43
	Never	54	64	31	52
<b>N =</b>					<b>236</b>

*This table does not include teachers that did not answer and so the N's are different for each part (not shown).*

Teachers were asked whether in cases where they have had students who were capable of gaining a place at Oxford or Cambridge, but the students did not

apply, more could have been done to encourage the students to apply. Many teachers did not respond to this question or said that nothing or very little could have been done to encourage these students. Of those that made suggestions, the most common was reassurance that they would fit in with the lifestyle at Oxford or Cambridge. The results are shown in Table 3.15.

**Table 3.15 Methods that might have encouraged capable students to apply**

Method	% of teachers
Reassurance that they would fit in with the lifestyle	12
Information from existing students / role models	9
More varied range of courses	9
Arrange visits to departments to see teaching and courses	9
Very little	8
University reps. coming to school to talk to students / do mock interviews	7
Modernisation / broadening of courses on offer	7
Advice about interview / selection procedures	5
More Summer Schools / access schemes	4
Closer links between schools & admissions tutors	3
More financial incentives	3
Reassurance to parents (especially of Asian girls)	3
Positive discrimination in selection process / broader intake	2
Nothing	14
No response	16
<b>N=</b>	<b>236</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 198 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer. Not all responses are listed.*

In relation to what Oxford and Cambridge could do to make themselves more attractive to students at their school. The most common response from teachers was to say that the Universities were already doing enough (24 per cent). In terms of suggestions, develop the programme of Oxbridge representatives visiting schools (14 per cent) was the most common, followed by the suggestions that the Universities should emphasise that state school students are not disadvantaged (13 per cent). In the 1998 study the most common suggestions from teachers were for the Universities to emphasise that state school students are not disadvantaged (15 per cent); develop the

programme of Oxbridge representatives visiting schools (11 per cent); and to improve the image of the Universities (11 per cent). It is interesting to note that in 2004 only four per cent of teachers suggested a change of image would make the Universities more attractive.

The four most common responses from comprehensive schools were: develop the programme of Oxbridge representatives visiting schools (20 per cent); nothing – they already do a lot (14 per cent); emphasise that state school students are not disadvantaged (13 per cent); and increase the proportion of state school applicants (nine per cent).

The five most common responses from grammar schools were: nothing – they already do a lot (31 per cent); emphasise that state school students are not disadvantaged (16 per cent); develop the programme of Oxbridge representatives visiting schools (11 per cent); increase the proportion of state school applicants (eight per cent); and publish more details about the application / selection process (six per cent).

The five most common responses from post-16 colleges were: nothing – they already do a lot (31 per cent); develop / improve open days (11 per cent); emphasise that state school students are not disadvantaged (nine per cent); develop the programme of Oxbridge representatives visiting schools (seven per cent); and provide more opportunities to visit the Universities (seven per cent).

### **3.6 Success in applying to Oxford and Cambridge**

Most teachers thought that where their students had been unsuccessful in applying to Oxford or Cambridge, most of the reasons for this were related to the interview process. A quarter of teachers stated that the students were not confident enough in the interview and a quarter said that the students did not have the academic grades necessary. In the 1998 study a quarter of teachers mentioned a lack of necessary grades, but only a fifth mentioned lack of confidence in the interview. The results are shown in Table 3.16.

**Table 3.16 Reasons that students have been unsuccessful**

Reason	% of teachers
Interview: student not confident / forceful enough	27
Academic: student didn't have good enough grades / predicted grades	27
Interview: poor interview (no reason given)	25
Interview: student not well-prepared/ did not read around subject	15
Academic: competition was too great	11
Interview: student nervous / felt intimidated	9
Academic: written work not of high standard	7
General: student applied against advice	5
Interview: poor interview skills	5
System usually very effective	4
General: student not committed enough	4
No response	9
<b>N=</b>	<b>236</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 216 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer. Not all responses are listed.*

Where students have declined the offer of a place at Oxford or Cambridge, the main reason that teachers reported was that the student preferred a course elsewhere. This question was not asked in the 1998 study.

Teachers were then asked whether they thought that any particular aspect of the application or selection process had disadvantaged students from their school or college. A total of 66 per cent of teachers reported that the interview process had placed students from their school at a disadvantage when applying to Oxford or Cambridge. There was little variation on this issue, with about 66 per cent of teachers at all the school types giving this response. Where there was variation according to the type of school, this was in relation to coursework, which post-16 colleges were more likely to mention (22 per cent) than the other two types (about ten per cent). Variation was also seen in relation to the offer that was made, which comprehensives and post-16 colleges were more likely to mention (about ten per cent) than grammar schools (four per cent). In the 1998 study for teachers from all types of schools, the interview process was the area which was most frequently referred to as having disadvantaged students (69 per cent).

Of those who indicated that the interview process had disadvantaged their students the following reasons were given: the student was too nervous (69 teachers); staff in school had been unable to prepare the student sufficiently (39 teachers); and the students were less polished than public school students (20 teachers). In terms of the reasons why additional tests or exams had disadvantaged the students, 62 teachers mentioned that the school had not been able to provide adequate coaching.

### 3.6.1 Improvements to the selection process

Teachers were asked to make suggestions for improvements to the selection process. The most common suggestions were for more information on the selection procedures before students applied and for the Universities to consider the background or context of the students and their school. The results were similar to those given in the 1998 survey, with the exception that in 1998 the joint most common suggestion was for the application and selection procedures to be brought in line with other universities, whereas in 2004 this was not commonly mentioned.

**Table 3.17** Suggestions for improvements to the selection process

Suggestion	% of teachers
Information: provide more information on selection beforehand	9
General: should look at school / student background / context	8
Interview: interviewer should take students nerves into consideration	6
General: reduce demands on school (e.g. early deadline)	6
Pretty good as it is	5
Offers: use AS module scores	4
General: bring into line with other HEIs	4
Interviews: different style	3
Interviews: more reliance on testing less on interview	3
General: change to post-exam system	3
Interviews: interviews in neutral setting	3
No response	34
N=	236

*Responses from an open-ended question. 155 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer. Not all responses are listed.*

Finally, teachers were asked to comment on the quality of the feedback that students received from Oxford or Cambridge. Just under a quarter of teachers' comments referred to the variability of feedback according to which College it was from, a similar proportion of teachers mentioned that feedback should be more detailed. A fifth of teachers said that feedback was generally seen to be good or mostly good.

**Table 3.18 Comments on the feedback received for Oxford and Cambridge**

<b>Comment</b>	<b>% of teachers</b>
It varies from College to College	24
Feedback needs to be more detailed to help with future applicants	22
Mostly good/ good	20
Some Colleges provide detailed/ helpful feedback	17
Some Colleges send standard letters	15
Very good/ excellent	13
Some Colleges provide no feedback	11
It has deteriorated	9
Poor	8
Satisfactory/ satisfactory to good	6
Feedback becoming bland due to data protection	5
No response	12
<b>N=</b>	<b>236</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 208 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer*

## 3.7 Teacher summary

Overall, teachers' views in 2004 were similar to teachers' views in 1998, but some changes have occurred.

### General points

- The most common sources of information about Oxbridge that teachers encouraged students to use were prospectuses, open days and websites.
- Teachers thought that the most useful sources were open day visits, the Oxford or Cambridge University prospectus and visits organised by the school.
- The majority of teachers thought that getting information about Oxford and Cambridge had become easier in the past five years. The information was generally said to be adequate, but some teachers suggested more openness on selection criteria, to appear more accessible and to give more help in choosing a College.
- The tutorial or supervision and College systems were regarded as the main differences between Oxbridge and other universities with high entry requirements.
- The main issues that teachers thought discouraged students from applying were a lack of confidence that they could cope and concern that they would be uncomfortable in the social situation.
- Teachers commonly felt that Oxford and Cambridge were already doing enough to make themselves attractive to students, though it was suggested that the Universities emphasise that state school pupils are not disadvantaged.
- Where students had been unsuccessful in applying to Oxbridge, the interview process was said to be the main reason.
- The majority of teachers thought that the interview process had placed students from their school at a disadvantage when applying to Oxford or Cambridge. This largely related to the nervousness of students.
- Teachers' main suggestions for improvements to the selection process were for more information about what it involves and for Oxford and Cambridge to take a greater account of the background or context of the applicants.

### Differences between teachers' views in the 2004 and 1998 study

- In 2004, a higher proportion of teachers reported that most of their students go on to Higher Education than in the 1998 study.
- Since the 1998 study there has been a large increase in teachers encouraging students to use websites as a source of information about Oxbridge.



- In terms of differences between Oxbridge and other universities, teachers in 2004 were less likely to think the public school image was a distinctive difference, but more likely to refer to Oxbridge as being very competitive to get into / for the elite than teachers in 1998.
- In 2004, a smaller proportion of teachers thought that there were differences between Oxford and Cambridge than had done in 1998.
- In terms of the differences between Oxford and Cambridge, in 2004 teachers stressed the structure of the courses and the location of the Universities, whereas in 1998 teachers referred to differences in the courses offered and the areas of specialism.
- Teachers in 2004 were less likely to suggest that the Universities change their image than in 1998.
- In 2004, a greater proportion of teachers mentioned that students lacked confidence in their interviews, than had done in 1998.

#### **Differences between teachers from different types of schools**

- Teachers at grammar schools reported that a higher number of their students apply to Oxbridge, receive offers and gain places at Oxford and Cambridge, than teachers from comprehensive schools or post-16 colleges.
- Comprehensive schools were less likely to offer some of the support mechanisms to students such as Advanced Extension Awards, advice on choosing colleges, visits from Oxford or Cambridge representatives, and mock interviews.
- Teachers at comprehensive schools were more likely than those from other schools to think that it costs more to study at Oxbridge than at other universities. They also thought that a lower proportion of state school students attend Oxbridge than teachers at grammar or post-16 colleges.
- Teachers at comprehensive schools were less likely to say that they knew a lot about the application and selection procedures at Oxbridge than teachers at grammar schools and post-16 colleges.
- Teachers from grammar schools were less likely to say that the social context and the attitude of family and friends had discouraged students than other teachers, and more likely to say that the course not being available had discouraged students. Comprehensive school teachers were more likely to say that the cost of going to Oxbridge had discouraged students than the other teachers.



## 4 Survey of students

A total of 906 students completed the questionnaire. A total of 383 students from comprehensive schools, 339 from grammar schools, and 184 from post-16 colleges completed questionnaires.

### 4.1 Information about the students

The first section of the questionnaire asked students about their background characteristics. Overall, approximately 40 per cent of respondents were male and 60 per cent were female. These figures are very similar to those respondents of the 1998 parallel survey, where 39 per cent of respondents were male and 61 per cent were female. Students were also asked what type of school they attended when they sat their GCSEs. Table 4.1 shows just under half of the young people sat their GCSEs at comprehensive schools (48 per cent) and just over a third sat them at grammar schools (36 per cent). Slightly more respondents who filled in the 1998 questionnaire sat their GCSEs at comprehensives (52 per cent) than respondents in 2004.

**Table 4.1** School attended when responded to questionnaire

Type of school:	% of students
Grammar	36
Secondary modern	7
Comprehensive	48
Independent	3
Other	2
No response	5
<b>N =</b>	<b>906</b>

*A single response item*

*Due to rounding errors, percentages may not sum to 100*

Students were also asked how many grades A and A\* they obtained in their GCSEs and the figures ranged from zero to 14. Approximately a quarter of students obtained ten A or A\* grades, 16 per cent gained nine and 15 per cent obtained 11 A or A\* grade GCSEs.

Half of the respondents indicated that they were currently studying mathematics. Biology, chemistry and English literature were also being

studied by nearly 40 per cent of students. History was the fifth most popular subject and was being taken by 34 per cent of students. In 1998, these subjects were also reported as being the most popular for respondents to study at A-level or equivalent. Students reported that nearly 80 per cent of the examinations they were studying were A-levels and 21 per cent were AS levels. The majority of students were taking three (430 students) or four (311 students) A-levels.

## 4.2 Students' Higher Education choices

### 4.2.1 Students' main reasons for wanting to go on to Higher Education

When students were asked to indicate their reasons for wanting to go on to Higher Education, the three most common reasons were because they enjoyed the subject, they felt a degree would get them a better job and because it seemed like a natural progression (see Table 4.2). In 1998, students also felt these were the main reasons, but fewer said that Higher Education seemed like a natural progression.

**Table 4.2 Five most common reasons for wanting to go on to higher education**

Reasons:	% of students
I enjoy the subject	69
I think a degree will get me a better job	49
It seems like a natural progression	49
I need a degree to follow my chosen career	44
I want to study new subjects/ areas	32
<b>N =</b>	<b>906</b>

*A multiple response question – students had to list the three most important reasons and therefore percentages may not sum to 100*

### 4.2.2 Students' likely UCAS choices

Respondents were asked what their six UCAS choices were likely to be. Overall, 51 per cent of them said they were likely to choose Oxford or Cambridge, nine per cent did not know or did not respond and the remaining respondents did not intend to apply to Oxford or Cambridge. In 1998, 37 per cent of students were intending to apply to Oxford or Cambridge, 59 per cent

said they were not and four per cent of students did not respond. Civic universities (e.g. Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield) and London universities were the types of universities students were most likely to put as their UCAS choices.

Those students who were likely to be applying to Oxford and Cambridge (i.e. they had indicated this as a UCAS choice in QB1), were more likely than others to say it was because they enjoyed the subject and it was a natural progression, but were less likely to say it was because they wanted to enjoy a student social life.

### 4.2.3 Reasons students decided to apply to Oxford or Cambridge

Students were asked to describe reasons why they were intending to apply to Oxford and Cambridge, and the most common reasons are shown in Table 4.3. The reasons which most students gave for deciding to apply to the two universities were their prestige and reputation, the types of courses on offer and the teaching methods used. In 1998 students gave similar responses, with slightly fewer deciding that teaching methods were an important factor (18 per cent of students in 1998, compared to 24 per cent in 2004).

**Table 4.3** Five most common reasons for deciding to apply to Oxford and Cambridge

Reasons:	% of students
Prestige/ reputation	44
Courses on offer	41
Teaching methods	24
Quality of staff	22
Quality of degree	22
<b>N =</b>	<b>463</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 457 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer. Filter question where n equals those who were applying to Oxbridge*

#### 4.2.4 Reasons students decided not to apply to Oxford or Cambridge

Of those students who did not intend to apply to Oxbridge universities, the most common reason given was that they did not believe they would achieve the necessary grades to get in (see Table 4.4). Other reasons students gave were that the course they wanted to study was not offered, there was too much pressure on students and that Oxford and Cambridge were elitist institutions. Similar views were held by students in 1998. However, a higher percentage of students in 2004 said they felt they would not get the necessary grades to get into Oxford or Cambridge (44 per cent of students in 2004 compared with 31 per cent in 1998).

**Table 4.4 Six most common reasons for deciding not to apply to Oxford and Cambridge**

Reasons:	% of students
Will not get the necessary grades	44
Courses not offered	20
Too much academic pressure	14
Elitist institutions	10
Oxbridge atmosphere wouldn't suit me	9
Didn't want to go through interview process	9
<b>N =</b>	<b>443</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 420 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer. Filter question where n equals those who were not applying to Oxbridge*

### 4.3 Sources of information about Oxford and Cambridge Universities

#### 4.3.1 Sources of information used

Only students who were considering, or at any time had considered, applying to Oxford or Cambridge were asked to complete four questions about sources of information about Oxford and Cambridge Universities. The most frequently used source of information were the Oxford or Cambridge University prospectuses, used by nearly three quarters of students (see Table 4.5). Approximately 60 per cent of students used the Oxford and Cambridge websites and 51 per cent used the UCAS website as sources of information or advice.

In 1998, the university prospectus was also the most frequently used source of information. Students in 1998 were given the option to say whether they used

web pages as a source of information but 74 per cent of respondents said they did not. It is therefore noticeable how many more students in 2004, than 1998, used the internet as a source of information about Oxbridge.

**Table 4.5 Sources of information which students use**

<b>Sources of information:</b>	<b>%</b>
Oxford or Cambridge University prospectus (printed or internet)	72
Oxford or Cambridge website	59
UCAS website	51
League tables	48
Oxford or Cambridge Departmental/subject prospectus (printed or internet)	47
Oxford or Cambridge college prospectus (printed or internet)	44
Open day visit	43
Higher Education fair	40
Visit organised by school/college	24
Oxford or Cambridge students visiting my school	43
Visit organised by student/parents	21
Visits from Oxford/Cambridge staff	19
Oxford or Cambridge regional conference	16
UCAS handbook	14
Other Higher Education handbook/prospectus	14
Summer school visit	4
Shadowing scheme	2
Information for ethnic minorities	2
Other	5
No response	21
<b>N =</b>	<b>906</b>

*A multiple response item. A total of 5132 responses were given. 717 respondents gave at least one response. Due to rounding errors, percentages may not sum to 100*

### 4.3.2 Usefulness of sources of information

The sources of information found most useful by the largest number of students were: visits to the universities, university prospectuses and departmental prospectuses (see Table 4.6). Of the small number of people who had attended a Summer School (34) or a Shadowing scheme (19), the majority had found them very useful. In 1998, young people found the same sources of information useful. There were very few sources of information which students had not found useful but of the 363 people who had said they

had attended a Higher Education fair, 33 per cent had not found it useful to find out more about Oxford or Cambridge.

**Table 4.6 Usefulness of sources of information about Oxford and Cambridge**

<b>Source of information</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Very useful %</b>	<b>Useful %</b>	<b>Not useful %</b>	<b>Not at all useful %</b>
UCAS website	458	25	57	15	2
UCAS handbook	130	21	55	18	5
Oxford or Cambridge University prospectus	648	57	39	3	0
Oxford or Cambridge Departmental prospectus	421	56	39	4	0
Oxford or Cambridge College prospectus	399	48	44	6	1
Oxford or Cambridge website	531	45	49	4	0
Open day visit	392	75	21	3	1
Visit organised by school	214	67	25	5	1
Visit organised by student	193	62	34	2	1
Higher Education fair	363	13	44	33	8
Information for ethnic minorities	17	29	35	24	12
League tables	435	23	55	18	3
Visits from Oxford and Cambridge staff	173	34	48	16	2
Oxford or Cambridge student visiting school	206	37	47	14	2
Oxford and Cambridge regional conference	140	45	38	12	4
Shadowing scheme	19	79	16	0	5
Summer school	34	82	12	3	3
Other HE prospectus	125	39	46	14	1
Other	45	39	46	14	1

*A series of single response items. Not all respondents indicated a response for all the items, because of this the number varies for each item. Due to rounding errors, percentages may not always sum to 100*



### 4.3.3 How sources of information could be improved

When students were asked how they thought the sources of information about Oxford and Cambridge could be improved, specific suggestions were made by less than one in ten respondents. Open-ended responses revealed that the most common suggestions were:

- more detailed information on courses or departments (nine per cent)
- more detailed information on each College (seven per cent)
- make the information more user friendly (five per cent).

Eight per cent of students reported that they already felt information was adequate. It must be noted that 49 per cent of respondents gave no response to this question, but this was partly because only students who had considered applying to Oxbridge were asked to answer this question. Similar percentages of students in 1998 also reported that they wanted more information on courses, departments and Colleges but a higher percentage also wanted more information on student social life than students in 2004.

### 4.3.4 Advice on applying to Oxford and Cambridge

Teachers/tutors, friends and parents were cited as the people who young people are most likely to have talked to about applying to Oxford or Cambridge (see Table 4.7). Students already at another university tended to have discouraged students to apply to Oxford or Cambridge and careers advisers tended to have provided neutral advice. Students in both 1998 and 2004 indicated that their most important source of advice was teachers and tutors. Talking to students from Oxford and Cambridge was a new category that was added to the 2004 questionnaire so comparisons cannot be made with 1998 results.

In 1998 some differences were found in relation to gender, whereby boys were more likely to have been encouraged by their teachers, but less likely to have been encouraged by their friends. However, this was not the case in the 2004 study.

**Table 4.7 Sources of advice about applying to Oxford and Cambridge**

People spoken to:	N	They encouraged me	They neither encouraged or discouraged me	They discouraged me
		%	%	%
Teacher(s)/Tutors	648	77	21	2
Careers adviser/connexions	247	36	60	5
Parent/Guardian	651	70	27	4
Brother/sister	311	46	46	8
Friend(s)	493	56	37	7
Students already at Oxford or Cambridge	373	75	21	4
Students already at another university	265	24	52	25

*A series of single response items. Not all respondents indicated a response for all the items, because of this the number varies for each item.*

*Due to rounding errors, percentages may not always sum to 100*

#### **4.3.5 Areas to do with applying to Oxford or Cambridge about which students have not been able to get enough information**

Table 4.8 shows that some students reported that they could not get enough information on the application process, including the interview structure (13 per cent). Some also felt that they could not obtain enough information on the strengths of each individual college (seven per cent). Half of respondents did not answer this question and 21 per cent of respondents felt there was actually sufficient information. Comparisons with 1998 cannot be made as this question was not included on the 1998 survey.

**Table 4.8** Five most common areas to do with applying to Oxford or Cambridge about which students have not been able to get enough information

Areas:	% of students
None	21
Information about applying, interview structure	13
Strengths of each individual college	7
Course details	3
Information on costs/ bursaries/ financial support	2
No response	50
<b>N=</b>	<b>906</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 449 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer*

## 4.4 Perceptions about Oxford and Cambridge Universities

### 4.4.1 Differences between Oxford and Cambridge and other institutions with high entry requirements

Students' responses to this open-ended question (see Table 4.9) showed that the main differences between Oxford and Cambridge universities and other high entry institutions were perceived to be Oxbridge's prestige, academic reputation, tutorial or supervision system and other cultural and social traditions. Each of these responses was mentioned by over a fifth of respondents from students in 1998 and 2004 which shows that views have remained very similar.

**Table 4.9** Five most common differences between Oxbridge and other HEIs with high entry requirements

<b>Differences:</b>	<b>% of students</b>
Oxbridge is more prestigious	26
Oxbridge's good academic reputation	24
Tutorial/supervision system at Oxbridge	21
Cultural/ social tradition at Oxbridge	21
Very competitive to go to Oxbridge	14
<b>N =</b>	<b>906</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 871 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer*

There were some differences when responses were analysed by type school or college. Students from post-16 colleges were more likely to mention the public school image as a difference between Oxford and Cambridge and other universities than those students at comprehensives and grammar schools. Students from grammar schools were more likely than students from comprehensives and post-16 colleges to mention the tutorial or supervision system as a difference between Oxbridge and other institutions. In 2004, students from different school types held similar views about the academic reputation of the two institutions, whereas in 1998 students from grammar schools were more likely to mention the academic reputation.

#### **4.4.2 Characteristics of Oxbridge students**

Respondents were asked what sort of student they felt is attracted to Oxford and Cambridge and responses to this open-ended question revealed that 63 per cent of students said they thought they were 'intelligent'. The other most common responses revealed that they thought students who were 'motivated', 'ambitious' and 'hard working' were attracted to Oxbridge. Only twenty-three per cent of students in 1998 said they thought students were 'motivated', but in 2004, 37 per cent of students felt this was a characteristic (see Table 4.10).

**Table 4.10** Five most common responses of perceptions of the kind of student who is attracted to Oxford and Cambridge

<b>Responses:</b>	<b>% of students</b>
Intelligent	63
Motivated	37
Ambitious	26
Hard working	21
From high social class	17
<b>N =</b>	<b>906</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 881 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer*

When responses were analysed by school type, data revealed that students from grammar schools were more likely to mention academic characteristics of students attracted to Oxbridge, in particular motivation, compared with comprehensive and post-16 college students. In contrast, students from post-16 colleges were more likely to say that students from a high social class were attracted to Oxford and Cambridge, compared with those students at comprehensives and grammar schools.

#### **4.4.3 Cost of going to Oxford and Cambridge compared with other universities**

Students felt that it either cost about the same to go to Oxford and Cambridge compared with other universities (45 per cent) or slightly more (32 per cent). Just 12 per cent of students felt that it cost much more to go to Oxbridge than other institutions. In 1998, a higher percentage of students (43 per cent) said it cost slightly more to go to Oxford or Cambridge than students in 2004.

Thirty five per cent of students explained that they had gained this information from the universities themselves. Other sources of information included: friends and family, teachers and tutors and Oxbridge students and teachers. Eleven per cent of students in 2004 reported that they got this information from the internet and University websites but in 1998 this was not mentioned at all.

#### **4.4.4 Number of applications per place**

When students were asked about the number of applications per place Oxford and Cambridge receive compared to other universities, just over half of

respondents thought they received more (53 per cent). This percentage is slightly higher than in 1998, when 46 per cent of students felt Oxford and Cambridge received more applications per place than other universities.

#### 4.4.5 Differences between Oxford and Cambridge, generally

Forty one per cent of students felt that in general there were differences between Oxford and Cambridge, 30 per cent felt that there were not and 28 per cent of students said they did not know (see Table 4.11). In 1998, only 16 per cent of students felt there were no differences between the two universities.

**Table 4.11 Five most common perceived differences between Oxford and Cambridge in general**

Differences:	% of students
Cambridge is science-based	8
Oxford is arts/humanities based	7
Strengths in different subjects	7
Different locations	6
Not all courses offered at both universities	5
No response	58
<b>N=</b>	<b>906</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 381 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer*

Of those students who provided further details, open-ended answers revealed that students gave a wide range of responses, with the most common differences being that Cambridge was science-based (eight per cent) and Oxford was arts/humanities-based (seven per cent). Fifty eight per cent of students did not respond to this question.

#### 4.4.6 Differences between the selection procedures at Oxford and those at Cambridge

Half of the respondents felt that there were no differences between Oxford and Cambridge's selection procedures (see Table 4.12). In 1998, half the respondents felt they did not know if there were differences, whereas in 2004 approximately only a third of students felt they did not know.

**Table 4.12 Four most common perceived differences in the selection procedures at Oxford and the selection procedures at Cambridge**

<b>Differences:</b>	<b>% of students</b>
Cambridge interview all applicants	3
Different systems for testing abilities	2
Extended/ longer interviews	1
More written tests at interview	1
Other relevant	2
No response	86
<b>N =</b>	<b>906</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 131 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer*

Very few students provided details of these differences, as 86 per cent of students did not respond to this question. Of those who did respond, three per cent of students said a difference was that Cambridge interviews all applicants. Responses from students in 1998 showed that 30 per cent of students said that STEP papers were often required by Cambridge but less than one per cent of students mentioned this in 2004. This figure is likely to have dropped because in 1998 more subjects required students to sit STEP papers, whereas today Cambridge Colleges only ask applicants to take STEP papers for mathematics (with a very small number of exceptions). It must be noted however, that there are now other written tests for other subjects at Oxford and Cambridge.

#### **4.4.7 Differences between the courses on offer at Oxford and those on offer at Cambridge**

Students varied in their opinions as to whether they felt there were any differences about the courses offered at Oxford and Cambridge, 38 per cent said there were differences, 26 per cent said there were not and 35 per cent did not know. Of those students who provided details, the most common responses were that the options on offer are different and the courses are less specialised at Cambridge. Other common responses are shown in Table 4.13. Again a large percentage of students did not respond to this question.

**Table 4.13** Five most common responses to differences between types of courses on offer at Oxford and at Cambridge

<b>Differences:</b>	<b>% of students</b>
Options on offer different	10
Courses more general/ less specialised at Cambridge	6
Course(s) only available at Cambridge	5
Structure of courses different	4
Courses more flexible at Cambridge	3
No response	61
<b>N =</b>	<b>906</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 358 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer*

When students were asked which differences they preferred, Table 4.14 shows the most common responses, which indicate that there were no clear preferences for courses at Oxford or Cambridge. For example, five per cent of respondents said that the course or department was better at Cambridge, and four per cent of students said that they preferred the less specialised course at Oxford. Students' responses from the 1998 survey revealed they held similar views to students in 2004.

**Table 4.14** Five most common responses to preferred course

<b>Responses:</b>	<b>% of students</b>
Cambridge – Course/department better	5
Oxford –Less general/less specialised	4
Oxford – Course/department better	4
Cambridge – more flexibility	4
Neither/not sure	4
No response	68
<b>N =</b>	<b>906</b>

*Responses from an open-ended question. 286 respondents gave at least one response. Percentages do not sum to 100 as respondents could give more than one answer*



#### 4.4.8 Reasons for applying or not applying to Oxford or Cambridge

Students were asked to indicate which issues had influenced whether or not they were going to apply to Oxford and Cambridge (see Table 4.15). Just over three quarters of students said that the graduate career prospects had made them more likely to apply. Other common responses which had made them more likely to apply included: the way teaching is organised (e.g. tutorials or supervisions), the content of the courses on offer and league tables. Sixty per cent of students in 2004 mentioned league tables as a factor that has made them more likely to apply to Oxbridge and this was a new category that had been added to the 2004 questionnaire. Students in 2004 were more likely to say that the organisation of teaching, the content of courses and graduate career prospects had made them likely to apply to Oxbridge than students in 1998.

The issue that the highest percentage of respondents felt had made them less likely to apply were the difficulty of gaining a place, additional tests or exams and the perceived social mix of students. These were the same reasons given by students in 1998, but a smaller percentage of students in 2004 mentioned that the perceived social mix of students had made them less likely to apply to Oxbridge (35 per cent in 2004, compared to 47 per cent in 1998).

Issues that the majority of students felt have not influenced their decision whether or not to apply include: the practicalities of not being able to apply to both Oxford and Cambridge, the earlier closing date for the UCAS form, the additional application form and fee and the financial support. In 1998, students listed similar factors.

**Table 4.15 Influences on students' decisions of whether or not to apply to Oxford and Cambridge**

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Has made me more likely to apply %</b>	<b>Has made me less likely to apply %</b>	<b>Has not influenced my decision to apply %</b>	<b>No response %</b>
The earlier closing date for the UCAS form	3	23	70	4
The additional application form and fee	0	29	67	4
Cannot apply to both Oxford and Cambridge	2	10	83	5
The interview process	14	34	49	4

Table continued overleaf...

**Table 4.15 continued**

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Has made me more likely to apply %</b>	<b>Has made me less likely to apply %</b>	<b>Has not influenced my decision to apply %</b>	<b>No response %</b>
Having to submit work	6	26	63	5
The College system	47	13	36	4
The content of the courses on offer	54	20	21	4
The way teaching is organised (e.g. tutorials)	64	6	26	5
The way courses are assessed	26	7	62	5
The perceived social mix of students	23	35	38	4
Cost of living/accommodation	13	26	57	4
Distance from home	20	17	59	4
Difficulty in gaining a place	8	57	31	4
The social life	30	21	44	5
Graduate career prospects	77	1	18	4
The location	49	11	35	5
Attitude of family and friends	48	9	39	4
Course/ subject not available	1	25	65	8
League tables	60	3	32	5
Financial support, bursaries etc	21	6	67	5
<b>N =</b>				<b>906</b>

*A series of single response items*

*Due to rounding percentages may not sum to 100*

## 4.5 Student questionnaire further analysis

In order to explore in more detail what makes students likely to apply to Oxford and Cambridge a statistical technique called logistic regression was used. Logistic regression, a variant of linear regression, allows one to explore the nature of the relationships between a number of different variables and the probability of an event occurring. In this case the analysis looked at how background factors like gender, ethnicity and educational background are related to the probability of a student applying to study at Oxford or Cambridge Universities. Later, some attitudinal measures are also incorporated.

In order to interpret the results of logistic regression students with different characteristics were compared to a notional 'standard' student. The average student in this research is a White male who attends a grammar school. He has 10 As or A\*s at GCSE, and his parents' highest qualification was below A level. These characteristics were selected because they were the ones used in the 1998 study. We refer to where differences occurred between the 1998 analysis and the 2004 analysis. The 2004 analysis found that a number of the background characteristics were significantly related to whether students were likely to apply to Oxford or Cambridge. Table 4.16 presents the probabilities that different types of students, in the sample, apply to Oxford or Cambridge Universities.

**Table 4.16 Probability of different types of student applying to Oxford or Cambridge**

<b>Type of student:</b>	<b>Probability</b>
	<b>%</b>
Standard (White, male, 10 As or A*s, grammar)	70.2
Standard but from a comprehensive school	63.7
Standard but from a post-16 college	67.9
Standard but female	50.4
Standard but with five As or A*s at GCSE	42.1
Standard but of Black origin	96.4
Standard but of Black origin and female	91.9

In the 1998 study, students attending comprehensive schools were significantly less likely to be applying to Oxford or Cambridge than those from grammar schools. However, for students in 2004 the type of school attended was not statistically significant, although those at comprehensives were slightly less likely to be applying to Oxford or Cambridge than those at grammar schools or post-16 colleges.

Female students were significantly less likely to apply than male students and this was also the case in the 1998 study.

The greater the number of A/A\* achieved at GCSE, the more likely the student was to apply. This was also the case in the 1998 study.

Black students were much more likely to apply to Oxford or Cambridge than White students, which was also the case in 1998. Unlike in the 1998 study, when Asian students were more likely to apply, there was no significant difference for Asian students in the 2004 (they were as likely to apply as White students). It may be that this finding reflects the manner in which teachers distributed questionnaire to students of minority ethnic backgrounds.

In the 1998 study, parental qualifications were found to have a significant relationship with the likelihood of applying to Oxford or Cambridge. However, as with school type, this was not found to be the case in the 2004 study.

To measure how well a logistic regression model fits the survey data, the numbers of students that the model predicts apply to Oxford or Cambridge is compared with the actual numbers of students reporting that they applied. The first model, that included students' characteristics and educational background variables, correctly predicted whether 72 per cent of the students applied to Oxford or Cambridge.

A second model incorporated some attitudinal measures, comprising five individual variables that had been derived from factor analysis (reported below in 4.5.1). Adding these measures to the logistic model improved its prediction ability to 87 per cent. When adding the attitudinal measures to the model a number of the background characteristics that had previously been statistically significantly related to applying to Oxford or Cambridge ceased to be so. This is often the case and is due to attitudinal measures being much more strongly related to decisions to apply. In each case, being influenced by each of the factors was related to being more likely to apply. The results of the second model are included in the next section.

#### **4.5.1 Factor Analysis**

A factor analysis was carried out in order to explore what makes students likely to apply to Oxford or Cambridge. Factor analysis is a statistical technique used to condense a large amount of data (i.e. the responses to individual questions) into a smaller number of scales or factors, while still retaining the underlying relationships that exist within individuals' responses. This is achieved by grouping questions that are related to each other and calculating a score on a scale for each individual. It is commonly employed to express people's opinions about particular issues as these often comprise many facets.

The value of reporting outcomes in the form of a scale is that it is based on substantially more data than reporting the outcomes of any single question in the questionnaire and should therefore be a more reliable measure. Besides, although it is interesting to compare responses to each question, a statistically more powerful, and much easier to interpret, analysis can be obtained by combining questions.

Three questions were included in the factor analysis, these were C3 'how much do you think it costs to go to Oxford or Cambridge?'; C5 'how many applications per place do Oxford or Cambridge receive?'; and D1 'reasons that might have influenced your decision to apply' (this last question contained 21 items). By examining the strength of correlations between these different questions and items it was possible to identify five main factors which affected students' decisions whether to apply to Oxford or Cambridge.

Factor 1: Life as an Oxbridge Student

- D1 College system
- D1 content of courses on offer
- D1 the way teaching is organised
- D1 the way courses are assessed
- D1 the perceived social mix of students
- D1 the social life

Factor 2: The application and selection process

- D1 the early closing date for the UCAS form
- D1 the additional application form and fee
- D1 the interview process
- D1 having to submit work
- D1 additional tests / exams
- D1 difficulty in gaining a place

Factor 3: Economic issues

- C3 the cost of going to Oxford or Cambridge
- D1 cost of living / accommodation
- D1 distance from home
- D1 location
- D1 financial support / bursaries

Factor 4: Going to Oxbridge would be good for my future

- D1 graduate career prospects
- D1 attitude of family and friends
- D1 league tables

Factor 5: Practical restrictions

- D1 cannot apply to both Oxford and Cambridge
- D1 course / subject not available

All of these factors were included in the logistic regression and were found to have a significant relationship with whether students were likely to apply to Oxford or Cambridge. Students who reported that their decision to apply was positively influenced by student life, the application process, economic considerations, their future prospects and practicalities were more likely to apply to Oxford or Cambridge.

The results of the further analysis show how the factors were affected by background characteristics, such as gender, ethnic origin and number of obtained GCSEs:

- Students with more grade A/A\*s GCSEs were more likely to be positively influenced by all five factors listed above than students with lower grades.
- ‘Life as an Oxbridge student’ (Factor 1) and economic issues (Factor 3) were more of a positive influence on students who attended grammar schools than those at comprehensives or post-16 colleges when making a decision about whether to apply to Oxbridge.
- The application and selection process (Factor 2) was more of a negative influence on students who attended comprehensives or post-16 colleges.
- Grammar school students were more positively influenced by perceived future prospects (Factor 4) than comprehensive students when making a decision.
- Student life or ‘life as an Oxbridge student’ (Factor 1) was a more positive influential factor for males than for females.
- Females were more negatively influenced by the application and selection process (Factor 2) than males when making a decision whether or not to apply to Oxford or Cambridge.
- Black students were more likely to be positively influenced by economic issues (Factor 3) than all other students when deciding whether or not to apply.
- Black students were more positively influenced than White students by perceived future prospects (Factor 4) when making a decision.

## 4.6 Student summary

Overall, students' views have remained largely similar to those of students in 1998, but some changes have occurred.

### General points

- Students reported that the main reasons for applying to Oxbridge were because of the prestige and the courses on offer.
- Of those students who were not intending to apply to Oxford and Cambridge, the main reason for this was that they thought they would not get the necessary grades.
- University prospectuses were still the most commonly used source of information about Oxford or Cambridge.
- The sources of information found most useful by the largest number of students were visits to the universities, university prospectuses and departmental prospectuses.
- Students suggested there should be more detailed information about courses, departments and Colleges and that information should be more user friendly.
- Students reported they wanted further information about applying to Oxbridge. The main areas were in relation to the application process and the interview structure.
- The main differences that students saw between Oxbridge and other universities with high entry requirements were the prestige of the Universities and the good academic reputation.
- Issues that made students more likely to apply to Oxbridge included: the career prospects; the way teaching is organised; the content of the courses and league tables.
- Those issues which have made students less likely to apply included: the difficulty in getting a place; additional tests and the perceived social mix.

### Differences between the 2004 and 1998 study

- A greater proportion of students in 2004 said that going to Higher Education was a natural progression. Students in 2004 were more likely to be intending to apply to Oxford or Cambridge than in the 1998 study.
- In 2004 students were more likely to refer to teaching methods as being a deciding factor in whether to apply to Oxbridge.
- A greater proportion of students gave 'not getting the necessary grades' as their reason for not applying to Oxbridge than had done in the 1998 study.
- Since 1998, many more students are using the internet as a source of information about Oxbridge.

- In 2004, students were less likely to mention that information on student social life should be improved.
- In 2004, a greater proportion of students described Oxbridge students as ‘motivated’ than had done in the 1998 study.
- In 2004, a lower percentage of students than in 1998, said it cost slightly more to go to Oxbridge than to other universities.
- A higher percentage of students in 2004, than in 1998, felt that Oxbridge received more applications per place than other universities.
- In 2004, a much greater proportion of students reported that there were no general differences between Oxford and Cambridge than did in the 1998 study.
- Students in 2004 were more likely to know whether there are differences in Oxford or Cambridge selection procedure than students in 1998.
- Students in 2004 were more likely to mention the organisation of teaching, the content of courses and graduate career prospects as factors that made them likely to apply. Whilst the perceived social mix was less likely to be a factor that made them apply.
- In the 1998 study, parental qualifications were found to be related to whether students were applying to Oxbridge; however this was not the case in 2004.

#### **Differences between students from different types of schools**

- In the 1998 study, grammar school students were more likely than comprehensive or post-16 college students to mention the academic reputation of Oxbridge as distinguishing it from other universities, but in 2004 the responses were very similar for all students.
- Taking into account academic ability, in terms of which groups of students were intending to apply to Oxford or Cambridge, in 2004 there was no significant difference between those from different types of school, whereas in 1998 comprehensive students were significantly less likely to be applying than those from grammar schools.
- Using factor analysis to examine the issues influencing applications to Oxford and Cambridge, issues surrounding life as an Oxbridge student and economic issues were more of a positive influence on students who attended grammar schools than those at comprehensives or post-16 colleges. The application and selection process was more of a negative influence on students who attended comprehensives or post-16 colleges. Grammar school students were more positively influenced by perceived future prospects than comprehensive students when making a decision about applying to Oxbridge.



## 5 Conclusions

Overall, both teachers' and students' views in 2004 had many similarities with the 1998 study, but there were some interesting differences and patterns that suggest that perceptions of the Universities have shifted since 1998.

### **Applicants**

Whilst a greater proportion of the students in our sample from grammar schools were applying to Oxbridge than those from comprehensives and post-16 colleges, in 2004 the gap was smaller than in 1998 and was no longer statistically significant. Parental qualifications were no longer related to whether students were applying. These findings suggest that students from a wider variety of backgrounds were applying to Oxford and Cambridge in 2004 than in 1998.

### **Teaching methods**

Students in 2004 seemed to place greater importance on factors such as course content and teaching approaches when making decisions about Higher Education. For example, students in 2004 were more likely to take into account the way teaching is organised and the content of the courses when deciding whether to apply to Oxford or Cambridge than those in 1998.

### **Academic reputation**

Both students and teachers placed an increased emphasis on the academic rigour and high expectations of the Universities. For example, in 2004 students from all types of school noted that prestige and good academic reputation were the main differences between Oxbridge and other universities. Also, in 2004 students were more likely to mention that doubt about achieving the right grades was their primary reason for not applying to Oxbridge.

### **Social mix**

Perceptions of the social mix at Oxbridge appeared to have altered slightly since 1998. Students in 2004 were less likely to report that the social mix at Oxbridge discouraged them from applying and that information on social life needed to be improved. Also, teachers were less likely to suggest that the Universities needed to change their image. However, it should be noted that some concerns were still raised about the social background of students and the need for the Universities to emphasise that state school students are not disadvantaged. Overall, the findings suggest that Oxbridge have gone some way to addressing issues surrounding the perceived social mix of students.

### **Differences between Oxford and Cambridge**

Since 1998, perceived differences between Oxford and Cambridge have reduced. Both teachers and students were less likely to believe that differences existed, and those mentioned tended to relate to the courses on offer. It was

notable that in the 1998 study many respondents referred to STEP papers as being a difference, but in 2004 this was not the case (probably due to a change in the application procedures, suggesting that students and teachers are aware of the change).

### **Information available**

Prospectuses and visits to the Universities were the main sources of information used by students when looking for information about Oxbridge. Since 1998 there has been a huge increase in the use of the internet to access information about Oxford and Cambridge. In general, teachers and students were happy with the information available about Oxford and Cambridge. The main areas of concern, for both teachers and students, related to the need for further information about the application and interview process, and on choosing Colleges.

### **Overall**

On many issues the findings of the 2004 study were very similar to those from the 1998 study. However, the pattern of findings suggests that since the 1998 study was carried out, there has been a subtle change in the way that Oxford and Cambridge are perceived. This relates to an increased emphasis on the academic requirements and provision of the Universities, and a reduced concern on social factors and issues surrounding state-school students. There is still further work to be done, and some recommendations are listed below, but it does appear that the attitudes of teachers and students have shifted slightly in relation to the way they think about Oxford and Cambridge.

## **5.1 Recommendations**

Oxford and Cambridge appear to have been clearly successful in trying to shift perceptions about the Universities and to encourage prospective students to focus to a greater extent on the academic rather than the social-class aspects of the Universities; this work should continue.

The application and selection process and interviews were seen as the biggest barriers to students applying to Oxbridge and them being successful. Current methods of providing information about these processes are not meeting the needs of users, and further information about these processes was requested. Oxford and Cambridge may wish to consider greater consultation with prospective students and their teachers about what information they would like to see.

It was clear that on a range of issues the perceptions of teachers in comprehensive schools were different to those of teachers in grammar schools.

Oxford and Cambridge may wish to address this perceived information gap and increase further their proactive targeting of comprehensive schools.

HE fairs were not seen to be as useful, by both teachers and students, as other sources of information such as Open Days and visits to the Universities. Oxbridge may want to consider either trying to find ways to improve their presence at Higher Education fairs, or instead to focus their efforts on Open Days and arranging visits to the Universities instead.

As websites are being increasingly used, then the effort that is put into maintaining and developing them needs to be proportionate. Oxford and Cambridge may wish to explore more innovative uses of the website in order to address some of the other issues raised in this report.

Further work needs to be done to provide information about the types of student that attend Oxbridge, and to reassure prospective students that they would feel comfortable with the social setting at Oxbridge.

Continued efforts are required to assure students that studying at Oxbridge is no more expensive than studying at other universities.

There was evidence that comprehensive schools provided fewer support mechanisms for prospective Oxbridge students. The Universities may therefore wish to consider targeting more support mechanisms at these schools, for example mock interviews.

Further work needs to be done to help students decide on which College to apply to and to support teachers in helping students making this decision, or on convincing students that all Colleges are essentially similar and that College choice is not the most crucial part of their application.

The current interview procedure was said to be difficult and teachers reported that the interview, and in particular nervousness, was the reason that students were not successful in gaining places. Oxford and Cambridge should continue to attempt to make the interview process less stressful for students in order to ensure that university staff are able to gather the best possible information about prospective students.



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## Appendix 1 Questionnaires



Teacher Questionnaire



Student Questionnaire