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UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

From the Physics Admissions Coordinator

Report on the Physics Admissions Exercise 2025

In 2025, Oxford Physics received a total of 1637 applicants for places in Physics or Physics and Philosophy, a decrease of 153 (9%) on the 2024 figure.

Of these, 1607 applicants were contesting the 186 places available for 2025 admission, or approximately 8.6 applicants per place, with 30 applicants seeking deferred places.

Of the 1637 applicants, 65.6% were classified as 'UK' applicants (67.5% in 2024), 5.9% were classified as EU but not UK (5.5% in 2024), and 28.5% were classified as non-EU (27.0% in 2024).

Across the collegiate university, Physics usually aims to interview around 2.5 applicants per place, and this ratio was met exactly this year. For shortlisting, we use the results of the Physics Admissions Test (PAT) as well as all other contextual information described at https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/decisions/contextual-data.

The PAT has been run for many years, and it has been a good predictor of future performance at Oxford. The test is set to a defined syllabus and both the content and draft questions are checked by school teachers to ensure that the level is appropriate. We are grateful for the yearly advice we receive from schools and teachers on adapting the PAT to changes in school syllabi, and on the effect of the test delivery format.

In the PAT, maths and physics elements are mixed together into a single two-hour paper. Further details, including the admissions criteria and sample papers, can be found on the Oxford Physics Admissions website at: https://www.physics.ox.ac.uk/study/undergraduates/how-apply/admissions-procedures-physics-courses.

In 2025, the PAT, in line with other Oxford admissions tests, was delivered online. The questions were presented online, in a multiple-choice only format, with an online calculator. Candidates had use of whiteboards to make notes and perform calculations.

Most candidate' tests were successfully delivered; a small fraction of candidates had disrupted tests caused largely by issues at their local test centres. Notices of special considerations and disruptions were received; these were considered at all stages of the subsequent processes.

There were a significant number of declared special circumstances, medical certificates, and/or letters drawing attention to adversities in applicants' personal lives that may have affected performance or ability to participate in the test. All of these were taken into account when making shortlisting and offer decisions.

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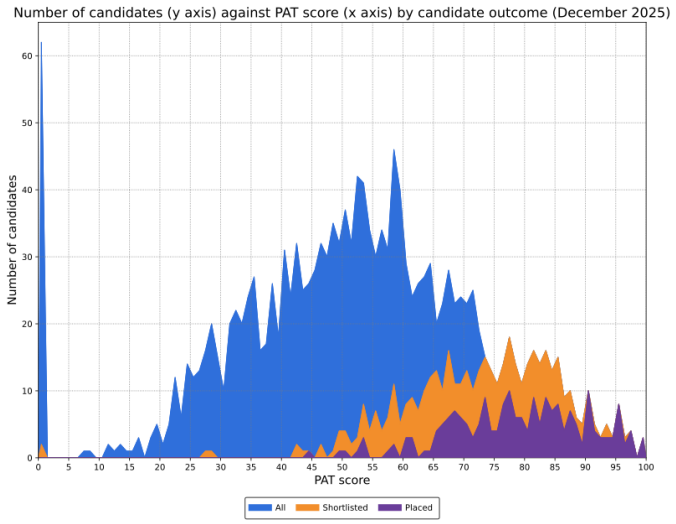

The marks achieved by applicants who sat the PAT ranged from 8% to 100% (omitting those with no marks) with a mean mark of 54.9% (49.6% in 2024, 55.6% in 2023, 51.2% in 2022) and a standard deviation of 17.8% (18.5% in 2024, 18.6% in 2023, 16% in 2022). More details are shown in the figure above. This year continued a pattern of recent years whereby of the top 100 applicants by PAT mark, only a small fraction had all their secondary schooling within the UK educational system (either state or independent sector).

The University also collates and quantifies contextual information around applicants' General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) results (when these are available), based on the ability to compare GCSE results between applicants from schools that are contextually 'similar'.

The principal determinant for shortlisting this year was the R-score. Pre-interview, this score is based on the PAT mark (out of 100), moderated based on the aforementioned contextual information (when available).

Our aim in the admissions process is to take the applicants whom we judge to have the most ability and potential to benefit from our course and teaching. Likewise, in the admissions process we are aiming to project applicants forward to how they are likely to perform on-course, not just compare the levels attained at age 17 or 18.

The 324 eligible applicants with R-scores equal or higher than 73.5% were automatically shortlisted for interview, with a further 55 applicants with slightly lower scores also automatically shortlisted after the inclusion of contextual data, giving a total of 379 automatically shortlisted applicants (378 in 2024, 400 in 2023, 307 in 2022). A further 89 applicants (147 in 2024, 190 in 2023, 164 in 2022) who were below the automatic thresholds but whose application forms showed other evidence of excellence and/or mitigating circumstances, including considerations of various levels of disruptions during the PAT, were also shortlisted.

A total of 468 applicants were therefore invited for (remote) interview this year. A key goal of the Oxford admissions process is that the probability of admission should not depend on the applicant's choice of college. Shortlisting is therefore followed by a reallocation process, in which applicants are transferred from first-choice colleges with large ratios of applicants per place to colleges with smaller ratios of applicants per place. This aims to ensure that, for each college, the ratio of interviewed first-choice applicants to places is as close as possible to the overall ratio. This year 90 applicants were reallocated to a different first-choice college at the time of shortlisting. Reallocation has been practised by the University for many years, ensuring that all strong applicants have the same chance of obtaining a place at Oxford, although possibly not at their first-choice college. Reallocation is not an indicator of the strength or weakness of an applicant; applicants with very high PAT scores can be reallocated.

Every shortlisted candidate has two interviews given by a first-choice college and one interview given by a randomly allocated second-choice college. Each interview is marked out of 10 based on the academic judgement of the interviewing tutors. The scale is such that a mark of 6 broadly corresponds to 'acceptable', 7 corresponds to 'good', and an average interview mark of 8 or higher will likely result in an offer. Approximately 1% of interviews are scored as '10'.

Applicants are assessed based on the totality of information about the applicant with no one interview, by itself, decisive. While most of the accepted applicants have three good interviews (at least as viewed by the interviewers), 71 accepted applicants had one interview which scored less than a 7, and 9 accepted applicants had one interview which scored below 6. It is very hard for applicants to assess their own interview performance and we know from conversations with accepted students that it is extremely common for applicants to think that interviews which have gone well – even very well – have gone badly. For applicants offered a place, the average interview mark this year was 7.95 (8.00 in 2024).

We would like to express our gratitude for the hard work of both applicants' parents (for applicants interviewing from home) and teachers and IT staff of applicants' schools (for those interviewing from school) for their work in facilitating the interviews and making appropriate spaces available.

After the interviews, the three interview marks are combined into a single score (out of 200). To guide admitting tutors, an overall ranking is produced based on a post-interview R-score. Post-interview, this score is based on the PAT mark (out of 100) and the three interview marks (out of 200), moderated based on the aforementioned contextual information (when available). This ranking is for guidance only; all applicants are assessed individually based on their R-scores, PAT scores, interview results, and all information in the UCAS form, including contextual information, and are then compared centrally against all applicants applying to Oxford Physics.

To ensure that the strongest applicants obtain places, all colleges have access to information on all applicants through a central database, and colleges are actively encouraged to flag up strong applicants they will be unable to offer a place to themselves. As a result, several

applicants were offered a place at a college that had not interviewed them at all, either as first or second college.

Ultimately, 201 offers were made for entry in 2026. These include 11 open offers, in which a college is not specified at the time of the offer. These are designed to cover the anticipated withdrawal rate of applicants who are made an offer and subsequently either decline the offer or fail to make the offer conditions. The offers also include 12 offers for Physics and Philosophy. A further 4 deferred offers were made for entry into Physics in 2027, and 1 deferred offer for entry into Physics and Philosophy in 2027.

Every year, there are applicants who are excellent physicists who we do not get a chance to see at interview. There are also applicants who we interview and would have liked to offer places to, but are unable to do so because of the finite capacity of the course. We know that every year we turn down applicants who, in the end, turn out to be stronger physicists than some of the applicants we do offer places to. We wish all applicants enjoyment and understanding in their future pursuits of physics.