

Editorial introduction: Volume 3, Issue 2. “I thought it was just colouring in”: tips on applying for Geography at top universities

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Oxford Geography Society is an organisation that I never intended to join. It would imply that I was an Oxford student, a label which felt both unachievable and undesirable. I did not want to attend an institution known more for its postcard-perfect buildings and colonial statuary than its top-class education. Indeed, all my UCAS choices were Russell Group universities – a brand which holds so much importance and mystique – in school. Therefore, I want to use this editorial to explain not just how I got into a top university, but what studying Geography at degree level is like.

You may have gathered that I never possessed a burning desire to study at Oxford, or indeed any elite university. Those that do harbour these dreams occasionally present like X Factor contestants on a mission to find fame. Whilst I do not think that there was a ‘lightbulb moment’ where I decided that geography was for me, being plunged into lockdown in 2020 put life into sharp focus. During this time, our geography teacher set us an assignment on human rights. Part of this involved reading a chapter from Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn’s bestseller *Half the Sky* (2009), which outlines women’s struggles across the globe and raises solutions. I read the chapter on maternal mortality and realised that I had never even contemplated how many women continue to die during or after childbirth (810 per day, according to the WHO in 2017). Enraged, I asked my teacher if I could borrow the book and read it hungrily, cover to cover. Over the next few months, I bought Kristoff and WuDunn’s other books and used their reference lists to source more (e.g., Melinda Gates’ *The Moment of Lift*, 2019). I found others by scouring charity shop shelves bulging with COVID clear-outs. When lockdown boredom struck, I went on lengthy walks, always listening to The Guardian’s Audio Long Reads or Today in Focus. I debated my latest interest with dad in the car (all our greatest discussions happen there). For his birthday that June he asked for an Economist subscription, knowing I would devour it. Slowly and subconsciously, my mind was being filled with knowledge that I did not even recognise as geographical.

That is my greatest tip to anyone who wants to study Geography at university. You must find your niche, the thing that really makes you angry or absorbed, that makes you want to pick up every book available on the subject. For me, this is still women's rights. I have been lucky enough to study feminist geographies during my first year in Oxford, but I have also learned about the racial logics embedded in the development theory championed by Kristof and co. This leads me onto what studying geography at a top university is like.

No matter where you study geography you likely will not spend much time in lectures, classes or with faculty members. Hence why researching geography courses is vital – if you dislike the content, you will not be able to motivate yourself to work. Work will almost definitely involve writing essays, but many courses also include compulsory modules on statistics, coding and laboratory skills. By the end of your degree, you will have a broad spectrum of skills which, contrary to popular opinion, are favoured by employers. Do not let stereotypes that make geography out to be 'pointless' or 'colouring in' dissuade you from applying – degrees are a great chance to explore what you love, and universities like Oxford, Manchester and LSE are bursting with experts. I urge you to use your professors and ask them questions, even if that seems daunting at first. Unlike teachers, who lack the time and know-how to guide you through the university application process, tutors work within the system and are there to support you.

Just like the X Factor contestant, students tend to describe their 'journey' through the application process. For many looking at top universities, this involves interviews which, at Oxbridge, are more about tutors seeing your thought process than about the decisions you make. To prepare, ask your geography teacher to run a mock interview (example questions can be found on [blogs](#), [specialist websites](#) and [online students forums](#)). The best preparation, in my opinion, is something that you are probably doing without knowing – seeing the geography in the everyday.

You might become a 'temp' over the summer – making you part of Standing's (2011) 'precariat' of low-paid, flexible workers – or donate to NGOs supporting Iranian women to gain freedom from their oppressive state. Either way, once you discover your geography niche, it will be hard not to notice it.

If you are not sure where to start, Routes has created a well of knowledge which I urge you to explore. If, like me, you're interested in global disparities in living standards, then why not read about the effect of spatial inequality on Nigeria's development? Our writers for this edition have utilised a diverse range of sources – like the film *Nanook of the North* (1922) – with both human and physical themes. There is no reason why you cannot use audio and visual

media as a starting point for your geography niche, be it about globalisation and food security or how we restore our balance with 'Hothouse Earth'.

In closing, let geography take over your life to the point where you too may want to join a university Geography Society. Be the cheesy X Factor contestant with big dreams (and, ideally, a little more talent). And don't shy away from top universities, which rely just as much on your intellectual curiosity as you rely on them for a stellar education.

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Link to Oxford University Geography Society's alternative prospectus and further resources

<https://www.oxgeogsoc.com/prospectus>