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AIM HIGHER

# Advanced Standing for Advanced Highers

Good Practice Case Study:  
**University of St Andrews**

## CENTRAL ADMISSIONS OFFICE

The Central Admissions Office promotes Advanced Standing for Advanced Highers but policy on Advanced Standing is decided at individual School (department) level.

Direct entry into second year is offered by the university but only in the Science subjects. The university played an advisory role in the development of Advanced Highers in the Sciences, and it believes that they offer evidence of significant breadth and depth of study. The Faculty of Science designed some of its first-degree courses to articulate with Advanced Highers and allow for direct entry into second year.

Courses in which Advanced Highers are particularly relevant to second year entry include Astrophysics, Chemistry, Biological Sciences, Mathematics, Materials Science, Physics, Computer Sciences, and Science with Languages. The basis is that there is often an overlap between the Advanced Higher curriculum and first year university courses.

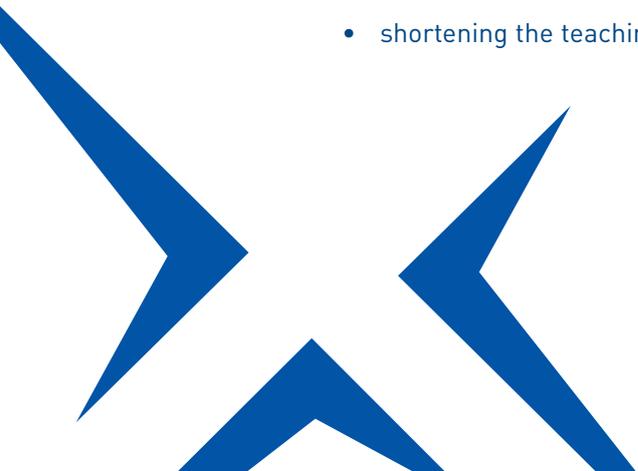
The School of Geological Sciences is re-addressing the issue of direct entry into second year. It currently has to base this on Higher Geology at A pass because the Advanced Higher Geology is undergoing further development, and the present Advanced Higher Geography is not seen as entirely suitable for direct entry into second year Geological Sciences.

The university encourages direct entry into second year for some of its Science courses and it sees the following benefits for Advanced Higher students entering directly into second year:

- It speeds up entry into employment or postgraduate degree courses and thus encourages students to aim for the Schools' Master degree courses.
- It saves one year's funding and so will reduce student debt.
- It avoids the previous tendency for well-qualified students to coast through their first year of study without doing much work.

However, the university admits that some teaching staff might be of the opinion that second year entry students could lose out on social interaction and or may feel too pressurised by the demands of an accelerated degree programme. Therefore offers of Advanced Standing are only made when all circumstances are considered, including the experience and aptitudes of the entrants. In particular, only those with high enough grades will be allowed direct entry into second year in order to guard against their being in over their depth in their first year at university.

The benefits for the university of direct entry into second year are identified as:

- allowing departments to attract the most able recruits
  - increasing throughput, which allows higher student numbers and commensurate higher funding
  - shortening the teaching time between first and second degrees.
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The University of St Andrews makes prospective students aware of the possibility of direct entry into second year through:

- the university's website
- the printed prospectus
- the UCAS guide
- open days
- interviews
- telephone contacts with individual entrants
- Student Advisers
- school talks — recruitment staff visit classes during school hours
- advising at HE Fairs/careers conventions
- e-mail — responding to general enquiries for a particular subject
- additional information letter sent from a University School along with the UCAS offer.

Advanced Standing is promoted by many of the individual Schools in the Faculty of Science. Usually, Advanced Standing means direct entry into second year, but there are two other departmental practices:

- One department offers entry into the first year of a fast-track programme.
- One department is not currently offering direct entry into second year, but is creating the means with which it will be able to do so in the next academic year.

## SCHOOL OF PHYSICS AND ASTRONOMY

**MPhys (Hons), BSc (Hons) courses in Physics, Physics with French, Astrophysics, Theoretical Physics, Theoretical Physics and Mathematics, Physics with Photonics, and Microelectronics and Photonics.**

The School of Physics and Astronomy has the highest number of direct entrants to second year in the whole of the University of St Andrews and is an excellent example of good practice in giving Advanced Standing for Advanced Highers.

Offers of direct entry into second year made to Advanced Higher students:

- Depend on the entrant's having three Advanced Highers (A, A and B) one of which must be Mathematics and another Physics, or Advanced Highers in Mathematics and Physics (A and A) plus Highers (A and A) in two other subjects. Mechatronics and Applied Mathematics are seen as useful Advanced Highers for direct entry.
- Are very carefully considered as to the potential undergraduate's ability to handle second year entry.

Offers of direct entry into second year are about 50% of all offers, and about three-quarters of the second year entry offers are to Advanced Higher students. This proportionately large number is only possible because the courses are tailored to articulate with Advanced Highers. Most offers of direct entry into second year are accepted. The large number of acceptances stems from the successful promotional work undertaken with the secondary schools and also through the careful consideration of each student's needs, abilities and aptitudes. For example, although the type and grade of an applicant's Highers do not officially come into consideration for applicants with the appropriate Advanced Highers, nevertheless they are looked at unofficially as the School of Physics seeks a rounded picture of the potential direct entrant into second year. If a student shows apparent immaturity even though having the relevant Advanced Highers, that student will be advised to start in first year.

A potential problem for applicants is that they are accepted into first year of the course on the basis of fifth year Highers. They then study for Advanced Highers in sixth year. However, this situation is picked up by the student adviser at the start of session and the students are given the opportunity to transfer directly into second year if they want to, and it seems a good option for them.

There is no difference in retention rates between students entering directly into second year compared with conventional entry students.

Direct entry into second year is promoted:

- on the web
- in print
- in the UCAS guide
- in the university prospectus
- in the separate School of Physics and Astronomy prospectus
- through case studies highlighting the advantages of direct entry into second year.
- on secondary school visits
- at open days
- through central admissions and School of Physics and Astronomy admissions
- by telephone
- at interviews
- by Student Advisers



Admissions tutors believe that secondary school visits and talks and telephone calls with Student Advisers work best. The School of Physics and Astronomy is very satisfied with its current level of publicity and methods of promotion, and is very aware that to engage in other promotional activities might result in targeting students who would find direct entry into second year inappropriate or too difficult. In particular, the School tries to ensure that there are no discrepancies in information given through the different channels of communication, and is scrupulous in monitoring the accuracy of information in its own prospectus and other publications.

The School's prospectus is an excellent document that gives a flow-chart showing first and second year entrance and the modules that will be taken. The prospectus also contains two short case studies of students who entered directly into second year, one on the basis of A-levels, and the other with Advanced Highers. The student who entered with Advanced Highers says, 'When considering my university choices, my decision was made a lot easier when I visited an open day and found the friendly and enthusiastic atmosphere of the physics department very appealing — I decided to take the direct entry into second year option and although challenging, I have certainly enjoyed my time so far. I was one of a group of about 30 direct entry students and found that every effort was made to make us feel at home right from the start. The courses are very flexible and there is an easy option to change within the department, which I found particularly useful in deciding which degree to follow.'

The performance of direct second year entrants is certainly as good as, and often tends to be better than, the performance of students who have entered the course via year one with Highers or with a combination of Highers and Advanced Highers. This is because all direct entrants into second year are very carefully selected as the best qualified, brightest and most mature students who are ambitious about future job and/or higher degree prospects.

Academic support given to direct entrants into second year consists of extra tuition and access to additional learning materials plus advice and counselling — although because of the careful selection process, the latter is rarely necessary. Also, the School prides itself on its induction course and familiarisation routines. Practical work and small-group tutorials also aid learning.

In terms of social support, all new students are encouraged to go to 'freshers' events etc, whether they are first or second year entrants, but the School largely relies on its student advisers to provide the necessary support. They find that their second year entrants usually develop their own informal 'buddying' system because they work in groups, and of course they can communicate through the website. All students are encouraged to join one or other of the two School societies (Astrosoc and Quantum Soc) run by students for students and offering social and academic events. In Year 3 (the second year for direct entrants), all students develop further communication skills through the 'Transferable Skills for Physicists' Module. This includes an informal weekend spent in the Highlands, giving a talk on a chosen subject.

In Year 4 (the third year for direct entrants), all students participate in one or more projects that involve joint working and can result in scientific publications as well as travel to international facilities. By the end of Year 4, it is impossible to differentiate between first year and second year entrants.

The School believes that the main benefits of direct entry into second year are academic, vocational and financial. Second year entry speeds up progression to academic achievement, employment and career advancement. Second year entry could only affect a student's personal and social development adversely if the School were not so careful in its selection process.

## SCHOOL OF CHEMISTRY

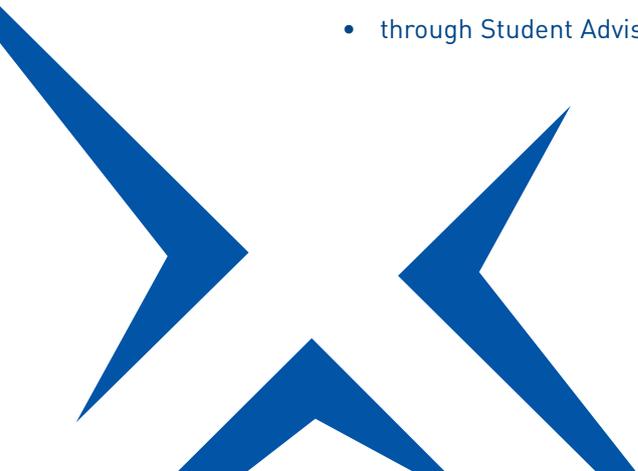
### **MChem (Hons) and BSc (Hons) degree courses in Chemistry, Chemical Science, Biomolecular Science, Chemistry with Catalysis, etc.**

Because of the new five-year MChem structure, which includes a whole year in industry, the School has introduced measures to make direct entry into the second year much easier for applicants with good Advanced Highers and A-levels. This means that students who enter at second year can complete their MChem after only four years. This saves both time and money, with one year's less fees and living expenses.

Offers of direct entry into second year made to Advanced Higher students depend on the entrant's having Advanced Highers at B in Chemistry and one other science, plus two Highers at B (Mathematics, Applied Mathematics and Information Technology are seen as useful for direct entry).

If students have been accepted into the first year of a course on the basis of fifth year Highers but then study for Advanced Highers in sixth year, this is picked up by the student adviser at the start of session and the first year students are given the opportunity to transfer into second year if they want to, and it seems a good option for them.

The School of Chemistry promotes direct entry:

- on the web
  - in print
  - in the UCAS guide
  - in the University prospectus
  - in the School of Chemistry prospectus
  - through secondary school visits
  - at open days
  - through Central admissions and School of Chemistry admissions
  - by telephone
  - at interviews
  - through Student Advisers
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Undergraduate talks with, and telephone calls from, Student Advisers work best, and the School of Chemistry believes it is successful in getting the message across that well-qualified direct entry students will not be at a disadvantage. The School ensures that all the information given out on direct entry into second year is accurate and encouraging. The School feels it is developing a good record of promoting direct entry into second year to those who will most benefit from it academically, financially and vocationally.

Retention rates are the same for direct entrance into second year as for entrance into first year and the School has very high retention rates overall.

In relation to performance rates, the School of Chemistry finds little difference between the overall performances of first year entry and second year entry students but believes that direct entrants into second year are the best-qualified students who are the most highly motivated. Also the School ensures that they are able to do any catching up that they need to do. Students who enter at year two do as well and often better than those who enter year one.

In terms of academic support, direct second year entrants are given extra tutorial support and a short Organic Chemistry module to top up their knowledge beyond school level. Written and oral presentation skills are developed individually and through team work, and problem solving skills are emphasised.

In terms of social support, all new students are encouraged to go to Freshers' events and join university societies etc, whether they are first or second year entrants. The School's very active Chemical Society also organises many social as well as academic events and the School actively promote other university groups. In addition, the student advisers work hard to provide the necessary support. The School also provides case study examples of current and former students demonstrating their wide range of interests.

The School of Chemistry believes that as long as Advanced Standing students are chosen carefully, direct entry to second year can be conducive to their personal and social development.

The School sees the main benefits of direct entry into second year as academic, vocational and financial in that it speeds up the progression to academic achievement, employment and career advancement.

### **MSCI (HONS) DEGREE COURSE IN MATERIALS SCIENCE**

This degree course was originally run jointly with the University of Dundee but now it is delivered solely by St Andrews. There is a new MSci modular course structure that includes a year's industry placement. By encouraging direct entry into second year, the School of Chemistry can help students to gain their full MSci after only four years, saving a whole year's tuition and living accommodation fees.

Offers of direct entry into second year depend on the entrant's having Advanced Highers at B in Chemistry and Physics, plus two Highers at B, one of which must be Mathematics. Applied Mathematics and Information Technology are both seen as useful subjects for the second Higher.

Applicants who have been accepted into the first year of the course on the basis of fifth year Highers but then study for Advanced Highers in sixth year are given the opportunity to transfer into second year if they want to, and it seems a good option for them. The School's student advisers at the start of session deal with this.

The School of Chemistry promotes direct entry into the second year of the Materials Science Course in the same way as it does its other courses ie:

- on the web
- in print
- in the UCAS guide
- in the University prospectus
- in the School of Chemistry prospectus
- through secondary school visits
- at open days
- through Central admissions and School of Chemistry admissions
- by telephone
- at interviews
- through Student Advisers

As with the other courses, undergraduate talks with and telephone calls from student advisers work best, and the School of Chemistry thinks it is successful in getting the message across that well-qualified direct entry students would not be at a disadvantage. The School is convinced that all the information given out on direct entry into second year is accurate and encouraging, knowing that any discrepancies would discourage such applications. The School is developing a good record of promoting direct entry into second year to those who will most benefit from it academically, financially and vocationally. This in turn benefits the School by increasing throughput and creating financial benefits.

The Materials Science course has its own prospectus that is very clear about the benefits to the student of direct entry into second year. Posing the question, 'Will I be at a disadvantage if I come straight into year two?', it responds with the following text: 'No, you will not be at a disadvantage. To ensure a smooth transition into University life for 2nd year entrants we offer a short module to allow students to 'top-up' their knowledge of the subject and extra tutorial support.'

Retention rates are certainly as good, and probably better, for students with direct entrance into second year than for those entering into first year — the School has very high retention rates overall.



As with its other degree courses, the School of Chemistry finds little difference between the overall performances of Materials Science first year entry and second year entry students, but believes that direct entrants into second year are the best qualified and the most highly motivated students.

Again as with the other School courses, in terms of academic support, direct second year entrants are given tuition. Written and oral presentation skills are developed individually and through team work, and problem solving skills are emphasised.

In terms of social support, all new Materials Science students are encouraged to go to 'freshers' events and join university and School of Chemistry societies, etc, whether they are first or second year entrants. In addition, the Student Advisers work hard to provide the necessary support. The School also provides case study examples of current and former students demonstrating their wide range of interests.

Though some university staff believe that students should undertake the first year and not opt for direct entry to second year, the Materials Science teaching staff think that the main benefits of direct entry into second year are academic, vocational and financial — it speeds up the progression to academic achievement, employment and career advancement. However, second year entry could not affect a student's personal and social development because the School of Chemistry is very careful in its selection process.

## SCHOOL OF MATHEMATICS AND STATISTICS

### MMATH DEGREE COURSE

The MMath degree course is a five-year programme that is accelerated into four years. Advanced Standing gives direct entry into a fast-track course through a modular structure, rather than a direct entry into the second year of a degree course. The School of Mathematics and Statistics believes that the fast-track programme is more flexible than direct entry into second year as it allows students to pursue other subjects in their first year of study and so keep their options open. The fast-track programme has been designed to overcome the problems associated with direct entry by providing a semester of acclimatisation and consolidation.

Fast-track entrants need either a good set of Highers plus two good Advanced Highers, one of which must be AH Mathematics, or three good A-Levels including Mathematics. Applied Mathematics, Physics and Mechatronics are useful Advanced Highers for the course as they are all Maths-related.

The School of Mathematics promotes MMath fast-track entry and details its benefits:

- on the web
- in print
- in the UCAS guide
- in the University prospectus
- through secondary school visits
- at open days
- through Central admissions and School of Mathematics and Statistics admissions
- by telephone
- at interviews
- through Student Advisers

The School's prospectus fully explains 'Advanced Standing — the fast track'. The level and amount of promotion produces good results. All information given is double-checked so that is completely accurate and free of confusing discrepancies.

Student talks with student advisers constitute the most effective promotional and recruitment methods as the advisers avoid targeting students who would find the fast-track programme too difficult. The School believes that it is beginning to develop a good system for entry into the fast-track stream and promote it to those who will most benefit from it.

Fast-track entry conditions include both Highers and Advanced Highers. This means there is no problem of applicants being accepted into first year of the course on the basis of fifth year Highers, ignoring any Advanced Highers that are gained in sixth year. The student adviser looks at all qualifications held by first year entrants and advises on entry into the fast-track stream on the basis of appropriate qualifications and suitable levels of maturity.

There is no difference in the retention rates of ordinary first year and fast-track entrants. In both cases the retention rate is very high because the School is very careful that the most appropriate advice is given to all entrants.

When comparing performance rates, the School of Mathematics believes that the MMath fast-track entrants tend to perform better than other first year entrants whether or not the latter enter with Highers alone or with Highers and Advanced Highers. This is because the fast-track entrants are carefully selected and given excellent advice.



In terms of social support, all new students are encouraged to go to 'freshers' events and join university clubs and societies, etc, whether they are first year or fast-track entrants.

The MMath tutors believe that for the carefully selected fast-track students there are no disadvantages. The main benefits are academic, vocational and financial in that it speeds up the progression to academic achievement but there are also more personal benefits for the student in terms of course satisfaction, intellectual stimulation and also increased self-esteem.

## SCHOOL OF COMPUTER SCIENCE

Currently there are two practical problems about offering Advanced Standing for direct entry into second year in degree courses in the School of Computer Science:

- There is a hidden requirement for high-level Maths expertise, which students gain in first year.
- The students need expertise in the Java programming language — no one coming directly from school has this, whether or not they have Advanced Highers.

The School cannot promote direct entry into second year until these problems are resolved. However, in the current year the School of Computer Science is developing a fast-track Java module so that it hopes to be in a position to recruit students directly into second year by 2007. The School will also make the Maths requirement more obvious in the prospectus.

The School has already had some enquiries about direct entry into second year on the basis that it saves one year's funding and progresses people to the workplace more quickly. Computer Science is very work-oriented and might attract students who are more mature than some in that they are already focusing on their future employment. The School looks forward to teaching its first direct entry into second year recruits.

At present, Advanced Highers are not directly used in assessing entrance to first year for the School's courses. Entry requirements are four Highers (ABBB) including Maths or three A-levels (BBB). However, the School likes candidates to have Advanced Highers as these students are a year older and therefore more mature, and having Advanced Highers demonstrates that the student has a greater ability to study intensively than does the possession of Highers alone.