



## **Balliol College Oriental Studies Professor Christopher Minkowski- Video Transcript**

The tutor, Professor Christopher Minkowski, is seated, facing the camera. The tutor's name and course subject are shown the first time they appear. The tutor answers the questions that are displayed on screen.

>> PROFESSOR CHRISTOPHER MINKOWSKI (Emeritus Fellow and former Boden Professor in Sanskrit): I'm Chris Minkowski. I'm the Bowden Professor of Sanskrit. My expertise is in Sanskrit Language and Literature and I specialise particularly in early modern India.

[Question displayed on screen:]

### **What qualities are you looking for in students?**

>> PROFESSOR CHRISTOPHER MINKOWSKI: Students for Oriental Studies tend to be fairly self-selecting it's not a widely followed subject in the UK and so, we look for students that are quite interested because the course is actually quite challenging. They also have to have a range of abilities, they have to be good at learning languages but also good at thinking critically and analytically about the subject.

[Question displayed on screen:]

### **What type of work do you give students to prepare for a tutorial?**

>> PROFESSOR CHRISTOPHER MINKOWSKI: I think it's important to understand that Oriental Studies has got nine different languages that one can get a BA in, and some additional subsidiary languages as well. Now, some of those languages include modern spoken versions of the language like Arabic or Chinese or Japanese, while others are exclusively focused on the ancient world like, for example: Egyptology and the ancient-era east. So, the kinds of assignments and work that students have to do depends on the nature of the course that they're doing. For the modern languages, they'll have to do work in the language labs and do discussion sections with other students, with tutors and so on. For the others, their tutorials will largely be based on readings and then writing essays and having discussions with their tutors about the essay that they wrote, defending so to speak the position that they took, that, for my subject is the sort of thing that I do, I tend to give them readings to read and then to write an essay where they have to take a position on what they've read, where they can't simply copy it out of the books that they've read.

[Question displayed on screen:]

### **What Should students know about applying to Balliol?**



>> PROFESSOR CHRISTOPHER MINKOWSKI: I think the first thing that you should know is that Balliol accepts applicants in all nine of the languages. There's no particular preference for some languages over other languages. It does happen that the fellows in the college have a slant towards India and we do have a certain number of Sanskrit students here, but that's just the way that the application pool has turned out in the last couple of years. We also have students doing Chinese and Japanese and we are going to have a student in ancient near east, coming in the coming year. So, we're happy to accept in all subjects, that's the first thing to know. The other is that we have two places, that is two spots in the college that we have the power to give out every year, when we have two good applicants. Some colleges have more, many colleges have fewer, but you should understand that wherever you apply your chances are about the same, so you shouldn't apply to a college based on how many places it has but rather on the qualities of college.

[Question displayed on screen:]

#### **What are the differences between Classes and Tutorials?**

>> PROFESSOR CHRISTOPHER MINKOWSKI: The thing about oriental studies is that in almost every case, students turn up having studied very little of the language. It is true some students have already studied Chinese and some have already studied Japanese, but the pace at which things go at the university is such that even if you have studied the language in the past, usually you're beyond your knowledge by the end of a term or two. So, a fair amount of emphasis is placed on language instruction. Language and Literature, instruction and learning how to read and write in the language. That takes probably more time for students than students in other humanities subjects, but there are also tutorials and tutorials are much smaller groups they can be with an individual student with an instructor or it could be two or possibly three students with an instructor. There, they're given an assignment of reading and then they have to write an essay based around a question and then, the important thing about the tutorial is; the tutor has already read the essay and has questions for you about what you've written and you may not get off easily by dodging the question since it's only a few of you in the room, there's nowhere really to hide so you have to know your stuff. Getting put on the spot like that is one of the great features of the Oxford education and really shows by the end of the three or four years that you're here.

[Question displayed on screen:]

#### **How do students know how they are progressing on their course?**

>> PROFESSOR CHRISTOPHER MINKOWSKI: Well the thing about taking a language intensive subject like Oriental Studies is that you have work to do almost every day, you have to turn up in class and be prepared you have to go over exercises or you have to read a text and so on, and so, the people teaching you know exactly how you're doing every day, based on your performance every day. At the end of each term the instructors all write a little report about



you which is sent to the college and the people in the college take note of how your instructors think that you're doing. Of course, eventually, there are these formal examinations, usually at the end of the first year and then at the end of the course overall. These are much more intensive and you sit in a special room and you sit there for three hours on several days and write answers to questions based on the things you've learned over the past year or the past three or four years. Aside from that, if you want to know how you're doing day to day, aside from your performance in class (which you know as well as the teacher, how well you're doing) there are tests and quizzes on a fairly regular basis especially in the language classes, they'll have quizzes every week or a couple of weeks to test whether you've learned the vocabulary or learnt elements of the alphabet that you need to know in the case of something like Chinese. There are also, somewhat more cumulative tests that take place often just at the beginning of the term, just before classes start you get a test seeing how much you remember from the previous term, because the vacations go on for a while you've been given a little bit of work to do during the vacations. That's where you begin, with a little assessment of that sort.

[Question displayed on screen:]

**What types of jobs do Oriental Studies students go on to do?**

>> PROFESSOR CHRISTOPHER MINKOWSKI: Well you might not think it, but a BA in Japanese, or a BA in Chinese, or BA in Arabic is very useful training to have, especially because the standard of instruction is so high. When students leave here with a degree in Japanese, they can really speak Japanese and they can understand it and in fact some of the most recent students we've had in Balliol doing Japanese, are now living in Japan, working in Japan, they got jobs, they were swept up immediately by consultancy firms to work in Japan. One of them even works for the Japanese government, a local government in Japan. So, for the modern spoken languages, it's pretty obvious that the standard of education is so high that you become a very useful commodity, if I can use that unfortunate expression. For the ancient languages, it's not so obvious, nobody snaps up the sanskritist. But, you get exposed to a different part of the world, you develop a certain kind of expertise with language and communication. There are all sorts of businesses and industries that are interested in people with those kinds of special skills, and applicants to standard jobs like in the city and places like that, look a little bit unusual you know, it's one more economic student after another and then suddenly, you've got a student who studied Egyptology. It can actually help you get somewhere. We had a Sanskrit student a few years ago who's now running a hedge fund related to India for a large corporation. So, many of our students of course go on into academics, there are also students working in the creative industries, and students working in museums and libraries and things of that sort.

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For more information about how to apply to Balliol, see [www.balliol.ox.ac.uk/undergraduate-admissions](http://www.balliol.ox.ac.uk/undergraduate-admissions)

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