

## OXFORD & CAMBRIDGE PRACTICE INTERVIEWS 2011 - Final Report

### Summary

In October and November of 2011 the Oxford and the Cambridge university societies in Luxembourg jointly provided practice interviews for 26 applicants for undergraduate studies at the two universities. This involved the organisation of 18 separate, subject-based interview panels, staffed by a team of 19 alumni and two outside subject experts. Ten candidates were called for interview at each university and of these five have been offered places at Oxford and three at Cambridge. Nineteen 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 2012 campaign and two long-term issues to be resolved.

### Candidates' statistics

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

### Organisation of interviews and timeline

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 18 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 were composed of alumni but in two cases we also brought in experts in subject areas where there were no suitable 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.

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 a 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.

The timeline of our activities is given in Annexe A. The scheduling of the programme was difficult as it had to be completed in the six weeks between the submission of applications on 15<sup>th</sup> October and the beginning of university interviews in the first week of December. We received more requests than we could handle. In principle we turned down all requests that came after the deadline that we had published (19<sup>th</sup> October). However, we deliberately set aside some capacity for "orphan" candidates from schools where we had no working contacts with the teachers. In fact there were only five of these. At the very end of the programme we did grant one exceptional request from a "desperate parent" when we knew that we had the time and resources to handle it.

### Feedback reports from interviewees

We have received valuable reports from the candidates who were called to interview: nine from the Cambridge interviewees and ten from the Oxford ones. Many of these give exact details of questions asked and how they 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. 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. The archive of reports will be valuable to us in the future in structuring our practice interviews.

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!

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

#### **Feedback – interview impressions**

- “The whole interview was really more like a conversation than like an inquisition (as I had feared).” *Offered place for History of Art*
- “The engineering tutor told me that he had read my Personal Statement and that he couldn't figure out which field in engineering appealed most to me.” *Unsuccessful applicant for Engineering*
- “There were one or two things I hadn't come across yet, and when I told them they gave the correct equation and explained the basics of the area, so being asked something unfamiliar didn't really matter”. *Offered place for Physics*
- “I was asked, given a hundred patients, how I would conduct a medical trial.” *Unsuccessful applicant for Biology*
- “The interview for Philosophy was especially difficult, since it stated a millennia-old problem and the tutor very effectively made the applicants contradict themselves.” *Offered place at a different college for Experimental Psychology*
- “We spent the following 25 minutes discussing the poem's first three verses! Our intensive debate led through all sorts of fields and we eventually got stuck on the musicality of the poem. Music being one of my main interests, my interviewer was particularly interested on hearing my take of how to interpret this poem if performed on a stage.” *Offered place for German & Italian as well as Choral Scholarship*
- Question from interview: “Which specific aspect of your work experience made you think - Yes, that's what I want to do?” *Unsuccessful applicant for Veterinary Science*

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.

#### **Feedback – value of practice interviews**

- “Thanks to the (advice at the) mock interview, I could read up on several subjects related to History of Art...” *Offered a place.*
- “Thank you very much for the practice interview. I think it really helped, especially in making me less flustered when things went wrong.” *Offered a place.*
- “Thank you again for offering a practice interview – it was extremely helpful, especially for the phase diagrams, which we have not yet covered in school.....” *Offered a place.*

- "The mock interview was a great help to me since I was given a lot of information I otherwise would have been without .... The critique I was given helped me prepare better and feel more confident in the interviews." *Offered a place*
- "Having a practice interview was very useful as it made me talk about my art work and to feel more comfortable talking about a subject that I don't actually study (in school)." *Interviewed but not offered a place.*
- "Thank you for your support and advice concerning my interview. Regardless of the outcome, it proved to be an interesting learning experience." *Interviewed but not offered a place.*
- "I was not invited to interview at Oxford, although I would like to thank you again for the mock interview as I will be interviewed for some Universities in France which have the same content in their interview as the practised one I passed." *Not called to interview.*
- "Unfortunately I did not get called for an interview but thank you for your time for the preparation and I definitely learnt a lot." *Not called to interview.*
- "I have been asked to take an interview at a different university for which the practice interview was beneficial." *Not called to interview.*

### Improving our service to the community

Discussion amongst the team of alumni has revealed things that we need to improve and issues that otherwise need to be addressed.

There are two improvements that we will apply in the 2012 campaign:

1. We will communicate our deadline for receipt of requests for interviews more clearly, to both potential candidates and to teachers, using handouts at events, e-mails and our websites.
2. We will prepare guidance notes for the practice interview itself, so that candidates have a clearer idea of what is going to happen and how to prepare themselves.

There remain two issues which are difficult to resolve.

Firstly, the OUSL experience of running practice interviews over the last five years persistently shows the need to encourage and practice –

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

This is an issue for teachers, parents and the candidates themselves. The alumni associations are not equipped or qualified to intervene in these matters.

Secondly, the demand for practice interviews is greater than the capacity of the alumni associations to deliver. Our capacity is limited by –

- The window of time between final applications (15<sup>th</sup> October) and the start of real interviews (1<sup>st</sup> week of December).
- Our ability to find alumni with qualifications relevant to the candidates' desired courses and with the free time to devote to interview panels (at least three hours on the day, including travelling, plus preparatory reading and discussion).

Our best estimate of our capacity is that we can run around 25 practice interviews in a season, which is what we did in 2011. We could possibly squeeze in an extra week of interviewing time by doing the scheduling immediately after a sharp cut-off date on 15<sup>th</sup> October.

Demand comes from three distinct sources –

- The Luxembourgish lycées (Luxembourg Diplôme de Fin d'Etudes)
- The four international schools - International School (International Baccalaureate), European School (European Baccalaureate), St. Georges (UK A-Levels) and the Lycée Vauban (French Baccalaureate).
- Schools near Luxembourg, in France, Belgium and Germany.

The most concentrated demand comes from the European School and the International School. Demand from the Luxembourgish lycées is scattered but still adds up. (Please see the Candidate Statistics table at the beginning of this report.) Demand from outside Luxembourg is occasional but should not be ignored – a successful candidate in 2011 came from Germany. OUSL and CSL tried to strike a balance between these three groups in 2011 and as a result turned down a number of late requests from European School candidates. We also operated an “orphan” policy, keeping some capacity for late demands from lycées and schools outside Luxembourg where we had had no working contacts with teachers. We think these policies should be continued in the 2012 campaign.

## Annexe A

## Timeline

- November 2010 – OUSL handout at Foire de l'Etudiant asking for requests for practice interviews immediately after application deadline 15 Oct 2011
- 15 September – OUSL reminder mail to teachers to get students to request practice immediately after 15 Oct
- 4 October – request to OUSL members to participate
- 7 October – agreement to collaborate between OUSL & CUSL
- 23 October – initial practice interview schedule established
- 25 October – 1st practice interview
- 25/26 October – 4 ESL & 1 ISL request refused as too late
- 6 November – refused two more late applicants from ESL
- 10-11 November – Foire de l'Etudiant: accepted 3 „orphan“ requests from Athenée, Lycée Vauban and Germany
- 13 & 16 November – accepted „orphan“ requests, 1 from LMR, 1 from LRS – refused late one from ESL
- 29 November – accepted „desperate parent“ request for previously refused ESL candidate
- 30 November – last interview panel.
- 4 January – interim report - discussion dinner with all alumni helpers