

École Internationale de Genève/International School of Geneva

Interviews and visiting universities

Interviews and university visits are two sides of the same process: the former elicits answers from the student, the latter from the institution. In both instances the goal is to ascertain whether a course, an institution or a location might be suitable for study over the three or more years of an undergraduate degree. While the prospect of engaging in interview may seem daunting, interviewers are looking beyond any nervousness, instead weighing up innate academic ability, logical thinking and intellectual curiosity. Many years ago I counselled a student who, at the conclusion of an interview at Cambridge, got up from the chair and, missing the door, walked straight into the wall. The rigour of the debate had been overwhelming. Yet the embarrassing mishap over bearings was certainly not a factor in the assessment and the offer of a place was forthcoming.

Interviews can be divided into two types: formal and informal. Formal interviews are typically used by highly academic institutions or courses in the UK. Such institutions include Oxford, Cambridge and Imperial; such courses are generally Medicine and Veterinary Science. At an interview for Oxford or Cambridge, the focus is on the choice of academic subject, two interviewers usually being present. Relying on existing subject knowledge from the IB diploma course, the interviewers try to push each applicant into unexplored areas, thereby testing flexibility and originality. An interview for History could span a broad theme, for example a conversation about the nature of royalty in the Middle Ages and whether humans harbour a propensity for a strong leader. The sound at an interview for Mathematics, by contrast, could for the most part just be the scratching of a pencil as a problem is unravelled, with only the occasional interjection of help by an interviewer. In essence, then, the interview is an opportunity to share the joy of academic study. As members of a research institution, the interviewers are constantly writing articles and books. In this endeavour their students serve as critical friends. To look at the acknowledgements of many specialised publications is to underline the validity of this statement. The root meaning of the word interview must therefore be stressed, in particular *inter* as denoting *between* two parties, neither side necessarily dominating. Both Oxford and Cambridge have videos showing the nature of a typical interview. Viewing one or more of these is worth a thousand words of explanation.

General outline <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUwN6GI-0EQ>

General outline <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/interviews?wssl=1>

Preparation <https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/applying/interviews>

Classics <http://www.greeksromansus.classics.cam.ac.uk/apply>

Computer Science <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7XwKVCBPfM>

Law <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=npEcenV-Y08>

For Medicine in the UK the formal interview falls into two categories: panel and multiple-mini. A panel interview works along the same lines as an interview at Oxford or Cambridge, questions being asked by two or three interviewers. Under consideration is whether the applicant has the appropriate characteristics to make a good doctor. Ethical questions may be posed: for example, the exploration of the issues surrounding euthanasia, the funding of medical treatment, recruiting medical staff from less privileged countries, the development of new treatments, a current health alert such as Ebola. Reading the online medical pages of a good newspaper like the *Guardian* will help towards preparing for a panel interview: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/medical-research>. A multiple-mini interview breaks the questioning into stages. Applicants spent a few minutes at each station in a room to answer a question. Sometimes a station may present the applicant with a role play, perhaps in calming a stranger (played by an actor) who has suffered some slight. For the applicant, moving around the room and meeting different interviewers can help allay nervousness. For the interviewers, the use of ten or more stations may provide for the recording of greater richness in personal interaction. At their core, however, the panel interview and the multiple-mini interview are not so very different from each other. There are no right or wrong answers; but rather a striving to be as personal as possible when responding, always supporting ideas with examples from reading and work experience. Veterinary Science follows a similar

pattern, only the questions naturally consider animals more than people, although empathy is of course required when talking with farmers and pet owners.

Sample interview questions <https://www.themedicportal.com/e-learning/interview/>
Question about work experience <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5bvWmytarI>
Question about choice of medicine <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11MCGdVAgGQ>
Question about choosing the applicant <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q87NzozhZDI>
Question about the biggest weakness <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JSt4SZ7i5F0>
Questions about weakness and flaws <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i5Wzh825Z8U>
Multiple-mini interviews <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mwGFRi4kLRQ>
Why be a doctor and not a nurse <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Po78LDom8Gs>

Fine Art, wherever it is practised, may ask for an interview. At its centre must lie the portfolio. Thus the interview is not primarily about personal character, but instead how creativity is nurtured and expressed. An applicant may talk about the development of style, themes and technique. How one idea leads to another is the key. How research into the work of other artist impinges on the portfolio should also feature. There are as many character traits as there are great artists: the impetuous violence of Caravaggio, the depressed darkness of Goya's final years, the cultured elegance of Velasquez. Art schools are definitely not looking at these characteristics, just the personal thrill of immersion in art.

University of the Arts London <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMvzake6Ecc>
Cornish College of the Arts <http://www.cornish.edu/admission/review/adfm/>
University of Kent <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jS-Q4eAnqcU>
Portfolio Review Day <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=850P0osJBCc>
RMIT University <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chfwcjiH3Hk>

European institutions that teach general subjects in English often require an interview. Unlike in the UK, where the applicant is expected to attend in person, interviews for European institutions are usually conducted via Skype. Such institutions include Maastricht University College in the Netherlands and Freiburg University College in Germany. Rather than push applicants into unexplored academic areas, interviewers probe academic interests, perhaps by considering extracurricular reading, visits to museums or projects like the Extended Essay. There is an element too of personality assessment. The intimate surrounds of a typical Liberal Arts and Sciences institution may not suit everyone. Sometimes what matters is less the content and rather the style of the answers.

University College Roosevelt <http://www.ucr.nl/admissions/Pages/What-to-expect-during-your-interview.aspx>
Science-Po <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KRcoFJpcxoo> (English teaching at Menton, Le Havre and Rheims) and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjZ6l7VRFsc> (French teaching at Paris).

Medicine in Europe through the medium of English may also demand an interview. If this is the case, then applicants are expected to attend in person. Often the entrance exam takes place before interview. Unlike in the UK, where the assessment is about the character of the applicant, European universities are checking on subject knowledge. The idea is that medical students will grow into their professional roles; in the UK it is assumed that an eighteen-year-old can already display the necessary traits that constitute an effective bedside manner. While checking on subject knowledge, however, some attention is inevitably paid to personality. Both Charles University in Prague and Szeged University, for instance, interview applicants.

Szeged University <http://www.med.u-szeged.hu/fs/entrance-examination>

Some US universities and colleges offer interviews, but they are neither compulsory nor always available. My advice is to take up an offer, should it be granted and provided it is feasible, because an interview will only be assessed for its positive notes. There are two possible venues: at the institution itself or in Geneva. When a visit to an institution is arranged through the admissions office, an interview

can be included. In Geneva it is usually alumni who conduct the interviews, generally in a public setting such as Starbucks, which underlines the nature of the exercise. For the atmosphere will definitely be informal. Rather than the pondering of academic questions, the focus is on the self. To create a good class of any particular year, the institution will be looking to admit the sort of students who will thrive in the special atmosphere of the place. That could be the literary tradition of St John's College in Maryland, the entrepreneurial spirit of Brandeis University in Massachusetts or the innovative leadership of Bryant University in Rhode Island. The discussion could range from personal knowledge about the chosen institution to current reading outside the syllabus. What is important is the flow of dialogue, the readiness to open up and the preparedness to ask questions in turn.

Harvard <http://www.businessinsider.fr/us/ex-harvard-interviewer-shares-the-questions-she-typically-asked-in-the-interview-2016-10>

Pennsylvania <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5JMqv7Q5kU>

Visiting an institution is rather like interviewing it. A place can speak through its atmosphere. At the end of a visit it is worth making some notes for future reference. These might address the following: impressions about academic work, class sizes, typical workload, research opportunities and accessibility of lecturers/faculty. For institutions offering a programme in Liberal Arts and Sciences – whether in the Netherlands, UK, Canada, USA, Germany or Australia – the range of majors offered and the core requirements should be considered. Life on the campus, or in the surrounding environment, is important: a visit may question the meals provided, self-catering equipment, athletics, general facilities, accommodation, societies, social life and diversity. It might be worth summarising a visit by asking why the institution might be a consideration for the future – or conversely why it might not. Without any notes one visit will inevitably, over the passage of time, blur into another and a dispassionate assessment will be awkward to realise. In all of this, trust must be placed in gut feelings. No institution will be perfect, but one or two institutions will stand out because, slipping out from the bounds of cold analysis, they will just seem right. While a general open day does not call for any expression of gratitude, unless it is felt appropriate, a personal visit should be followed up by note of thanks. This applies particularly to a visit to a US university or college where individual contact is valued and may well be recorded in an application file. There are suggestions about how to arrange visits to universities in *Guidance Bulletins* 10, 15, 22, 38 and 43 which have been sent to parents and are posted on the Nations Voice website at <https://www.nationsvoice.co/university>.

Campus visit checklist <https://secure-media.collegeboard.org/CollegePlanning/media/pdf/campus-visit-checklist.pdf>

College visit checklist <https://www.forbes.com/sites/noodleeducation/2017/02/08/20-things-for-your-college-visit-checklist/#174a40fc4723>

UCAS Open Day Guide <https://www.ucas.com/ucas/exploring-university>

Further advice about interviews can be found in *Guidance Bulletins* 1, 26 and 43. Interview practice is arranged at Campus des Nations for those students who request it. This can help prepare an applicant for the general situation, although, given the fluidity of any interview, it cannot replicate the exact format. And that is the whole purpose of any interview: to make an assessment of thought and discourse away from a defined syllabus. A few years ago I counselled a student who applied to read English at Oxford. On arrival at the interview room, the applicant was asked to spend five minutes writing down all the books she had read in the past twelve months. Later she expressed her annoyance that this exercise had not been covered in the practice interview. What should have been a sweet moment of pleasure over sharing the breadth of her reading with the interviewer – Alberto Manguel, Director of the National Library of Argentina, privileges books as friends in his *Packing My Library* – turned instead into something quite sour. An offer of a place was not forthcoming.

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