

2021 Admissions Round Feedback

English Language and Literature

Please note this is subject admissions feedback from the 2021 selection round - there will be changes each year, and these pages are only retained to provide a general indication of process.

The English admissions tutors would like to thank all applicants for the time and care they put into their applications. We are also grateful to referees for providing their supporting statements and for the encouragement and support they give to applicants.

This year there were just over 900 applications for English Language and Literature to the University, of whom two-thirds were shortlisted for interviews. Offers were made to around 225 applicants, including four for 2023 (i.e. deferred) entry. There were 25 first-choice applications to Keble and 19 were shortlisted for interview. Following reallocation of applications among colleges, 21 were interviewed at Keble for the six places available.

The admission tutors look holistically at candidates' performance across all areas – GCSE and predicted A Level (or equivalent) marks, contextual data, UCAS personal statement and references, submitted written work, the ELAT test, and (when shortlisted) interviewers' marks – in order to make decisions. All UCAS forms and pieces of written work are double-marked (sometimes triple-marked) by the interviewers, and we also look closely at any ELAT scripts which seem anomalous in any respect.

In their assessment of individual applications, the tutors took account of contextual data concerning relative individual and school performance as well as some background characteristics related to place of residence. This information is available only for applicants from within the UK. An explanation of how the University uses contextual data can be found here: <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/decisions/contextual-data>.

This year tutors were also aware of the potential and uneven impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on both learning and assessment. Treating each application individually enabled them to assess how these factors affected applicants.

Applicants are assessed according to the criteria agreed among the Colleges for English. These are available from here: <https://www.english.ox.ac.uk/what-we-look-for-undergraduate>

When judging personal statements, we seek evidence of reading beyond the curriculum and wide-ranging engagement with literary texts. We look for thoughtfulness as well as passion, for analytical as well as enthusiastic readers. While extracurricular activities can lead into and out of academic study in fruitful ways, we encourage candidates to use the limited space available in the UCAS statement to focus on their interest in literature.

When marking written work, we were looking primarily for writing ability – the best evidence of an interest in words. High marks tended to go to those who gave sustained attention to matters of literary form and style, and to precision and coherence of argument.

Candidates who scored well in the ELAT, and who had good exam results (making appropriate allowance for the disruption to assessments this year and last), written work, and references, were likely to be asked for interview. Candidates who showed less good scores in some areas of their application will only have been invited for interview with special consideration of other factors.

Shortlisted candidates had at least two interviews (20 minutes each, both conducted online via Microsoft TEAMS), and in both a large part of the discussion focused on an unseen poem which candidates were asked to read in advance. Two poems were sent electronically to each interviewee half an hour before the interview and they chose which one to discuss. Towards the end of each interview, candidates were asked broader questions about their personal statement, and about various conceptual issues relating to literary study.

During interviews we were looking for evidence of clarity of thought and expression, analytical ability, flexibility, and thorough attention to stylistic details. The best interview performances came from those who thought carefully about the poem and who were prepared to defend their interpretations with lots of close reading from the text, to take on new information and perspectives, and to refine their thoughts during discussion. It may be worthwhile here to repeat some comments from previous years' reports on admissions: 'The very best candidates demonstrated: a real appetite for reading and ideas; a commitment to thinking through confusing things whilst not being afraid to be confused; a nuanced feeling for words and a willingness to be surprised by them. Some of the best candidates spoke hesitantly and stutteringly, and others of the best spoke confidently and fluently. Both kinds, though, looked closely at the literary object before them, and tried to describe how it was working.'

Six offers were made for English and one for English and Modern Languages. Information on English and Modern Languages can be found under the Modern languages subject heading. As in previous years, choosing between the many excellent and able candidates was very difficult indeed. It is important to stress that, in making final decisions, we do not look just at interviews, but assess them in the context of the whole application. Interviews matter, but they are not our sole criterion in assigning places. Here at Keble we pride ourselves on our inclusivity and our commitment to outreach and access. Of the 5 UK candidates who received offers to read English this year, **all** were from state schools and categorised as widening participation applicants. For more information on outreach, see: <https://www.keble.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduates/outreach/>