

Applying to Cambridge

A Mentor's Perspective

CASE STUDY



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Through the Eyes of a Mentor

Early start off

Nora came to Upgrade early on and we started working together on her application. She already knew she wanted to study at Cambridge, but we also compiled a list of backup universities that would be suitable for her. She had chosen Cambridge because it gave her the chance to combine her mathematical mindset with her passion for Astrophysics. Her choice was indeed fitting, as Nora would always come prepared to our meetings showing that she is an independent learner. After some guided research, Nora also found the college she wanted to apply to: one where the Mathematics professors were also involved in Astrophysics research endeavours.

Personalised timeline

Now that clear objectives were set, we put a plan in place with everything that needed to be done for the UCAS application. The process we follow at Upgrade is methodical, leaving no room for errors. This gives our students a clear overview of their tasks for each meeting and it diminishes the anxiety of the application process.

The most important part of the UCAS application was writing and perfecting the Personal Statement. Within this essay, Nora needed to highlight all of her academic endeavours and show her scientific curiosity to the admissions committee. Since she is much more than an exceptional student, having interests beyond mathematics competitions, Nora had a good basis for her storytelling.

One common misconception is that Olympiads and academic competitions are the strengths of a good application in the UK.

Although they help boost a student's profile, these achievements are far from being the most important element of an application. Instead, a curious mind, a positive attitude and open-mindedness are far more valuable. The Oxbridge admission committee is looking for students that are excellent in their academic career, highly engaged in the subject they are applying for and well able to contribute during class discussions.



Writing like a scholar

Working together on the Personal Statement, I helped Nora compress her experience and write a coherent story. In her first draft, she was writing about how she prepared for academic competitions with an emphasis on the technical astrophysics details. As the essay evolved through several iterations, the story began to take shape, leaving behind the listing of competitions Nora attended and won prizes in. Nora's research work came into focus, making her less of a student that attends Olympiads, and more of a self-made scholar.

How to nail your interview

The last step of her application was the interview. Oxford, Cambridge and Imperial are all universities that base their final selection of students on in-person interviews. Being interviewed is a tough experience: the student has to solve university-level mathematics problems in front of two university professors. The student is expected to explain their reasoning as they are solving the problems and not use a calculator for the entirety of the interview.

At first, every interviewee experiences some level of shock. I remember when I had my interview I was nervous and expecting a very formal talk with professors who would ask me questions like 'Where do you see yourself in five years?'. Luckily the questions were strictly technical and problem-solving.



When Nora went through this process, I was able to help her in her approach to the problems, by showing her how to verbalise her reasoning and by giving her plenty of practice. By the time she reached Cambridge, Nora had had three mock interviews in addition to five prep sessions and was able to stay calmer than she would have with no preparation.



Nora's Stats

GPA	9.68
Romanian Bacalaureate	9.86
STEP 3	S
IELTS	7.5



If you are passionate about what you do, you won't think it's too much work.

Nora Gavrea

After the incredible achievement of being accepted and having studied at Cambridge for a year now, Nora still remains humble and attributes her success to the guidance of her mentor and the passion that drives her.



Finally, what set Nora apart from the rest of the Cambridge applicants was not her GPA, nor her medals, but her passion, curiosity and independent learning which she persuasively presented in her Personal Statement. These are the building blocks for a Cambridge student that will spend three career-formative years surrounded by elite students from around the globe.

Nora doesn't fit in the box of the overachiever. She is not defined solely by her Olympiads. Nora is a problem-solver, a curious soul with a very upbeat and friendly attitude. Her perseverance, even in the slow-moving face of scientific research, makes her the perfect candidate for three years of sustained effort in a top university.

What makes Nora a Cambridge-worthy student?

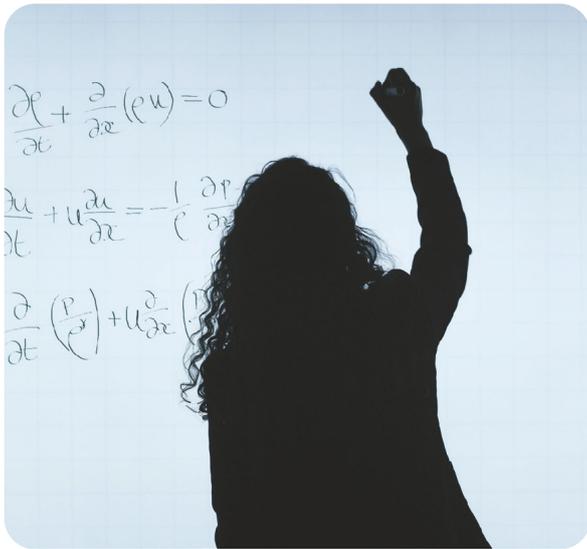
Although Nora was awarded bronze medals in the Astrophysics Olympiad and silver for the Mathematics Olympiad, she doesn't fit the International Mathematics Olympian stereotype. She is a passionate student who enjoys reading both fiction and non-fiction and has practised karate since she was 7.

Despite being a high achiever in school, Nora's academic accomplishments are not what made her the best fit for Cambridge. She is, first of all, a curious person with a strong will and immense dedication to her chosen subject. Her resilience and passion led her to take part in a research project conducted by the head of the Cosmology department from the Institute of Space Science, Department of Cosmology and Astroparticle Physics, in Magurele.

Nora used her research abilities and scientific inclinations in mathematics as well: she published an article in a Mathematics magazine where she developed a generalisation on a property of triangles. Her insightful and innovative theorem proved that Nora has the intellect that would make her an ideal candidate for Cambridge.



Following Her Passion Across Borders



This passion could have taken her anywhere, but Nora set her heart on the UK as her study destination.

Cambridge was the obvious choice when Nora realised that it would be the perfect place to merge her passion for Astrophysics with her Mathematical abilities. No other university had a program that would combine these two naturally related subjects this well. Every mathematical component of the program would find its corresponding element in astrophysics, and the staff and students there would be just as involved in Nora's interests.

She decided that Mathematics and Astrophysics would be her academic path, but staying in Romania was not an option for Nora and her aspirations.

Back home she would have had to choose between the two subjects that were so easily combined in a degree in the UK. She could have either studied Physics with the opportunity to specialise in Astrophysics only after she graduated, or she could have studied Mathematics, straying away from Cosmology.

Nora's Postgraduate opportunities would have been even scarcer as Romania has only one well-funded Astrophysics research centre at Magurele. Neither option was fitting for this eager student who could not let go of either passion. In the end, Cambridge was a perfect choice, even if the journey was difficult.



Interviewing for Cambridge

After crafting a standout Personal Statement, Nora was invited to the next round of admissions: the interview.

This was the big step, the one that separates potential accepted students from those who only look good on paper. On average, only 1 out of 3 students who reach this stage will receive a conditional offer to study at a top UK university.

In multiple 40-minute interviews, Nora had to discuss and solve mathematical problems in front of Cambridge professors, who would ask her to explain her thought process.

The unique nature of the interview, which was vastly different from any exam Nora had prepared for before, was cause for more particular training. Her mentor guided Nora through 3 mock interviews with Oxbridge alumni mentors.



Before going to the interview I was thinking that I'm just a high schooler and I will meet and talk to university professors. Who knows what kind of problems they will give me and what questions they'll ask'.

Nora and Ion would go over the recordings of the mock interviews together. She would get insight into how to remain calm under pressure, learn strategies to handle the possibility of making a mistake during the interview and be given additional training on the specific type of math problems she would receive.

But the most important part was that Nora was not alone in this process. She had someone who had been through the same interviews, who understood her and the pressure she was faced with. She could ask Ion all of her questions and she could rely on him during this stressful time in her academic career.

After the prep, she was able to see that the professors aren't looking for the student to give all the right answers, or to not make a single mistake during the interview, but rather they expect the student to be able to recognise their mistakes, reassess their method and remain focused.



Nora Advice to the Younger Generation

When asked about the advice she holds for future Cambridge applicants, Nora gives a very precise and calculated message:

“

If this is truly what you want, then never give up. Keep on working towards your goal no matter what comes your way. Those obstacles are only there to make you stronger.

As she begins her second year of studies at Cambridge, Nora does not regret any of her choices, from applying to Cambridge to working with Upgrade Academy Global. She feels grateful to have met Ion, her mentor who she still keeps in touch with.

Who We Are

Upgrade Academy is a mentorship service that offers admission support for secondary school students. We have helped our students gain acceptance to the best universities in the world by offering them individualised coaching plans and comprehensive guidance from inspiring mentors.



What We Do

After our initial discussion, when we get to understand your goals as well as your current academic situation, our mentors create a long-term personalized plan, specifically suited to your particular needs, so that you maximise your chances of admission to your dream universities. Each application prep plan starts ASAP, from the point you are at NOW in your high school career and ends at the end of high school when you have all your results and are ready to leave for college.

Learn from the people who actually studied there. We are alumni from top US and UK universities including but not limited to Harvard, Cambridge, Oxford and Yale.

How Does Upgrade Academy Help You?



Decide on a Dream

We help you in choosing your field of study, the right schools and university programs.



Essays Support

Write unforgettable essays that truly convey who you are. Together we brainstorm ideas, create a structure and iterate through multiple drafts.



Academic Development

Gain proficiency in the field you are going to study in university.



Interview Prep

Mock interviews, advice and feedback from people who have been through these interviews themselves.



Extracurricular Development

Create your own projects with a real impact on society.



General Application Support

Clear application timelines, advice on financials and constant communication with students and parents.

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