



2020 Admissions Round Feedback

Theology & Religion / Philosophy & Theology

Please note this is subject admissions feedback from the 2020 selection round - there will be changes each year, and these pages are only retained to provide a general indication of process.

As usual, this was an exceptionally competitive year. Decisions were difficult, and taken with great care and thought. As in previous years, tutors across different colleges worked together to ensure that the best candidates were offered places regardless of the college to which they applied. All shortlisted candidates in Theology and Religion *and* Philosophy and Theology were interviewed by at least two 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. The principle behind this is to ensure that a candidate's choice of college does not impact their chances of a successful application. This is why a candidate who indicates that their first-choice college is Keble may end up being summoned for interview at another college. Shortlisting begins in early November and the official selection criteria for Oxford undergraduate courses can be found on the web at: <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/courses-listing/theology-and-religion?wssl=1>.

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.

Keble received 24 total first-choice applicants for Theology and Joint Schools: 7 first-choice applications for Theology and Religion and 17 first-choice applications for Philosophy and Theology. Decisions about deselection were 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, as well as considering all extenuating circumstances. Keble deselected 11 candidates in total before interview, and

after the reallocation process, we interviewed 13 first-choice candidates and 13 candidates from other colleges.

College tutors and the Faculty's Admissions Committee examined all applications thoroughly before shortlisting and interviews, including consideration of examination results and predictions, as well as 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, engagement with both Philosophy and Theology). Candidates whose test scores, written work marks, GCSE scores and A-level predictions or results were overall lower than average were among those we did not invite for interview.

Interviews

Interviews took place on between Monday 7th and Wednesday 9th, December 2020. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, all interviews took place online through Microsoft Teams. Thankfully, the technology worked smoothly in the case of all interviews. Interviews for both first and second college candidates in both Theology and Religion and Philosophy and Theology included a text-based exercise (for which all candidate were given twenty minutes of preparation time before the interview, with extra time allocated for those who declared through the College Office that it was needed) and broader discussion about the course, the nature of the discipline, the candidate's motivation for study, and questions arising from each candidate's application. 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. Candidates who applied for the joint school with Philosophy were automatically considered for a place in the single school, if they demonstrated greater strengths in Theology than in Philosophy.

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

This year we made two offers for Philosophy and Theology and five offers for Theology and Religion.

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.