

Top student wins spot at Cambridge



ASPIRATION: Multilingual Varvara Vassilieva aims to study politics. Picture: CALUM ROBERTSON

TIM WILLIAMS

SHE'S originally from Russia, speaks five languages and reads philosophy for fun.

Now Adelaide teen Varvara Vassilieva has won a place at one of the world's most prestigious institutions, Cambridge University, to study politics.

But getting in wasn't easy.

The Walford graduate, who was her school's top International Baccalaureate student, says the "long and daunting" application process stretched over six months.

It required essays, personal statements focused on academic interests, an entrance exam and a trip to the UK in December for a gruelling interview.

"You get asked very difficult philosophical (questions) you have to battle with, and with your interviewer rebutting your arguments. It really makes you think on the spot," the 18-year-old said.

"There were two, both of whom were professors at the

university in the subjects I was applying for. I was so overwhelmed by their intellect. It was incredible."

Ms Vassilieva, who will live in Cambridge's Christ's College when she makes the move in September for her three-year degree, originally set her mind on Oxford. But she said students are allowed to apply for only one of the "Oxbridge" unis and she felt her weakness in economics would hurt her chances at Oxford.

"It was a dream and a goal at the same time. I decided on this (UK study) about mid-2015," she said.

"The course at Cambridge perfectly suits my interests. I'm really keen to be involved in all the societies. Maybe I'll try rowing and some other sports."

The Felixstow resident moved to Australia when she was three. She makes annual trips to visit her grandparents in Moscow and is "fully bilingual", speaking Russian at home.

Her mum was a Russian-

German interpreter and Ms Vassilieva, a self-described "polyglot", is fluent enough in German to "have been mistaken for being German a few times".

The aspiring NGO worker, United Nations staffer or diplomat won Walford's prizes for German and Spanish, and is taking Adelaide University night classes in French, which she says is a critical language in international relations.

She also reads philosophy in her spare time. Her personal statement for Cambridge entry covered ideas from big-name philosophers such as Machiavelli, Rousseau, Kant and Foucault, whom most humanities students don't encounter until university.

While her parents will fund her study, she's working as hard as she can to help with the cost by coaching gymnastics, working in a cafe and tutoring before she leaves.

Once in the UK, Ms Vassilieva hopes to do well enough academically to win a college scholarship.

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