2018 Admissions Round Feedback

Theology & Religion / Philosophy & Theology

Please note this is subject admissions feedback from the 2018 selection round - there will be changes each year, and these pages are only retained to provide a general indication of process.

Though numbers were lower overall for the single school (Theology and Religion) this year, with 83 applicants for 36 places, it was an exceptionally competitive year for the joint school with Philosophy, with 149 applications overall and 36 offers made, a success rate of 24.2%. We had 7 places to offer this year at Keble in Theology and Religion and Philosophy and Theology for entry in October 2018. We received 25 direct applications to Keble.

Many different factors are taken into account in the assessment of individuals’ performance on paper and at interview. Written work is blind marked by two markers following a formal mark scheme, and contextual factors such as the performance of the candidate’s school, as well as relevant personal circumstances, are carefully considered as each applicant’s qualifications are reviewed. In assessing applications for the joint school with Philosophy, we also pay close attention to performance in the Philosophy Aptitude Test. As always, tutors across the university worked collaboratively to ensure that each shortlisted candidate was interviewed by at least two different colleges.

Shortlisting, Deselection and Reallocation

The Faculty of Theology and Religion has admissions procedures which are partially centralised, including pre-interview reallocation and deselection to ensure an even distribution of candidates across colleges, which accounts for the fact that a first-choice applicant may be summoned for interview elsewhere. Shortlisting begins in early November and the official selection criteria for Oxford undergraduate courses can be found on the web at: http://www.theology.ox.ac.uk/undergraduate-admissions/how-to-apply/selection-criteria.html

Decisions about deselection were sometimes finely balanced, and took account of quantitative data ("scores" given for GCSE performance, or marks for written work or the Philosophy Test), but also considered individual students in the round, drawing on references and the contextual information mentioned above. Keble deselected 10 candidates before interview; after deselection and the reallocation process, we interviewed 15 first-choice applicants and 15 applicants from other colleges, a total of 30 candidates (or 4.3 per place).

College tutors and the Faculty’s Admissions Committee examined all applications thoroughly before shortlisting and interviews, including consideration of examination results and predictions and rigorous scrutiny of UCAS personal statements and references. In applicants’ personal statements, we seek evidence of reading beyond the curriculum and enthusiasm and thoughtful consideration of the subject to which the candidate is applying (and in the case of a joint school application, serious engagement with both Philosophy and Theology). Candidates whose test scores, written work marks, GSCE scores and A-level predictions or results were overall lower than average were often among those we did not invite for interview.
Interviews

One of the interviews for Theology involved general discussion about the course and the nature of the discipline, motivation for study, and questions arising from each candidate’s application. The other Theology interview was a text-based exercise for which all candidates were given fifteen minutes of preparation time before the interview (with extra time allocated for those who declared through the College Office that it was needed, in advance of the interview).

For joint school applicants, these qualities were also tested through the Philosophy test and interview, where certain distinctive skills are assessed, such as logic problem-solving. All first choice candidates who applied for the joint school with Philosophy were asked whether they would consider a place in the single school, which could be offered if they demonstrate greater strengths in one area.

Second college candidates were invited to attend one consolidated Theology interview which combined the text exercise with questions from the general interview described above. Second college candidates in the joint school were also invited to attend one Philosophy interview.

In the course of each interview, we were looking for evidence of motivation and interest, for readiness to respond to and accommodate alternative perspectives, for clarity of thought and expression, and for the ability to engage in a close reading of a text and to perceive variations in texts with attention to fine detail. No prior knowledge of the subject was necessary for any stage of the interview process, and recounting familiarity with specific texts was not always helpful to candidates engaging directly with fresh questions. We were impressed by those who demonstrated an ability to think independently, and were able to take on new information or different perspectives and to refine their thoughts during discussion without losing their coherence. Furthermore, a good understanding of the course for which the candidate was applying is always an advantage. Enthusiasm, thoughtful responses to the questions asked, and receptivity to new ideas were all indications of a candidate’s ability to flourish in the tutorial setting.

Places offered

For this year’s admissions, 7 offers were made, including one open offer: 4 for Theology and Religion and 3 for the joint degree with Philosophy. Four candidates who had applied directly to Keble were offered places at other colleges, and Keble offered places to 2 candidates who had applied to other colleges. All offers were for entry in 2019, but the College will consider deferred entry for candidates of sufficient merit.

It was, as always, a privilege to meet such a talented group of students. As we have made clear in the past, candidates who did not secure a place should not regard this decision as a definitive verdict on their intellectual quality and potential. We balance a number of factors in a very complex process and we remind candidates that we only see a snapshot of each of them at a particular moment in their development.

We are, as ever, eager to encourage schools which would not usually consider presenting candidates for Theology and Religion at Oxford to contact us and to see what the course and college can offer. Please contact the College Office for further information.