

UNIQ/ Oxford Summer Schools – A Guide

By Nina Lindsay



UNIQ is the widening access programme run by UNIQ that offers year 12 students from non-fee paying schools a chance to spend a week studying a subject they love in the University of Oxford. The idea is to experience what a week in the life of an undergraduate student would be like. The course is very intense but incredibly enjoyable and you can definitely get a lot out of it.

I applied in 2013 for the Oncology (Cancer) course. I wasn't sure at the time what sort of field of science I wanted to go in, and the course was a good mix of research, analysis with some medical influence as well. Some courses (such as Oncology, Physical Sciences etc.) are not actually offered as an undergraduate degree, but offer a combination of different subjects.

I have tried to break down the main things that you might have questions about or encounter on a UNIQ summer school.

Applying

Things to Bear in Mind

Information about the summer schools is usually updated on the UNIQ summer school website in December. Applications will open in early January and close in late February. Please don't end up like me, and find out about the summer school the day before the deadline!

It's important to remember that the people who process your application to UNIQ (the widening admission team at Oxford) are not the same as the people who look at your personal statement etc. if you actually apply to the university (the admissions tutors for each subject). Just because you get a rejection from the summer school does not mean you shouldn't apply to Oxford. It also means that if you write something stupid on your UNIQ form, it is not going to disadvantage your UCAS one- so do not despair!

No application to UNIQ is wasted- everyone who thinks they will enjoy it should definitely apply no matter whether they, themselves, think they will get in. There's no worry about "wasting an option" like in your actual UCAS application, and you may get a brilliant and exciting week out of it!

Entry Requirements

There are no set grades required for entry but there are A-levels that you are expected to be studying. For example, the Oncology course required you to be studying two science subjects to A2 level. Some courses ask for a specific subject. Individual courses will vary so make sure you've read the information for your subject on the UNIQ website.

Competition for Places/ Playing the Stats

The summer school is incredibly oversubscribed. The year I went, there were over 4400 applications for 850 places. In 2014, they hope to raise this to 1000 places, but obviously the odds are still quite slim. Applications are extremely competitive, especially in courses such as medicine, maths, law and physics.

It is worthwhile to consider that the percentage of people offered places for fairly similar courses may be very different when selecting a subject. Instead of applying for physics, could you instead apply for materials or physical science? Instead of medicine could you consider learning about Oncology?

2012 Application Figures

UNIQ Course	Number of Applications	Number of Places Available	Success Rate
Beginners Languages	32	15	47%
Biochemistry	116	40	35%
Biology	81	30	37%
Biomedical Sciences	112	30	27%
Chemistry	99	40	40%
Classics	56	30	54%
Computer Science	77	20	26%
Earth Science	40	15	38%
Egyptology	23	10	44%
Engineering	122	24	20%
English Literature	254	44	17%
Geography	67	20	30%
History	193	40	21%
History: R + P	80	30	38%
History of Art	38	15	40%
Law (both weeks)	310	60	19%
Materials Science	18	16	89%
Mathematics	285	32	11%
Medicine	622	40	6%
Modern Languages	330	45	14%
Music	59	15	25%
Oncology	74	20	27%
PPE	234	36	17%
Physical Sciences	66	30	45%
Physics	197	36	18%
Theology	36	15	42%

Criteria for Selection

There are four main criteria that the widening access team assess your application by.

1. Your home background. They generally use two sets of postcode data to prioritise those who come from places “with low progression to higher education”.

2. The history of successful applications to Oxford from your sixth form (prioritising those who come from colleges with little history).
3. How well you did at GCSEs compared to others within your school. It is, of course, much harder to stand out in a grammar school with over 50% of students receiving over 5 A grades. In the Oncology course, the highest number of A*s I heard of was 13, and a few people with 12. I had 10 A*s and an A. Obviously there is some range, and someone else from Herschel was accepted on the Physical Sciences course with 7 A*s, 2 As and 2 Bs.

GCSE results are quite important, not only to UNIQ but also when applying to Oxford for real. In terms of the summer school, I know people who failed to get in with 5 A*s, and being realistic you are unlikely to receive a place if you struggled to get As at Herschel. Do bear in mind, though, that GCSEs are only one part of the criteria they look at. Do not think that you are wasting your time by applying- whatever your grades.

4. Your personal statement. This is meant to be a practice before writing the real one, so it only has to be half the length that you need for UCAS (2000 instead of 4000 characters). Again, these are read by the widening access team and not admissions tutors, but the things they focus on are fairly similar to what you need to include in your application to universities, so it's important to get it right now!

The main tips from the summer school team are:

- Proofread your statement- silly mistakes give a bad impression. Get someone else to read it through and check your grammar/ punctuation/ spelling.
- Structure and clarity of thought are very important. Make your statement easy to read and convey your skills clearly.
- Provide relevant evidence for your passion and dedication to the subject- have you read books or been to related clubs? Don't just list what you've done, but explain what you have learnt and the skills you have developed from any academic activities.
- Work experience is useful for vocational courses such as medicine or law, but you must include your observations and thoughts about it to make it worthwhile. Which skills did you have to use or develop while you were there?
- Try and keep the majority of the piece academic and limit your extra-curricular activities to 20-25% of your statement. For Oxford, these are only useful as far as showing you can manage your time in a healthy and productive way.

Preparing for Summer School

Results

You will find out whether you have been offered a place on the summer school in mid-April. If unsuccessful, you get a letter. If successful, you will be sent a welcome pack with further information and some forms to fill in. Among these are your parental consent forms, BOD card application and letter to give to your Head of Sixth Form. You will also have a travel expenses form to fill in once you

buy train tickets. Make sure you get all the right forms in on time and confirm your place so you don't miss out.

Being Sent Books/ Reading Lists

For some subjects there some required reading, and sometimes within a tight deadline! For Oncology there were three books to read within two weeks- but not everyone had read them by the time I got there.

For other subjects there is no required reading but there will be a recommended reading list put up on the UNIQ website that has been approved by university tutors. These are great if you are looking for some extra reading to enrich your university application.

Packing/ What to Bring

You are allowed to bring one large bag/suitcase, and one set of hand luggage. Alongside all the normal clothes, toiletries etc. It is important to bring:

- Stationery- normal pencil case + calculators and rulers if it's a science subject. You will be provided with a notebook and a small tote bag on arrival
- Really, really comfortable shoes- you will be walking A LOT
- If you are doing a science subject, you will need clothes that cover your whole body.
- Something formal/dressy for the formal dinner
- Costume for the bop/party
- A watch so you can meet curfew and be on time for meeting people/ going to lectures.
- No gadgets (no laptops) but there is usually Wi-Fi and it can be helpful if you need to search for something online to help with your work.

Try and keep your bag as small as possible. You will only have to transport it once- from the station to your college- but this could be as long as a 40 minute walk if you are far away. (It was 30 minutes to Magdalen). Lots of people bring trail-along suitcases, which are fine, but they are difficult to manoeuvre if you are taking a really pebbly path- and the rattling can drive people mad!

UNIQ Forums

As soon as offers have been sent out the UNIQ forums will be up online. Through these you can talk with people who are on the same week or same course as you. It can be nice to speak to people with similar interests- last year people even made a fandoms forum to discuss Doctor Who and Harry Potter! Once the college allocations are up you can find out who'll be in the same college as you and get to know people you'll be with for a week!

The forums will stay up even after the summer school and you can use it as a place to ask questions of other tutors or organisers of the scheme as the time draws close to UCAS admissions as well.

At the Summer School

Lanyards

Every one of the UNIQ summer school, including your mentors, will have a coloured lanyard with the UNIQ logo on it. This is how you can identify your fellow students- as well as how your mentors identify you- so make sure you wear it. My advice is that you put all the card shaped items- such as meal vouchers and your BOD/library card, in there so they do not get lost. It's also a good idea to hang your keys around them if you're worried they'll go missing.

Accommodation

All UNIQ students get to stay in college accommodation for the week, in a single bedsit room which you can lock. It goes without saying but try not to lose the keys. There were a few people who had to go off in search of a porter at 11 o'clock at night because they have locked themselves out of their room.

Sometimes you end up sharing a toilet or bathroom, but different colleges' accommodation will vary. All of them will provide bedding and duvets. Below is my room at Magdalen. We even had a cleaner come in every day to empty the rubbish bin and replace the towels!



Food

The food at Oxford is really good- and while you are at UNIQ, it's all free! You will get a meal ticket when you first arrive to show to the cashier when you are served so that they know you don't have to pay for your meals in hall. Breakfast is usually at 8am and there is a huge choice between cooked and continental. Dinner can either be in hall in your main college or at another college for formal dinner. There are always multiple courses available as well as a vegetarian option- you'll have to fill in a form a dietary requirement before you arrive.

For lunch, every student gets a £5 voucher for Taylor's, a sandwich and pasta chain in Oxford. Even with about five different shops throughout the city, there can be a bit of a mad rush as 30 students descend upon the shop, all within their allotted lunch time!

The Mentors

Every subject has three or four mentors attached to the group, and out of these one will be resident with you at college and be responsible for walking you everywhere. All mentors wear a bright orange T-shirt, which is very useful for finding them in a crowd. They are all Oxford undergraduate students themselves and many of them have been in the UNIQ programme themselves. It is definitely worthwhile asking them questions about the subject and about the admissions process as a whole since many of them have been through it very recently. You're going to spend a lot of time with your mentor over the week so try to be friendly!



You will also have a site manager (with a purple T-shirt) who is based at each college. If you're doing gold DofE and you want UNIQ to count as your residential (which it can) then your site manager is who you need to give the booklet to. They are also who you need to report to in order to sign for curfew (which is usually at 10pm unless there's a formal dinner or bop).

The Lectures

You will have 6 hours of lectures a day from Monday to Thursday- 3 hours in the morning session and another 3 hours in the afternoon. On Friday you only do the morning session. You may have a range of different lecturers on different field in different days, and one of these sessions may include a mock tutorial- a discussion in a smaller group than normal, to resemble one of Oxford's normal methods of teaching. It is likely, if you are doing a science subject, that one of these days will also include lab work (mine involved a lot of pipetting).

It is a very good idea to take detailed notes during the lectures- you will be given a notebook to write in. There is also ample opportunity to ask questions if you do not understand anything or are interested in knowing more about a particular topic. Your lecturers are usually at the very top of their field and are passionate about their subject- so they will be happy to answer.

You will be set work to do outside the lectures, which your mentor should be able to help you with. It's important to remember that the work is designed to be challenging, and so do not be surprised if it takes a few explanations for the concept to sink in. It can be nice to tackle the work together as a college group, so you can help each other in areas that you find difficult.

'Free Time'

Every day an hour and a half is allocated to lunch, and another hour in the afternoon which is marked as free time. Lots of this time is used trying to finish the work that you have been set in your lectures or walking from place to place.

Another really useful thing to do in your free time is to explore the city of Oxford itself. You will have a map in the back of your notebook, which gives you a rough idea of where everything is if you want to venture out to go shopping. Alternatively, your mentor may be willing to give you're a mini tour of some of the other colleges in Oxford. You'll be amazed how many weird and interesting facts they can tell you about the history of each college.

Evening Activities

There are things organised in the evening for you to do every day of the week- so don't worry about being bored. Some examples include open air Shakespeare (The Merry Wives of Windsor- you may not have heard of it), some sports- there was a parachute, a football, a Frisbee and various other game like things going on.

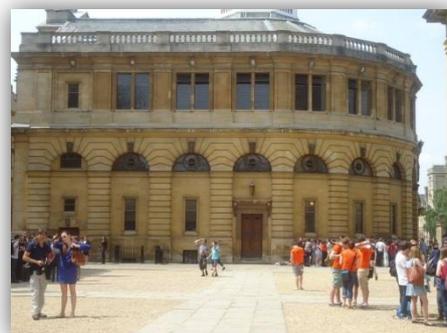
There was a talk given one evening by a researcher in the field we were studying- this is called the alumni dinner- in this case someone who worked in cancer research. We also had an admissions tutor give a short speech about the possible routes available to those with a science degree. This then leads onto the formal dinner where you can continue to ask as many questions as you like.



Another evening is entirely devoted to the bop- what Oxford calls a party. Everyone was told to dress up as something beginning with the letters U, N, I or Q. We had nerds, newspaper, the night, Native Americans... The evening started with a drinks reception (pictured), then a full formal dinner with the entire summer school, followed by an hour and a half of dancing... overall, a great night!

Leaving and Looking Back

We were lucky enough to have our own graduation ceremony in the Sheldonian (pictured) where Oxford graduates receive their degrees. Each attendee received a certificate and two more books to enjoy reading over the summer. After a barbeque in the lovely weather it was off home.



My week at the UNIQ summer school definitely gave me a good idea of what it would be like to study at Oxford. It came with the realisation that all these people, even the mentors who had already been accepted and were studying there, were just like everyone else. The discipline and passion was evident (there was no messing around or talking out of turn) but the bop and the experiences in the evening showed how no one was one- dimensional either. I came away simply wishing I could do it all again.

I sincerely hope if you are considering applying to UNIQ you take the chance, and throw yourself in!