

## ACADEMIC INFORMATION FOR NEW UNDERGRADUATES

This briefing document provides some useful information to help you settle into academic life at Brasenose and also sets out some important aspects of the academic relationship between undergraduates and the College. Although the guidelines are not comprehensive, they include references to other more detailed sources of information – particularly the Student Handbook (or ‘Blue Book’). Undergraduates have indicated that they appreciate guidance explaining what they might expect as Oxford students. If you have any queries or wish to suggest improvements for future versions of this document, you are most welcome to contact either myself ([simon.smith@bnc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:simon.smith@bnc.ox.ac.uk)) or the JCR’s Vice-President (Academic & Careers), Elena Dahan-Reljich ([jcr-vp-academic@bnc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:jcr-vp-academic@bnc.ox.ac.uk)).

### Settling into Brasenose

Brasenose strives to be a welcoming and supportive College and alongside its reputation for academic achievement is highly regarded for the range and quality of its social, cultural, and sporting activities.

Where possible students are encouraged to give back to the community by organising/participating in societies and events. Many undergraduates engage with other students across the Collegiate University to produce plays, music, and art or to engage in political debate, voluntary work, and numerous other pursuits. Whatever your interests, you will discover many opportunities to get involved in extra-curricular activities.

While students benefit from Brasenose’s friendly community, the College’s primary aim is to further education and learning. Your own rationale in joining Brasenose is similarly to pursue degree-level study and the Tutors’ offer of a place similarly reflected your academic potential. The College and University offer opportunities, guidance, and motivation to help turn potential into achievement. Last year’s Freshers group settled just as well as their predecessors and collectively made excellent progress. Transitioning from school to University may feel daunting but you should feel encouraged and reassured by the knowledge that, only a year ago, the students greeting you on arrival were in exactly the same position. While a portion of this document provides advice should the first year throw up challenges, it must be emphasised that the issues flagged here are also encountered at all Universities as well as the Oxford colleges.

After confirmation of places in August, the Tutors send out some suggested reading for you to complete in September. Every Fresher has a small academic allowance (currently £50). You can draw on this on arrival to meet some of the cost of books or other study materials. You will receive this money as a credit to your batels (College bill) in Michaelmas Term, and do not need to provide receipts.

None of the Tutors expect you to spend all of your time at Brasenose working. Learning at Oxford is, however, cumulative and it is important to avoid falling behind and to ensure that your motivation remains strong. Making up ground becomes more difficult as the degree develops and

it is better to maintain commitment to your studies, rather than finding yourself in the position of having to recover ground.

The degree courses will stretch you and the effort needed to complete assignments and prepare for examinations should not be under-estimated. Many students, particularly early in their University careers, make changes to their previous lifestyles resulting in less structured waking/sleeping routines and more unbalanced patterns of working and leisure. Sometimes altered patterns of behaviour are a result of nervousness about starting University, and are motivated by a desire to 'fit in' and gain peer acceptance. This can lead over time to problems such as procrastination over starting assessments, pressure to meet deadlines, insomnia, and in a small number of cases symptoms of burnout. It is better to make more modest and gradual changes and to aim for a more sustainable work/leisure balance. The other students arriving at Brasenose are very similar to you in terms of ability and lifestyle, with a wide range of personality types. There is no need to strive to impress others or to try and be anything other than yourself in the first few weeks.

In recent years, the College has upgraded facilities on the main site for study, including a new downstairs reading room in "Old Cloisters" called the Smith Reading Room. The main Libraries upstairs have also been refurbished and in 2019 we completed the enlargement of the principal Lecture Room (the "Amersi Room"). Where possible, you are encouraged to get into the habit of working in a suitable study environment, either in Brasenose or the Bodleian or one of the other nearby libraries. Separating study space from personal space can help ensure that the time you devote to work is productive. If you work in your College room, it is important that you are able to relax before sleep. Turning off devices well in advance of trying to sleep can help considerably with this.

There are plenty of social spaces in Brasenose in which to get to know your year group. These include the JCR, Hall (most students have breakfast, lunch, and supper there daily), as well as the Bar area. The weather in October is also typically good enough to stop and chat outdoors in the Quads, particularly New Quad. Try to make some time in your daily schedules to meet fellow-students in these social spaces. If you see somebody who seems to be on their own, say hello! Don't be embarrassed if you forget someone's name or have to ask for a reminder more than once. It is a good idea to carry on with a major leisure interest you enjoyed at school by joining a College and/or a University club or society. There is also plenty of scope to try something new. At different times of the year, there are also opportunities for volunteering or paid work for the College which is another good way of meeting different groups of students. The JCR likewise organise a range of events throughout the year either free of charge or at subsidised rates.

### **Balancing Study with Other Activities**

Prior to joining Brasenose and registering for your course at the University, you are asked to complete two contracts (available via the Freshers' website, [freshers.bnc.ox.ac.uk](https://freshers.bnc.ox.ac.uk)). These agreements set out formally the nature of the relationship between undergraduates and the College and University. I would like to summarise what lies at the core of these documents (and in the related Student Handbook) by stating what the College expects from you academically and what support you can expect in return from us.

To help you relax and enjoy life when you are not studying for your degree (and to encourage you to develop new interests or to further existing ones), the College actively supports provision of social, cultural, sporting and other recreational activities. While Brasenose wishes to help all its students fulfil their potential, should you operate outside of what are reasonable boundaries it is important to be aware of the potential consequences. Details of the academic disciplinary code are set out in the Student Handbook. In order of seriousness, the College can issue a Tutors' Warning, Academic Warning, and (after Academic Review) set Penal Collections and/or attach Probationary Conditions to your continuation as a student. If you are subject to academic discipline, the reasons for this will be explained and a pathway will be set out to help you return to good academic standing. For guidance, roughly 1 in 20 students receive a formal warning at some stage of their degree studies. The great majority of students receiving warnings get back on track and suspensions or terminations of study are rare. You should be aware, however, that the ultimate sanction for repeatedly breaching the code after fair warning is termination of your studies at Oxford.

Brasenose expects all of the students it admits to perform at a level that reflects their ability and, therefore, to remain in good academic standing. The essential boundaries for undergraduates are as follows:

- You are expected to keep appointments with Fellows, Tutors, and College Officers and to respond promptly to all communications.
- You are required to attend punctually all scheduled College tutorials and all College and University classes, seminars, lectures, or practicals required by your Tutors (whether online or in-person) unless granted formal permission to be absent.
- You are expected to complete all course work by the agreed deadline to a standard reflecting your ability and personal circumstances. A majority of students discover that they can produce work of 2:1 quality with a reasonable work/leisure balance. Around forty percent of students find that first-class performances are within their compass. A few students operate at a different level to this. Your Tutors will discuss your performances with you as the degree develops and will offer appropriate guidance. You should be reassured that the College will never ask you to work at an unrealistic level – you are only expected to work at a standard that reflects your ability and to abide by the expectations set out above.
- College and University regulations require you to pass College Collections (if the Tutors attach a pass mark to these examinations) and all University Examinations at the first or, in exceptional circumstances, the second attempt - depending on the relevant regulations. It is particularly important to pass the First Public Examination (also known as Prelims or Mods) since this is a requirement of continued membership of College. Later in your degree there may be other progression thresholds, for example to continue into the fourth year if your course is an integrated Masters. The pass mark of a University or Public examination is usually set well below the level of a 2.1 but in most cases students are required to pass all papers at either a first or second attempt. College Collections provide essential experience in sitting University Examinations and should, therefore, be taken seriously. Some Tutors set a formal pass mark in particular College Collections and you should make sure you understand what the expectations are when preparing for these examinations, bearing in mind that a series of fail marks can result in the issue of a formal warning.

The College will arrange teaching provision appropriate for your programme of studies. You can, therefore, expect to receive regular guidance and formative feedback throughout your degree. Your Tutors should also issue guidance over when you can expect to receive feedback on written work and what form this will take during normal circumstances. If you submit an incomplete assignment or hand in work late, however, normal circumstances no longer apply and the Tutor will exercise his or her discretion over accepting and returning a written exercise.

The amount of time spent working will vary among students at different times of the year. The University has issued some general guidance to undergraduates, which is as follows. If you find that you are consistently working in excess of 48 hours a week and struggling to keep on top of your degree, you should seek advice to help ensure your workload remains sustainable. Either one of the Tutors or the College Counsellor, Sub Dean or Chaplain would be good choices to approach. Guidance is available to help students work more effectively should it be needed.

It is a common myth that Oxford prohibits students from paid part-time working during Term time. There is no such restriction and in fact a number of students work for the College for a few hours a week. As stated above, you are not expected to spend all your time working and it is common to find students doing other things – either extra-curricular activities or paid work – in their spare time. It is the case, however, that during Term time, Oxford and Cambridge students typically spend more of their time on academic study than the average UK student, partly due to the intensive eight-week Terms. A published study found that Oxbridge students spent more than 40 hours per week on academic study during Term time which is more than 10 hours higher than the UK average.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, students are advised:

- To discuss with their Tutors plans to take on extra-curricular or paid roles which take up significant amounts of time.
- To prioritise academic commitments over other activities during Term.

Outside of Term, many students engage in volunteering or seek work experience and internships. There are no restrictions on these activities either provided that:

- You reserve time to follow a programme of vacation study recommended by your Tutors.
- You set aside time to prepare for College or University exams scheduled when Term resumes.
- You do not take on commitments that clash with examinations or other mandatory commitments during Term without obtaining permission.

### **Help and Guidance Transitioning from School to University**

The College invests extensively in Library, IT, and other facilities to support your study needs. Brasenose also maintains an excellent level of welfare support to enable you to access help promptly should you require it. There are a number of options available to students both within Brasenose and within the wider University and these are set out in this link:

<https://www.bnc.ox.ac.uk/current-students/welfare-support/welfare>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/HEPI-How-different-is-Oxbridge\\_Report-107-FINAL.pdf](https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/HEPI-How-different-is-Oxbridge_Report-107-FINAL.pdf)

Students may self-refer to the College Student Support Advisor (counsellor), Sebastian Petzolt, while the College Nurse, Kinneret Milgrom, runs surgery hours. The Chaplain, David Sheen, and Sub Dean, Arnaud Petit, are also available to see students very often at short notice. If you have a disability, the Senior Tutor and Academic Administrator (Henry Jestico) are the academic leads. They will help you apply for reasonable study adjustments and examination adjustments, as part of your Student Support Plan, and will also assist putting in place anticipatory adjustments. While the College will make reasonable adjustments, by the same token you should follow any steps recommended by qualified medical persons or advisors to improve your situation, which may include anticipatory measures likely to be recommended after a Disability advisory Service assessment (or similar) is completed.

Along with the UK and the rest of the World, Brasenose is learning to live with Covid-19. Last year, the great majority of teaching took place in person as planned. You can play your part by washing your hands regularly throughout the day and observing basic hygiene. If you feel unwell, get in touch with the Nurse who will be able to give you advice.

In general, Freshers enter the College with a very strong academic transcript of prior attainment. Most students appreciate that University degrees are different to the type of course they have experienced previously and that it is unrealistic, therefore, to expect to continue to score the high marks achieved at GCSE, A-level, or the IB. By way of illustration, the average College Collection mark achieved by Freshers lies in the region of 64% with a standard deviation of around 10%. In most subjects, 70% is considered a first-class mark. Some undergraduates find it difficult to adjust to these new conditions and pursue unrealistic levels of attainment, with the result that they struggle to achieve satisfaction. Over time, this can result in low morale. Try to resist this negative way of thinking and seek help from the College or University welfare services if you find yourself in this position. Stretching to improve your performance is fine but striving for the unobtainable is not what University is about. Remember that students mature academically at different rates and that progression is not always linear and may sometimes be subject to slippage. Your Tutors are experienced and will issue you with appropriate guidance, conscious of the fact that degree programmes last three, four, or five years and that a great deal of individual development occurs over this timescale.

Several options are available should you need help transitioning to University. Should you simply feel unsure about something (for example, the best way to take notes), do not be afraid to ask students from the year above for their perspective. Your 'college parents' will be happy to lend an ear. If you find that you struggle to manage your workload due to illness or other factors, the best advice is to approach your Tutors (as well as seeing the Nurse if you are unwell). It is often possible to reschedule work and if your Tutor supports an application the College can assist with extended residence over part of the vacation to enable you to catch up.

Brasenose provides some bespoke study skills support. For the academic year 2023-24, the writing support Tutor is Kirsty Gunn and undergraduates can self-refer to this one-to-one service by emailing her requesting an appointment. Details of individual sessions remain confidential to the student and the skills tutor. Brasenose also provides students with the opportunity to arrange a number of one-to-one sessions with either a Sciences or Humanities/Social Sciences graduate study skills advisor to help them with aspects of the course such as workload planning (but not the

submission of essays or problem sheets). As in the case writing support the details of graduate study skills sessions remain confidential.

While wishing to encourage all students to do the best they can, Brasenose believes in recognising academic achievement. The highest distinction the College can bestow on undergraduates is to make them a Scholar or an Exhibitioner. In addition, a variety of academic prizes are offered. More details of College honours can be found in the Student Handbook but the basic principle is as follows. If your work is consistently of an excellent standard, or if you achieve a first-class performance in a College or University examination, your efforts will be recognised. However, if you are working at a level of an upper-second yet making progress and enjoying the course, this is also very encouraging and you should feel satisfied with your efforts. Improvement prizes may be awarded to recognise progress in these cases. Every year, some students achieve first-class degrees without previously being awarded either an Exhibition or Scholarship, reflecting the fact that academic maturity unfolds at different rates depending on the individual.

In recent years, the University has experienced an increase in the number of students flagged for using unfair means in assessments. Plagiarism or collusion in online assessments are the most prevalent forms of unfair means. Examination Boards subject all submitted work to software and other checks and penalties of varying severity are imposed. In a few cases, students are prevented from graduating. It is essential to familiarise yourself with your subject's guidance on unfair means (usually this can be found in the course handbook). The University has provided information about good academic practice and the avoidance of plagiarism. You should take care to read the following guidance:

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism>

### **Celebrating Tradition and Change**

Brasenose's statutes were drawn up in 1509 and over time the College has acquired a number of traditions and customs kept up by succeeding generations. Joining any kind of institution for the first time is a learning experience – nobody is expected to know everything on arrival and if you are unsure about anything at all just ask one of the College staff, or a member of the JCR, or a student in another year group for guidance. Although the College has been around for more than five centuries, it is continuously renewing itself and every new cohort of students re-shapes undergraduate life afresh. We are not stuck in a time warp and your student experience will to a large extent be what you and the rest of the year group make it. There is a mix of celebrating traditions and change – an example of the latter being the Rainbow Flag, which is flown throughout February each year.

Summing up, Brasenose wishes to give its undergraduates a helping hand and to honour their achievements. The College hopes you will enjoy yourself as a student and find a way of managing your time that enables you to flourish intellectually and also participate in those extra-curriculum activities that interest you. As Senior Tutor, I share these aspirations and hope that the years you spend at Brasenose turn out to be very happy and memorable ones.

The remainder of this briefing deals with a number of frequently asked questions (FAQs) about College and University life, with particular reference to the academic side of things.

## FAQs

### **Undergraduate Student Handbook (aka the 'Blue Book')**

The Blue Book provides a one-stop guide to College regulations relating to academic, accommodation and other matters. It also contains useful information about College contacts, sources of student support (including health, welfare, and student finances) plus practical information and instructions how to pay your fees. The current version is available at <http://www.bnc.ox.ac.uk/current-students/handbook>.

### **Junior Common Room (JCR)**

The Junior Common Room (JCR) is the College's common room for undergraduate students. The JCR Committee (elected from among the student body) has produced a most excellent guide to life at Brasenose for Freshers. A copy is enclosed with your welcome letter.

### **Accommodation**

You will receive an email from the College's Accommodation Manager giving details about your accommodation and instructions on how to sign the tenancy agreement online.

### **University Card**

You will need your University Card as soon as you arrive. The card is required to set up your email account and provides you with access to College and University facilities and services, such as Oxford's libraries. It also functions as your College meal card: so don't leave home without it!

### **Single Sign-On/WebAuth**

You will be sent an Oxford Single Sign-On username and password, which gives you access to many web-based services at the University, including the University's student record system, Student Self Service.

### **Dates of Full Term**

Michaelmas Term 2023: Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> October 2023 to Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2023

Hilary Term 2024: Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> January 2024 to Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> March 2024

Trinity Term 2024: Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> April 2024 to Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> June 2024

### **Student 'parents'**

The JCR have assigned second- and third-year undergraduate 'parents' to each incoming first-year student. These volunteers will be available for advice as you begin your time at Brasenose. You will find a letter from one (or both) of your college parents enclosed in this envelope. If you happen not to find a letter in this pack, please email the College Office us ([college.office@bnc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:college.office@bnc.ox.ac.uk)), who will put you in touch with 'mum' and 'dad'.

### **Tutors**

You should find enclosed some information from the College tutors in your subject to let you know what preparatory work and preliminary reading you should undertake prior to your arrival in Oxford. Your tutor will arrange a meeting in Week 0 to discuss tutorial teaching arrangements for

the coming term. Course information is provided by faculties and departments, usually by means of course handbooks and information on websites; this will be sent separately by your faculty or department.

### Matriculation

Matriculation is the ceremony that marks your formal admission to the University. Due to the pandemic arrangements for the 2023 Matriculation ceremony are not yet confirmed, but it is likely to take place on **Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> October**. You will be sent further details as soon as they are available.

### Academic Dress

The required dress for formal University functions, including University examinations, is known as *sub fusc* and consists of:

1. One of:
  - a. Dark suit with dark socks
  - b. Dark skirt with black tights or stockings
  - c. Dark trousers with dark socks
2. Dark coat if required
3. Black shoes
4. Plain white collared shirt or blouse
5. White bow tie, black bow tie, black full-length tie, or black ribbon

Some information about academic gowns is available at <http://freshers.bnc.ox.ac.uk>. You may like to order your gown before coming up to Oxford, but you are under no obligation to do so. A limited number of second-hand gowns may be available from the Steward once you are here.

### College Doctors

It is **essential** that you register with the College Doctors if you do not have alternative medical care arranged in Oxford. Information on how to do this is available on the Freshers' website.

### Paid Employment

Oxford students are not barred from working during their degree and in fact about 1 in 3 undergraduates take up the opportunity to work for the College at some point during the year. Opportunities arise mainly during the vacation (admissions, conference, telethon) but during Term there is work available in the Library, Bar, and IT Office (opportunities are advertised). We ask students essentially to adopt the same approach to paid work as for extra-curricular activities: prioritise academic study and avoid entering into any major commitments during term time. If you are seeking paid work to overcome a serious financial problem, you are strongly advised to book an appointment with the College Accountant as there may be alternative and better ways in which we can help you manage your finances. In addition, the following should be noted:

- Any work should be local (or something that can be done remotely) and in term time limited to a just a few hours per week: the College will not grant permission to be absent during Term time and Tutors will not reschedule teaching or College examinations. For



example, we have turned down requests to be absent from students wishing to fulfil modelling assignments or take up internships during Term in recent years.

- Permission is needed to run any type of business from Brasenose premises. For example, in recent years we have stopped students from attempting to run mail order businesses which outsourced storage and parcel handling to the Porters' Lodge.

If you are seeking work experience during the vacations, the University Careers Office provides guidance: .

<https://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/>

<https://www.careers.ox.ac.uk/list-of-careers-advisers/>

### Sources of further information

There is a wealth of information for students on College and University websites. There is a dedicated website for Freshers at <http://freshers.bnc.ox.ac.uk>, which contains all the key information you need before arriving at College. Please ensure you look at this and check it regularly before you arrive so that you are aware of any updates.

The main College website is [www.bnc.ox.ac.uk](http://www.bnc.ox.ac.uk). The JCR maintains a separate website: <http://jcr.bnc.ox.ac.uk/>. The University website has a 'Student Gateway': [www.ox.ac.uk/students](http://www.ox.ac.uk/students), which includes information for new students ([www.ox.ac.uk/students/new](http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/new)). Information about the Orientation events for European and International Students can be found on the University website at <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/new/international>.



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