

Appendix B

Preparing yourself for Oxbridge Interviews

“At interview, the strongest applicants demonstrated that they had chosen their degree programme at Cambridge carefully, and understood the demands of the course. They showed that they could organise their thinking well, arguing logically, responding positively to challenge, and were able to rethink or refine their initial thoughts on a question when presented with new information, or a different way of approaching it. They were also able to back up their responses with appropriate evidence, drawn from academic sources as well as personal experience. They displayed real academic curiosity about the topics discussed, and could show that they had explored their subject outside of the school curriculum (which might have been through a taster day, a self-guided project, or through on-line exploration or deeper reading into particular interests). Most importantly, they didn’t give up when presented with something not immediately familiar, but persevered, using their existing knowledge and understanding, to approach an answer.”

(Feedback to schools from Cambridge Admissions 2018)

There are all sorts of myths about interviews at Oxford and Cambridge – that questions are deliberately set to trip you up, that interviewers deliberately try to humiliate you and that those who are not then made an offer are left with a grudge for the rest of their lives. These are complete myths. Questions are difficult but that is part of the challenge. Applicants, after all, are trying to get into two of the best universities in the world, with hot competition not just nationally but internationally, so one would expect it to be challenging. Admissions tutors basically are looking to confirm three things:

- (i) that you are as keen and as interested in your chosen area of study as your personal statement and reference claim you are
- (ii) that you will be able to cope with the course and the teaching methods of the two universities
- (iii) that you will be able to contribute to, as well as learn from, the tutorials that are the essential part of the Oxford system or the supervisions that are the essential part of the Cambridge one.

For the interviewers, therefore, the interview is seen as a mini-tutorial or mini supervision and they want to see what each candidate can potentially bring to the table. This will not come across if the interview is approached in the wrong way. It should not be anticipated as a hugely daunting experience or as a potential interrogation. The best way to approach it is as a conversation with like-minded subject specialists, with whom you will look forward to working for three years and to whom you want to come over as an interesting person to work with.

When I went to my own interview (admittedly many years ago), the student who was due to precede me was there too. We soon discovered that we had the same tastes in current comedy programmes and happily shared our favourite one-liners, relaxing the both of us. After he went in for his interview I was soon joined by the student who was to follow me. He sat down, clenched his hands together so firmly that I could see his knuckles going white, his jaw was set tight and it looked for all the world as though someone had just dipped him in a huge vat of starch and planted him there. I tried to strike up a conversation with him but he couldn't speak. The poor guy was petrified. The whole interview that followed must have been an absolute nightmare for him (and probably for the interviewers as well) and, as I never saw him again, for he obviously was not successful. Nerves are only to be expected but they must not be allowed to get in the way – and certainly not to that extent. Yet in interviews I have conducted I have seen candidates grip the sides of chairs as if they are waiting for electricity to be sent through them and heard monosyllabic answers given to even the gentlest of questions and in such circumstances candidates cannot possibly do themselves justice. More to the point they cannot engage with the interviewers or establish a rapport with them. The more you can engage with the interviewers and establish a rapport, the better the impression you will create.

Questions may well be of a sort that you have never encountered before. This is to see (a) whether you will take on the challenge, (b) how you think when doing so and, above all, (c) whether you think in the way you need to as a top specialist in the subject you are applying for.

It may seem odd to give you such unfamiliar questions but tutors want to avoid covering what you have been taught or have had drilled into you as interview preparation, and therefore the questions will often appear unusual. In Maths, for instance, it is not expected that applicants will be able to solve most, or indeed any, of the problems put before them. I have had plenty of candidates for Maths, who have thought that they'd done hopelessly as they didn't get anything solved, then be amazed when they've been made an offer. The first to be weeded out will be those who simply say they haven't been taught a particular maths topic and therefore don't even attempt a problem. They will obviously not come across as the keen and determined problem-solver that their personal statement and reference will have claimed. The next to fail will be those who will make one attempt at a solution, find that it doesn't work and then say they can't do it – in effect saying “if at first I don't succeed, I give up”. Those who do succeed will look at various ways to approach a problem. They will be asked to explain their thinking as they go along and thus show that they are thinking mathematically. Having shown that they are determined not to be beaten by a problem, at some appropriate point they will be given a helping hand and hopefully that will move them forward until the next wall is hit, whereupon the same help will be offered to see how far that can be built on. That exactly mirrors what will happen in a tutorial/supervision, when problems will be worked through in that way.

Let us take an equivalent example in History. A question asked one year was “which do you think is more important – political history or the history of technology?” That is a tough question even for professional historians to answer. No student will be expected to have a ready-made answer or indeed to have ever thought about the question before but it will show how people think now and, most importantly, whether they think as historians. When the question was used, most candidates responded by saying immediately either “political history” or “the history of technology” (more usually the former) and then tried to justify their answer. In other words they jumped to a conclusion and then tried to defend it. This is not how good historians work. Good historians will define what is meant by the terms of reference (“political history” and “the history of technology” in this case), will then consider ideas on both sides of the argument, try to illustrate and evaluate them as they goes along and will then allow the evidence to draw them towards a conclusion. What that actual conclusion becomes is not particularly relevant – there aren’t “right” answers anyway- but **the method is crucial.**

In Economics the question “Is the slowdown in the growth in China a good or bad thing for the West?” was usually responded to by candidates in a similarly one-sided way – “good because.....” or “bad.....because” (usually in this case the latter). A good economist however will not see an answer in such black and white terms. Interviewers will be much more impressed with the candidate, who can see the possible and probable “goods” and the possible and probable “bads”, who will look at different possible contexts and scenarios and evaluate them **before** coming to an overall conclusion.

Developing the right approach is one thing that can be prepared for, using a number of practice questions. People often claim that interviews cannot be prepared for because no-one knows the exact questions that are going to be asked. Whilst the latter claim is true, the logic is flawed. In just the same way you should prepare by ensuring that you can talk fluently about, and develop, anything you have put in your personal statement. I once gave a run through to a student, who had put in her personal statement that she had “been fascinated” by a lecture she had attended at Royal Holloway College on Constantine the Great. When I asked her to summarise for me what the lecture had concluded, whether she agreed with it or not and what else she’d done to follow up on that topic, she couldn’t do any of those things, suggesting that it hadn’t been “fascinating” to her at all. Obvious disasters like this must be avoided at all costs. Interviewees will all too often say very vaguely “I read a book....” or “someone said.....”, where precise and sharp references will come across so much better – the particular book, particular source, what the conclusion was and whether it was agreed with etc. You should be ready for a deep discussion or debate on any topics you have stated a particular interest in and have your evidence well researched and your arguments well prepared. You may well be asked for your opinion on something (or have an opinion you have expressed in an essay you’ve submitted quoted back at you) and then be required to defend it. Whatever you say (even if the interviewers

privately agree with every word) may well be challenged just to see how far you will be able to go in arguing your case.

I fondly remember a prospective economist of mine coming back from a Cambridge college saying he thought he had no chance of an offer because the debate he'd had with tutors had actually got quite heated. "I think they hated me", he claimed. Far from it, it turned out. They told me how much they would look forward to his going to the college because they just knew that they'd have a very lively time in all supervisions with him there. All they would need to do would be to light the fuse and off he'd go and they'd all have a ding-dong debate, which was exactly what they were looking for. He went on to get a First.

Oxford does its interviewing over two or three days. Cambridge does it all in one. At Oxford it can mean doing a lot of waiting around. Some colleges are better than others at organising things for interviewees to do, people to look after them etc but some people who go up for interview, who are not used to that sort of environment, can get a bit put off by it. They can also be upset at being asked to have an interview at a different college. That is not unusual and nothing adverse should be read into it. It may be down to how many and which tutors are available at any one time and some tutors run tutorials for students in several different colleges but only have rooms in one. The best advice to you is to go and enjoy the rich experience of being there and the free food and accommodation. You should not be intimidated by the surroundings and certainly not by the other candidates. They may all look to be super-intelligent, calm, confident and have fifteen A*s at A-level each but they won't have. In order to be there for interview a selection process will already have taken place so everyone is there on merit, including you.

Remember the point about rapport. A handshake at the beginning, looking the interviewers in the eye and then sitting in a way that feels comfortable – all gets the interview off to a good start. After that the advice must be to keep calm, to listen carefully, to pick up on any key words in questions, to seek clarification of any things that aren't immediately clear and to try to build up answers carefully and thoughtfully. If something isn't known, it is best to say so rather than bluff. No-one is expected to know everything. Without putting on any exaggerated act, let the enthusiasm show through by the readiness to take on questions, engage in discussion etc and, where possible, show that the conversation is being enjoyed rather than endured. A smile is always welcome. At the end a thanks for the time spent and another handshake will be courtesies that will be noted.

If you are not made an offer, it is not the end of the world. Most candidates who are interviewed are not made an offer and most of the college admissions tutors will readily admit which Oxford or Cambridge colleges turned them down in their own time, when they applied as a 17 or 18 year old. It still means that you are likely to be going to a top university and course elsewhere and one that most of your peers around the country would give their eye teeth to go to, so hopefully the disappointment will not be too deep or too long-lasting. It is great, however, if you can be told that you are among the very best and more of our

students from state schools, and from all regions of the country, need to be going to our top universities.

Your school can access lists of bespoke questions for each subject, that come from real interviews over the past few years and you can use these for practice. Ideally they can be used in the context of run throughs with the questions being put to you by people you've never met before, as will obviously be the case in the real situation. Don't try to learn scripts. Rehearsing answers is fine but, if you try to learn answers, you will come across like the speaking clock and lack all the spontaneity that helps create a rapport. Remember to think of the interview as a conversation so that there is as much responsibility on your shoulders as on theirs to keep the thing going. If you are going on a bit too much in an answer, they may interrupt you in order to go on to their next question. Don't feel they're being rude. They have a timetable to keep to and they want to ask the same questions of every candidate in order to be fair. What they are probably feeling is (even if they don't say so) that they're satisfied you can answer that question well so now let's move on. It might sound a bit hopeful to say that I hope you enjoy the interview but I hope you do and you certainly want to be able to look back on the interview, feeling that you've done yourself justice. You can't be asked to do more than that but again be realistic. Do not judge yourself by a yardstick of perfection – they certainly won't be judging you that severely. Mistakes, misuse of words, not expressing yourself as clearly as you could when not under pressure are part of all interviews (just listen to our politicians being interviewed!) If you make a serious mistake, they'll just be interested in how well you recover. If a first interview doesn't go well, the second can still make all the difference.

Keep calm, keep focused and very best of luck.

Peter Rawling

(The PiXL Club)