**Applying for Cambridge:**

I researched which universities I wanted to go to by looking at league tables, especially the student satisfaction rating. I also visited lots of different universities, this was especially helpful for ruling out the places I definitely didn’t want to go to or would rank lower down on my options list. I also knew I didn’t want to go to a campus university or be too close to home as I want a new adventurous experience. These need to be places you would happily go to if you don’t get an Oxbridge offer.

Even if you put a lot of effort in, it is essentially a lottery as to whether you’re offered an interview and subsequently a place, so please to don’t attribute too much self-worth on their decision. You can be the worthiest candidate, just in a really strong pool of other applicants where they can only pick a few people. I think this is a really important factor to acknowledge.

This was something I took into consideration before applying. I decided to apply for Cambridge mostly as a challenge. I didn’t mind too much about the outcome, but I knew it meant I would have to push myself a bit further and get my application off sooner. The upside to this was that it wasn’t left hanging over me for the whole autumn term. It required more work but in the long run this benefitted my subject knowledge regardless of what Cambridge thought of me. Plus Politics and IR is something I’m really passionate about, so it’s hardly a chore.

I applied for Cambridge rather than Oxford due to the limited range of course options both universities offer. My main interest is in International Relations, but Oxford only have PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics) or History and Politics, neither of which totally suited my interests. Meanwhile Cambridge, although not a perfect match, offer HSPS (Human, Social and Political Science) which combines Politics and International Relations with Sociology and Social Anthropology. I thought this added breadth to the overall focus, and I would only have to take all four topics for the first year before I could specialise into just Politics and IR.

Despite being really prestigious universities, Oxbridge only have a limited course selection. Its super important to make sure the course totally suits you rather than you trying to suit the course for the sake of applying. If you end up doing a subject that bores you for three or four years, you won’t get the most out of the experience and it will become clear to interviewers that you’re not speaking about something you’re completely passionate and committed to. In this regard it becomes a wasted application.

My research into Colleges was not very detailed. On the Cambridge open day in July, I walked from the campus where I would spend most of my teaching time, into town. Via the route I took I passed about three colleges which I looked around and eventually settled on one of the larger ones, Queens’ College. This meant I struck a nice balance between the lecture locations and the centre of town although neither distance is very far. All of the Colleges are very beautiful, especially on a hot summer’s day, and often have similar facilities. I picked a slightly larger College as this meant my class size for my already small course would be slightly bigger. Eight students rather than four as at the alternative Colleges. However, had I been pooled and moved to another College, I would not have minded very much.

As it turns out, an added bonus of applying to Queens’ was that they didn’t have an admissions test for HSPS, I just had to submit two longer length essays in subjects most relevant to my course, that had already been marked by Bootham teachers. This reduced a lot of stress around applying. I also had the opportunity to write a small additional personal statement. This allowed me to add in information about my super curricular endeavours that were specific to the Cambridge course as this was different to what I had applied for elsewhere. In this I focused more on sociology and social anthropology as these didn’t come up in my original statement.

Over the summer between College One and Two, I had a lot of free time despite the heavy workload assigned by teachers. This gave me plenty of time to read lots of books, listen to podcasts and watch lots of documentaries. Find sources you really enjoy learning from as its important you have a pleasant experience that you can relay into your personal statement. Even passive sources such as listening to a podcast while you walk the dog or tidy your room add to your general knowledge. It’s a good idea to do this over the summer so that it can provide evidence of you interest in your personal statement. Universities just want to see that your interest is self-motivated rather than just doing the minimum teachers set. I really enjoy podcasts such as the Rest is Politics which I would recommend regardless of whether you like Politics or not. I also enjoyed reading books as it is a good start to my day in the holidays and I found it a nice balance between productivity and relaxation. It’s also a good idea to link lots of ideas together in your personal statement eg. reading one thing led you to watch this other thing. That shows dedication and true interest.

I learn about my interview with a relatively large amount of time to prepare. School kindly arranged about four mock interviews for me. Not only was this great practice but they provided excellent advice for me to carry forward. This meant that by the time I came to interview, I was familiar with the process and less nervous about being asked super random questions. I also reread my personal statements and the essays I had submitted in case they asked me about them. And then I brushed up on summaries of the books and videos I had watched so I was aware of some key concepts I could refer to in my answers. In the end they didn’t ask me at all about anything I had given them, we just had a conversation. At times it felt totally unrelated to Politics but that’s okay. Mostly they are testing how you think, especially on the spot, so be prepared for some super random questions. It is okay if you don’t know the answer or need time to think. Be honest when you don’t know, it looks much better than lying or ask for a few seconds. I tend to ramble when put on the spot, so I make a conscious effort to keep my answers concise, drawing on relevant evidence and examples when needed. I actually thought my interview had gone horribly wrong, but it wasn’t up to me to decide and clearly, they liked something they saw. Try not to worry about the outcome until it is released as I had to wait over a month to hear their decision so it’s best to just put it out of mind.

To summarise, my top tips would be:

1. Only apply if you know you love the course not just the idea of studying at Oxbridge, other universities are just as good.
2. Look into what the application process is for your course, this can vary between colleges.
3. It should feel fun to do the super curricular research, if not you might have the wrong course.
4. Brush up on everything before interview and be comfortable at answering completely random questions.
5. Don’t try to guess what their decision will be based on the interview. If they do reject you, don’t be too upset as its mostly a lottery.