



# ORIENTATION

A guide for new international  
students at Oxford

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# INTRODUCTION

On behalf of the Student Information team,  
welcome to Oxford.



Oxford is the world's oldest English-speaking university, and the third oldest university in the world. With such a history behind it, and the fact the University and colleges seem to take up most of the city, it can appear quite daunting upon first arrival. But don't worry. Things should soon become familiar – and we hope this Orientation Guide will help.

You might feel bombarded with information from multiple sources in your first few weeks – your college, your department, the University offices and various student groups may get in contact – but you will soon learn to filter what's important to you.

This booklet acts as a practical introduction, divided into two parts. The first part covers **Academic Essentials** and deals with aspects of **studying** at Oxford and will be the most practical part for you to read. The second part covers **Social Essentials** and guides you through how to make the most of University life outside research, lectures and essay-writing. This is a practical guide only. Rules and regulations for students are laid out in the Student Handbook, which it is important that you read.

If you would like to suggest any additions or changes to this booklet, we would really appreciate your feedback. You can reach us at [student.information@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.information@admin.ox.ac.uk). We'll also be happy to answer any queries you might have during your time in Oxford.

# ACADEMIC ESSENTIALS



## The University year

**The University year** consists of three terms and three vacations between them. Within each term there is a “Full Term” lasting eight weeks and this is when teaching and lectures take place. The vacation periods between Full Terms last six weeks, except for the summer vacation between one academic year and another, which lasts three and a half months and is referred to as the Long Vacation (or “Long Vac”).

The Oxford terms are:

**Michaelmas** (Autumn)

**Hilary** (Spring)

**Trinity** (Summer) – followed by the Long Vacation

Week 0 (or 0th Week) is the pre-term week, then Week 1/1st Week, Week 2/2nd Week, etc. The term structure is less important for graduate research students but during the vacation periods the libraries will have reduced opening hours and college accommodation may be unavailable.

Michaelmas, when most new students arrive and old students return, is a bustling and vibrant term. Hilary is a little quieter and Trinity is when the bulk of exams take place.



## The fascinating language of Oxford

It might seem that people at Oxford speak a different language entirely. History, tradition and no small degree of whimsy means there are many words, names, concepts and abbreviations that you won't find anywhere else. Do you know what Torpids are? Or the Isis? Might you meet a Bulldog, or one day go to a Gaudy? Don't worry – you can find most of our unique terms in the [Oxford Glossary](#) on the University homepage (respectively: college rowing races in Hilary term; the river Thames; a Proctor's Officer; a college party for alumni).

## Academic dress

One of the most visible quirks of Oxford is the clothing students are required to wear on certain formal occasions. Full academic dress is worn at University ceremonies (like [Matriculation](#), the ceremony where new students become members of the University, and Graduation) and also during exams (both written exams and vivas). It consists of the appropriate gown worn over **sub fusc** (another strange Oxford expression – it means, roughly, dark clothes with a white blouse or shirt). Gowns and sub fusc can appear bewildering at first, but there is [a useful guide on the University website](#), which also lists places in Oxford where gowns can be purchased (it is also sometimes possible to obtain second-hand gowns from your college lodge or from other students).

## Handbooks

There are many rules and regulations for students at Oxford. The best and quickest way to get a grounding in the ones that will affect you is to read the handbooks prepared by the University and the individual departments.

You will probably have already received your course handbook by now – **this will be a very important document and you should read it through as well as print or bookmark it online**. Your handbook will outline the structure of your course and note its relevant milestones.

The various [undergraduate course handbooks](#) and [graduate course handbooks](#) can be found on the Oxford Students website. Some of these handbooks, depending on the department that created them, will be need to be accessed using your SSO (Single Sign On).

You should also read the current [University Student Handbook](#) (formerly known as the "Proctors' and Assessors' Memorandum") – **new students are obliged to read this document** and it is updated for the beginning of each academic year.



## College and University

(Note: for information on the social aspects of college life please see the “College life – JCRs and MCRs” segment in the Social Essentials section below).

One of the main differences about Oxford is the collegiate system – as well as being part of the University and your department, you will also have a college affiliation (though if you are a graduate student you will have less to do with your college than an undergraduate). Most students at Oxford have full academic membership of a college, except for **Recognised Students** and students on certain shorter courses.

For undergraduates your main points of contact in college will be your tutor and (for administrative purposes and for more technical, non-academic advice) the college’s Senior Tutor and Academic Administrator. You will interact quite a lot with your tutor and quickly become familiar with them, but get to know who your Senior Tutor and Academic Administrator are – they will be listed, with contact details, on your college website (every college will also have a graduate assistant or support officer, though the title may vary). Your college may even have a nurse or employ their own counsellor (if not, they will guide you towards the **Counselling Service**). They will also have an existing relationship with a medical service in Oxford and you will be able to register with a GP there.

As a member of a college you will be entitled to eat in college during term-time and will have access to college computers and other IT resources as well as the college library (usually open 24 hours in term-time). There will likely be book grants offered by the college for undergraduates and **hardship funding** available in cases of financial difficulty. There will be other awards and prizes available too, and these will vary from college to college.

Your college will be responsible for your education as an undergraduate, but it is the University that is responsible for your assessment and will (if you satisfy the examiners!) award your degree.



## A note for graduate research students

If you are a graduate student, particularly a graduate research student, your experience and routine will be very different than that of undergraduates. You will generally have a lot more flexibility, be much more responsible for setting your own pace and will have a closer relationship with your department than you do with your college. You should get to know who your **relevant support officers** are at a divisional and departmental level – they will be able to help you with admin and queries related to your course.

Your supervisor will make termly reports on your progress via **GSR (Graduate Supervision Reporting)** and you will have the option of adding your own notes or comments via GSR too (this is mandatory for students in the MPLS division).

## Libraries

Regardless of which course you're on, you're going to spend a substantial amount of time in the libraries of Oxford (collectively known as the Bodleian Libraries) – there is a useful introduction on how to use these on the **Bodleian website**. If you have a college affiliation you will be able to use your college library – although small, and with limited stock, they have the great advantage of being accessible 24 hours a day for members of the college during full term.

Desks at these libraries can become scarce in Trinity term at the height of exam season as the seats are taken up by revising students so do be aware of this.

You can look up items from the library catalogues and request books from the Bodleian's legal deposit (the Bodleian receives a copy of every book published in the UK), renew physical book loans and find online journals using **SOLO (Search Oxford Libraries Online)**. The basic catalogue search is open to anyone but to have full access (to request books etc.) you will have to log in using your SSO (Single Sign On).



### Library induction dates

have already been arranged for new undergraduate or visiting students starting in Michaelmas term – for graduate students or students arriving in other terms please contact your college (or your department if you do not have full academic membership of a college) to ask if they have any inductions planned.

## Lectures and seminars



Unlike many other UK universities, attendance of lectures and seminars at Oxford is not monitored – in most cases students are expected to decide which lectures they want to go to and to devise their own weekly schedules and routines. Every department will have its own lecture list each term and you should check yours online regularly as changes do happen from time to time.

The lecture lists for each department can be reached via an A-Z listing on the [Oxford](#)

[Students website](#) – some are publically accessible but others will require you to log in using your SSO (Single Sign On). Students are encouraged to spread their wings and attend lectures not immediately related to their specific course should they desire to do so – lectures will generally be open to all University members unless the listing in the lecture list specifically indicates that this is not the case (which is rare, but may apply in specialist seminars where attendees are expected to contribute to the discussion for example).

## Student Self Service

[Student Self Service](#) is the online facility where you will perform your Registration at Oxford at the beginning of each year of study (for first year students this online Registration must also be complemented by your college registering you, or your department if you do not have a college. Recognised Students have this done for them by Student Information at the Exam Schools).

Student Self Service is also where you can update your contact details as and when they change. It is very important to keep these up to date, particularly if you are living in private accommodation – every term the University sends a list of enrolled students and their Oxford addresses to the local council. If you are living in an address that isn't on the Oxford record you may end up having to pay [council tax](#), for which students are usually exempt. You can [apply for council tax exemption using the council website](#).

If your course requires it, you will also make your [Examination Entries](#) on Student Self Service. You will be sent an e-mail notification when any relevant entry window for your course opens.

When the time comes, Student Self Service will also be where you book your [Graduation ceremony](#) date.

There is a short guide to Student Self Service on the [Oxford Students website](#), but if you need more detail, a much more [comprehensive manual](#) is also available. If you encounter any technical difficulties with Student Self Service, please contact our colleagues at [student.systems@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.systems@admin.ox.ac.uk) for assistance. If you are receiving an error code or message please include a screenshot of it in your communication.



# OXFORD STUDENT UNION AND OTHER RESOURCES



## Oxford SU

**Oxford SU (Oxford Student Union)** was created to defend students' rights, represent the student body in the University's decision making process and provide services and advice to students. Unless you deliberately opt out via Student Self Service, if you are a matriculated student you will automatically be a member of Oxford SU and able to attend general meetings, vote in referenda and elections, and run for office within the Union. Oxford SU manages **Freshers' Fair** at the start of every academic year and also provides an **advice service** for students during term-time whilst organising events for students who stay in Oxford over the vacation periods when many other students are away.

## Useful welfare links and resources for current students

**There are several services available** to provide help to you and offer opportunities during your time at the University. As well as advice and support from your college or department, here are some other resources that you should know about and make full use of if needed:

**Careers Service:** Oxford's Careers Service can provide you with expert and tailored support with your career goals. As well as offering a comprehensive skill-building programme they offer hundreds of internships in over 40 countries and advertise thousands of job opportunities on their own CareersConnect website.

**Childcare Services:** The University is proud to be able to offer a comprehensive range of high quality childcare at affordable prices. It works closely with various professional bodies to continue to develop and enhance its provision.

**Counselling Service:** The Counselling Service is here to help you gain understanding and in-sight into any difficulties you may be experiencing, to develop emotional resilience and put into effect real change, enabling you to fulfil your academic and personal potential. The Service offers free and confidential support, but it is not an emergency service.



**Disability Advisory Service:** The Disability Advisory Service provides information and advice on disability issues and facilitates support for those with, for example, sensory or mobility impairments, long-term health conditions, specific learning difficulties, autistic spectrum conditions or mental health difficulties.

**Equality and Diversity:** The University of Oxford is committed to fostering an inclusive culture which promotes equality, values diversity and maintains a working, learning and social environment in which the rights and dignity of all its staff and students are respected.

**IT Learning Centre:** The IT Learning Centre is a focus for IT training activities and runs courses and workshops open to all University members.

**Language Centre:** The Language Centre is the University's hub for all students who want to improve their language skills. They offer teaching across 12 modern languages and Academic English – from intensive short courses to in-depth three-term programmes, and from daytime to evening to suit your schedule. If English isn't your first language, their Academic English courses can help you improve your written and spoken communication, building your skills and increasing your confidence.

**Oxford SU Student Advice:** Student Advice is the only independent advice and information service exclusively available to Oxford University Students.

**Oxford Nightline:** Oxford Nightline is a completely independent listening, support and information service run for and by students of Oxford and Oxford Brookes universities. They aim to provide every student in Oxford with the opportunity to talk to someone in confidence from 8pm–8am, 0th week to 9th week during Oxford term time.

**Student Immigration:** If you are an International Student who needs a visa to study in the UK you may have already been in contact with the team. They can support you during your course with advice about working during your studies, options to work after studies and advice on extending your visa or other matters concerning your visa conditions.

**The Sexual Harassment and Violence Support Service:** The University takes a zero tolerance approach to sexual harassment and violence. The Sexual Harassment and Violence Support Service provides a safe place for students be heard – independent of their college or department. It offers free support and advice to any student who has been affected by sexual harassment or violence.

# SOCIAL ESSENTIALS

## College life – JCRs and MCRs

If you have a college affiliation, one of your major social hubs will be the college **JCR** (Junior Common Room; for undergraduates) or the **MCR** (Middle Common Room; for graduates). The facilities will vary from college to college but will usually include sofas, a TV, coffee and tea-making facilities (in some colleges the JCR also has a small café or the bar and JCR are combined). The JCR and MCR, as well as being actual rooms, are also the names given to the undergraduate and graduate student bodies of a college and there is an elected committee of students in each who represent the students' views to the college authorities and organise social events. Find out who your JCR/MCR representatives are.

## Affiliate/associate membership of a college

If your course does not have automatic academic affiliation with a college you might like to obtain temporary membership of a JCR/MCR (this is sometimes referred to as associate or affiliate membership). This will entitle you to access to the college JCR/MCR and possibly – depending on the college – access to the college library and dining facilities. The procedure, entitlements and costs will vary from college to college – in some colleges you have to be nominated by one or more existing JCR/MCR members first. Please be advised that not every college offers this facility, and some that do may only grant it to people who have some kind of pre-existing connection to the college.

## Visiting other colleges and libraries



As a University cardholder you will be able to visit and explore other colleges too (at the colleges' discretion of course – after dark or during interview season you may not be allowed). The buildings and gardens are often very beautiful and certainly worth exploring – most colleges will also allow you to bring guests without the usual admission fees, though some colleges restrict the number of guests you can bring at any one time (Magdalen will only allow non-members to bring one guest per visit for

example, Christ Church will allow two). Many college grounds are particularly extensive and well worth a wander in good weather.

Many of the libraries at Oxford are very beautiful and worth exploring – even if they are unrelated to your course. **The Radcliffe Camera** and **Duke Humfrey's** (located in the Old Bodleian) are perhaps the most stunning and a valid University card will give you automatic access to these buildings. But unlike colleges you won't be able to take guests with you, unless prior permission has been granted by the librarian.



## Clubs and Societies

There are over 400 student clubs and societies at Oxford for almost every hobby, sport or interest you can think of – [an A-Z register of them can be found on the Oxford Students website](#) with contact details for the club presidents. Whether you'd like to take up rock climbing, act in a student-run theatre production, refine your origami skills, or play board games, there will be a club for you (and, if not, you can create one). The clubs also have their own social events each term and are a great way to meet students from other colleges. Some charge a fee that can be paid in termly, annual or lifetime rates and this amount will vary from club to club, depending on the expenses involved. The clubs will have stalls with representatives looking for new members at Freshers' Fair every 0th Week in Michaelmas term but they will welcome new members at any time of the academic year.

## Sports at Oxford



Many colleges will have their own sports facilities which may include playing fields, gyms, and boathouses. These will generally only be available for use by members of the college but there are also facilities available to all University members – there are [83 student sport clubs](#) that you can join and the [Oxford University Sport complex on Iffley Road](#) offers a swimming pool, gym, sports hall, racket sport courts and more (you can also run on the track where Sir Roger Bannister broke the four-minute mile in 1954).

## The University Club

The [University Club](#) on Mansfield Road is a social hub for graduate students (including Recognised Students) as well as University staff and alumni. In addition to a small gym and sports facilities for members, it offers a bar and café. Membership is free – you just have to [sign up on the Club website](#) and your membership is processed, you will be able to gain access to the Club building by swiping your University card. Undergraduate visitors are welcome as the guests of members.



## Botanic Garden

The University maintains the beautiful **Botanic Garden** by Magdalen Bridge. Entry for Oxford students is free (you'll need to show your University card to avoid the entrance fee) and there is a pop-up café in the garden between April and September. Less crowded than the walks in neighbouring Christ Church Meadow, the Garden is an ideal place to escape from the city for a while or to stretch your legs between stints at the library. There are fantastic greenhouses too.

## Volunteering



Want to contribute something else to the local or national community and add something interesting to your CV? The **Oxford Hub** is a student-run volunteering group that run multiple projects across the city and University. Previous projects have ranged from teaching primary school children, making ethical food accessible, helping the community to get more active, and spending time with the elderly.

Oxford SU also have volunteering opportunities available in **Oxford Raise and Give (Oxford RAG)**, their student-led fundraising organisation. The charities supported by Oxford RAG are selected each year by student vote in Hilary term.

## Performing at Oxford

Oxford has a rich tradition of (and resources for) student performance and some colleges have their own theatres or music rooms. There are many University drama groups but the most well-known is the **OUDS (Oxford University Dramatic Society)** which has performed plays in Oxford since 1885 whilst the **Oxford Imps** and the **Oxford Revue** perform improvised comedy and sketches/stand-up respectively. More information about these groups and others, including film-making groups, can be found here.

For student music groups you can join the **OUMS (Oxford University Music Society)** which has been active since 1872 and is for both performers and concert-goers. Most colleges will have their own choirs and music groups too.



## Student journalism and campaigning



There are several student run newspapers, magazines, and websites if you'd like to get involved in journalism– including [the Cherwell](#) and the [Oxford Student](#) (both published weekly in term-time) and the termly [Isis Magazine](#). There is also a student-run internet radio station called [Oxide](#). More information about Oxford radio and journalism can be found on the [Undergraduate Admissions website](#).

If you want to get involved in [student campaigning](#) at Oxford there are also many opportunities via Oxford SU who run several campaigns, including the LGBTQ Campaign, the International Students Campaign and the

Campaign for Racial Awareness and Equality (CRAE). [A full list of the Union's active campaigns can be found on the Oxford SU website](#).

## Peculiar Oxford traditions – May Morning and the Tortoise Fair



There are many distinctively “Oxford” events throughout the year that will surprise but hopefully delight newcomers.

The most famous of these is May Morning. Every year at 6am on the 1st of May the choristers of Magdalen College climb the tower overlooking Magdalen Bridge to sing hymns to the rising sun of May Day. It's a tradition going back centuries in Oxford and huge crowds gather on the bridge or along the High Street to hear them – some rise incredibly early whilst others have been up through the night. After the singing is done the crowds cheer and make their way into town where the cafés and

pubs open especially early and there is music and dancing in the streets. It's a remarkable experience and a highlight for many students.

Another odd but wonderful Oxford tradition is the annual Corpus Tortoise Fair which takes place every year in late May or early June at Corpus Christi College. Some Oxford colleges have a college tortoise and each year they have a tortoise race (honestly, they really do). The charming but slow race becomes the occasion for a fair to be set up on the lawn of Corpus, which includes music and games with stalls serving food and drink.





## Discounts and offers

Outside the University, many facilities and businesses in and around the city offer special discounts for students. All the cinemas and theatres offer special prices for students, and all the musical events at the [Sheldonian Theatre](#), [Holywell Music Room](#) or in the colleges will have reduced prices for students (keep an eye on the poster boards propped up between Exeter College and the Sheldonian Theatre on Broad Street for an idea of what's going on).

The two bus services between Oxford and London (the [X90](#) and the [Oxford Tube](#)) also offer reduced prices for students. London is very close to Oxford by bus, making it easy to explore.

You can also [climb to the top of the medieval tower of St Mary's](#) on the High Street at a reduced rate if you show your University card. You will be rewarded with the best view of Oxford and the surrounding countryside, but it's not advised if you're uneasy with heights or suffer from claustrophobia (the 127-step spiral staircase dates from the 13th century and is very narrow). An easier climb and a lower but still very impressive (and 360 degree) view can be obtained from the top of the [Sheldonian Theatre](#) (where student discount with a University card also applies).

If in doubt, don't be afraid to ask if a student discount is available at a particular shop, café, venue or business. Many offer this all year round – [Boswell's department store](#) on the corner of Broad Street and Cornmarket, or the [Robert Dyas hardware store](#) on Shoe Lane (both good places to shop for household essentials) offer 10% off for example. Though in many cases, you'll have to [sign up with UNiDAYS](#) first. UNiDAYS is a website/group that accumulates and curates offers for students all over the UK.

# CHECKLIST FOR YOUR FIRST FEW WEEKS HERE

## Immigration (if applicable)

- Make sure your college scans your Tier 4 visa if you have one and passport ID page
- Register with the Police within 7 days (if noted on your visa)
- Understand the types of employment and hours you are permitted to do on your visa
- Make a note to start the process for renewing your visa two months before it expires
- Plan to apply for a Schengen visa for European travel three months before needing it

## Academic

- Initiate the registration process by [verifying your details on Student Self Service](#)
- Visit your college (or department, if applicable) to complete University registration
- Get to know who your college and department contacts are
- Book a class at the Language Centre (do so early as classes fill up quickly)
- Buy or hire your academic gown and mortar board if required
- Print an enrolment certificate from Student Self Service in case you need it for Council Tax (if this is required), to register with the police (if applicable), or to open a bank account

## Finance

- Research ways to transfer money between the UK and your home country
- [Set up a UK bank account](#) if required
- Plan your budget for the next 12 months and plan for currency fluctuations
- Buy a TV licence if necessary

## Health and safety

- Register with the College doctor or with the medical practice closest to where you live
- Research insurance options for your belongings and for travelling outside the UK
- Make a list of emergency contact numbers
- Read the [British Council's safety guide](#)

# CHECKLIST FOR YOUR CONTACTS

These are some of the main people you should get to know and get contact details for in your college or department/division:

## Undergraduate College Contacts:

- Personal Tutor
- Academic Administrator
- Senior Tutor
- JCR President and Committee
- Welfare team (students and staff)

## Undergraduate Department Contacts:

- Undergraduate Studies Assistant
- JCC (Joint Consultative Committee)

## Graduate College Contacts:

- College Advisor
- Academic Administrator
- Tutor for Graduates
- MCR President and Committee
- Welfare team (students and staff)

## Graduate Department Contacts:

- Supervisor
- Course Director
- Director of Graduate Studies
- JCC (Joint Consultative Committee)



# THAT'S ALL FOR NOW

We hope you enjoy your time at Oxford. Don't forget, if you get lost you can always contact us at Student Information – you can e-mail us at [student.information@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.information@admin.ox.ac.uk) or telephone 01865 276903. We're based at the Examination Schools on the High Street and maintain an information desk in the Great Hall there where you're very welcome to call in and ask us anything you like. The desk, telephone line and e-mail address are staffed or monitored between 8.30am and 5.00pm from Monday to Friday.







