

2023 Admissions Round Feedback

English Language and Literature

Please note this is subject admissions feedback from the 2023 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.

The English Faculty as a whole received 864 applications this year, of which 605 (70%) were shortlisted. That figure of 70% is 10% higher than 2022, when we shortlisted 60% of applicants. 235 offers have been made for ELL, meaning that 27% of applicants were successful.

There were 23 first-choice applications to Keble, all of whom were shortlisted for interview for the five places available for 2024 entry.

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, and all interviewers' marks – in order to make decisions. All UCAS forms and pieces of written work are double-marked (sometimes triple-marked) by the interviewers.

In their assessment of individual applications, the tutors take 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 the ELAT test had to be discarded because there were a variety of problems with its delivery to all candidates; this happened for candidates at all colleges. This is the statement issued by the chair of admissions in the English Faculty:

On Friday 19 October we announced that – due to the technical problems and rubric confusion candidates experienced in sitting the Oxford ELAT – we would not be using ELAT scores in our formal shortlisting calculation this year.

Since issuing that statement, the very considerable disparity of candidates' test experiences has become clearer to us. The Oxford ELAT is designed as a standard test; it allows our admitting tutors to assess how all candidates respond to the same exercise. This year, however, problems with the test meant that candidates did not access or take it in the same conditions and circumstances.

The Faculty of English has therefore taken the decision not to mark ELAT scripts. This is not a decision we have taken lightly, but we believe it is the only way to ensure that our admissions process is fair, equitable, and robust.

We apologize once more for the problems candidates experienced. We recognize that candidates took great time and care in preparing for and sitting the test and we are very sorry that this work cannot be taken into account this year.

In the light of this, Keble English shortlisted and interviewed all our candidates as we felt it gave us the best chance of being able to assess them fairly.

Tutors remain aware of the potential and uneven impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on both learning and assessment. Treating each application individually helped us 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, and 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 look 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.

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 or poems which candidates were asked to read one hour in advance. This year, one of the interviews focused on a comparison between two unseen poems, and the other on a close reading of a single poem.

During interviews we were looking for evidence of clarity of thought and expression, analytical ability, flexibility, and thorough attention to formal details. The best interview performances came from those who thought carefully about the poem

and who attended to style as well as content. These candidates were able to defend their interpretations with close readings from the text, but, equally importantly, they were also able to take on new information and perspectives, and to refine or even rethink 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.'

This year, 5 offers were made for English at Keble (including one Opportunity Oxford offer) and also one for English and Modern Languages; Information on English and Modern Languages can be found under the Modern languages subject heading. Two other candidates were made offers at other colleges.

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 candidates who received offers to read English (or EML) this year, nearly all were from the state sector—and the majority of those were also categorised as widening participation applicants.** For more information on outreach, see: <https://www.keble.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduates/outreach/>