

OXFORD & CAMBRIDGE PRACTICE INTERVIEWS 2012 - Final Report

Summary

During six weeks from 22nd October to 7th December the Oxford and the Cambridge university societies in Luxembourg jointly provided practice interviews for 37 applicants for undergraduate studies at the two universities. This involved the organisation of 22 separate, subject-based interview panels, staffed by a team of 35 alumni. Thirteen candidates were called for interview at Cambridge and eight at Oxford. Of these only one has been offered a place at Cambridge and three at Oxford. These numbers are significantly less than 2011, when there were five offers from Oxford and three from Cambridge. Fourteen of the candidates interviewed at the universities have provided detailed feedback about their interviews. We have identified a number of points to improve in the 2013 campaign and, as in previous years there remain long-term issues which only the schools and the candidates themselves can resolve.

Outcome

(2011 figures in parentheses)

	OXFORD	CAMBRIDGE
Practice interviews	20 (14)	17 (12)
<i>Luxembourg lycées</i>	2 (5)	2 (3)
<i>Luxembourg international schools</i>	14 (8)	15 (9)
<i>Schools outside Luxembourg</i>	0 (1)	0 (0)
Called to interview	8 (10)	15 (10)
<i>Luxembourg lycées</i>	1 (3)	2 (3)
<i>Luxembourg international schools</i>	7 (6)	13 (7)
<i>Schools outside Luxembourg</i>	0 (1)	0 (0)
Offers received	3 (5)	1 (3)
<i>Luxembourg lycées</i>	0 (1)	0 (1)
<i>Luxembourg international schools</i>	3 (3)	1 (2)
<i>Schools outside Luxembourg</i>	0 (1)	0 (0)

The lower number of offers in 2012 is disappointing. The shift from 8/26 in 2011 to 4/37 in 2012 may indicate a decline in the average quality of applicants as a result of our efforts to encourage a larger number to apply. If so, these figures point to the need to better and earlier preparation – see “Improving our service to the community” on p.4 below.

The predominance of the Luxembourg international schools persists, probably because of the higher levels of education and qualifications amongst the majority of parents and the

presence of more English speakers. This year this group included for the first time the Lycée Vauban, which had two candidates, one of whom was offered a place at Oxford.

It might be thought that the scale of our practice interview programme was hardly justified by the low success rate. We think it should be seen in a different light: in 2012 we encouraged and assisted no less than 37 school students to aim high and the reports from the unsuccessful candidates (see below) indicate that the whole exercise was worthwhile for them as well.

“Nevertheless, I would like to thank you for the practice interview and all the advice you have given me as it will surely be very useful to me in the future.”

Interviewed at Cambridge for Natural Sciences but not offered a place.

It would be interesting to know if the candidates' teachers consider that aiming for a place at Oxford or Cambridge raised the candidates' performance in their school-leaving examinations.

Organisation of interviews

Each practice interview involved two interviewers with subject knowledge relevant to the course the candidate had applied for, together with an observer. Whenever possible the same panel was used to interview two candidates for the same or closely related subjects on the same evening. In all there were 22 such panels. Each interview required preparation by the panel members, which involved studying the candidate's papers and entrance requirements of the course applied for, as well as preparing suitable questions and supporting material. Panels in 2012 were composed exclusively of alumni. Handling of requests for practice interviews and the scheduling of the whole programme was carried out by the OUSL Secretary. Prior to each interview the candidate was sent a copy of the Terms & Conditions explaining the nature and limitations of the practice. They were asked to show these to their parents and teachers and to bring with them a signed copy to give to the organisers. The practice interviews are entirely free of any charge or donation. For the first time in 2012 we also sent the applicants a new guidance note explaining how to prepare themselves for interviews, both the practice and the real thing.

Interviews were held in offices, homes and school rooms provided by alumni. Candidates were thus confronted with a panel of adults they had never met before in an unfamiliar location and were then interviewed for around 30 minutes. In some cases they were given a text or questions to study beforehand. Questions and discussion were focused on their academic abilities, as in the real interviews. The candidate then left the room for five minutes whilst the panel discussed them. Finally the candidate was given detailed feedback and advice for 20 minutes, covering behaviour and language as well as academic response.

Compared with 2011 the 2012 interviews campaign was significantly larger: 37 candidates compared with only 26 and 35 interviewers & observers compared with just 20. By publicising a deadline for requests of 15th October we tried to get a longer window of time for practice before the real interviews in December. This still did not work very well as requests were still being received up to 21st October. This is probably due to the fact that we sent reminders to interested students and to teachers at the end of the summer term and did not repeat these reminders at the start of the autumn term. However, with a good pool of volunteers we were able to start scheduling interview panels earlier in the

week so that the first panel ran on Monday 22nd October. The larger pool of volunteers also meant that we were able to handle all the requests that we received, including a very late one at the end of November after the candidate had been called to interview.

Feedback reports from interviewees

We have received valuable reports from the candidates who were called to interview: twelve from the Cambridge interviewees and seven from the Oxford ones. Many of the reports give exact details of questions asked and how candidates responded to them. The candidates have also shared with us their feelings at the time of their interviews and their assessments of how well they were prepared. As in previous years, candidates who were not offered places have been as willing to provide this information as those who did secure offers. Their honesty and effort is to be applauded.

It is clear from the reports that the style and content of interviews differs sharply between subjects and between different interviews. Sometimes the focus is exclusively on subject material, at others it is on the candidate's own ideas and activities. The challenge for the candidates is to think "on their feet" and for us to prepare them adequately for the unexpected:

"I was given an A4 piece of paper with the following written on it: 'An ordinary meal is an end-point, a long way from biology. Discuss.' "

Interviewed at Oxford for Human Sciences but not offered a place.

"Finally they asked me something about my personal statement, which led us to a discussion on the axioms of mathematics. Even though I have never really studied this topic, thanks to what I have heard about it, I could contribute to the discussion ..."

Offered a place at Oxford for Mathematics & Philosophy

"Why do you think we need to waste 10 minutes at the start of every interview asking candidates why they want to become a doctor?"

Interviewed at Oxford for Medicine but not offered a place.

"They didn't go over my personal statement so much, but rather concentrated on my ideas and my understanding of what good architecture is and should be."

Interviewed at Cambridge for Architecture but not offered a place.

"... I had to talk about a text that was given to me ... The general message was that ... music is the act of creating, playing or enjoying certain musical ideas. The text was quite shocking as it claims music doesn't exist."

Interviewed at Cambridge for Music but not offered a place.

"They asked me how big the Internet is. At first I was very confused by that question and didn't know how to answer, but ..."

Interviewed at Cambridge for Computer Science but not offered a place.

We give below some other points that emerge from the candidates' reports that are in addition to those listed in the 2011 report (see annexe):

Feedback – interview questions

- Be prepared to ask the interviewers questions if they provide the opportunity and to develop this into an academic discussion.
- If invited to, be prepared to develop arguments against your own opinions.
- Be prepared to explain out loud your reasoning whilst attempting to solve a problem.

The following is a selection from candidates' descriptions of their interviews:

Feedback – interview impressions

- "I was asked why I wanted to study French literature and later about my personal statement. I cited works I had read, such as *Candide* by Voltaire, to answer questions more specifically and they seemed to appreciate it." *Offered place for French at Oxford.*
- "I was caught quite off my guard by the question of what I do in my free time. I should have mentioned my reading and elaborated further on my schedule." *Unsuccessful applicant for Computer Science at Cambridge.*
- "They gave me five minutes to ask questions, so I recommend you encourage next year's applicants to think their questions through in advance." *Unsuccessful applicant for Architecture at Cambridge.*
- "I was very nervous, but I tried to put that away as much as possible, not concentrating on what was at stake, but rather enjoying the interview itself." *Offered place for English at Oxford.*

The candidates without exception considered that the practice interviews had been useful. This was equally true of those not called to interview and of those who were not offered a place. However, the impression of some of the practice panels was that candidates had not read or paid attention to the contents of the guidance note we had sent them about preparation for interviews.

Feedback – value of practice interviews

- "I felt that my practice interview prepared me well for the real ones." *Offered a place.*
- "Thank you very much for the great experience the Oxford and Cambridge society (sic) allowed me to have. I felt a lot more comfortable as I had been advised ... to take my personal statement line by line and think about everything I could be asked about...." *Not offered a place.*
- "The practice interview was very good in that it showed me the interview as more of a dialogue instead of an interview." *Not offered a place.*
- "I feel that the practice interview was extremely helpful. ... It helped me ... mainly to cope with the stress, which disappeared as soon as I sat down in front of the interviewers." *Not offered a place.*

Improving our service to the community

There are three improvements that we should apply in the 2013 campaign:

1. We will communicate our deadline for receipt of requests for interviews to both potential candidates and to teachers, more clearly and with a repeat at the beginning of the autumn term.
2. In the information event that the Oxford and Cambridge societies intend to run in April, we will put the emphasis on choice of courses and preparing oneself to be a better candidate.
3. We will send out the guidance notes for preparation for interviews in the summer term to all interested students who have previously registered with either OUSL or CSL at the Foire de l'Etudiant and to our teacher contacts in the schools, so that candidates have enough time to prepare themselves.

There remains an issue which we noted in the 2011 report and which is difficult to resolve. The experience of running practice interviews over the last six years persistently shows the need to encourage and practice –

- a) reading outside the syllabus,
- b) critical thinking,
- c) verbal & graphical exposition,
- d) specialist vocabulary in English.

These are capabilities that need to be cultivated long before the candidate decides to apply to Oxford or Cambridge. They are not things that can be fixed in a few weeks before the entrance tests and interviews. They are competencies that should be useful to any candidate for a university education, not just those going to Oxford or Cambridge. This is an issue for teachers, parents and the candidates themselves. The alumni associations are not equipped or qualified to handle these matters alone.

It is worth noting here that there may be scope for coaching of promising candidates in the way they handle themselves in interview. There is ad hoc evidence for the benefits of coaching where a candidate has the knowledge and skills but presents herself poorly. In the last two years interview panels have on two occasions felt so strongly that a candidate had potential that they have voluntarily offered them a second practice. In both cases the candidate has noticeably improved with the second practice and has gone on to be interviewed and offered a place. However, any attempt to systematise this would imply some degree of selection that the alumni associations are not competent or justified in exercising.

Annexe – extract from report on 2011 campaign

We give below some key points that emerge from the candidates' reports:

Feedback – interview questions

- Must be able to explain precisely why you want to study a particular course and how you understand its relationship to other studies and to the outside world.
- Must be able to talk about your recent reading and give your own views of it.
- Must be able to defend views already given in your Personal Statement or submitted essay(s).
- Be prepared to engage in extended discussion and argument.
- Be prepared to deal with topics you have not covered in your school course – test of how you think – tutors will usually be helpful.
- Be prepared to cope with (apparently) aggressive questioning – a test of how you respond.
- Be able to use wider and more general knowledge drawn from sources outside of your school course.
- Be sure you know all the right vocabulary of your subject in English – even for English mother-tongue candidates!