

## Interviews for a Place in Higher Education.

Most places on first (undergraduate) degree courses are awarded without candidates being interviewed. This is because the universities or departments concerned regard their application forms as sufficient to judge their suitability. However, in a number of well-recognised instances this is not seen as enough, and an interview is likely, if not certain. These are:

- any application to Oxford or Cambridge;
- most applications for medicine, dentistry, or veterinary science;
- teacher training;
- social work or nursing/midwifery;
- art and design courses.

Although interviews in additional subject areas are always possible, generally speaking they happen because:

- competition is strong and the university can afford to assess candidates very rigorously;
- the course is a preparation for work requiring personal qualities without which a practitioner, however academic, would be ineffective.

An interview of any kind may be an unfamiliar experience to your son or daughter, and such an important one means preparation is strongly recommended. Most schools or colleges offer assistance with this and many have considerable expertise. Help often takes the form of a 'mock' interview (usually with a member of staff) to provide a sense of the occasion and the ground likely to be covered. These can be very helpful by:

- highlighting and addressing the topics considered most likely to come up;
- helping students gain a sense of the appropriate length and depth of answers;
- offering feedback about strengths or weaknesses in self-presentation;
- making the student reflect on what he or she really wants to study and why.

Typically, actual interviews are conducted by one or two university staff (rarely more).

No applicant can know what they'll be asked, but these three questions are 'good bets':

- what interests you about ... (the subject you've applied for)?

- why have you applied to this university in particular?
- what will you bring to this department or institution?

Of course, your son or daughter's application form may well have already stated points on this score, but he or she will still be expected to expand on them. It's important for them to say what they really think, and refer only to reading and tasks they've actually done and experiences they've actually had. A simple but honest answer will tend to be better-received than a fuller one which seeks to impress but lacks a sound basis.

It was once the common wisdom to convey the impression of being a well-rounded individual. There is some merit in your son or daughter showing that academic activities aren't their whole existence, but they needn't be involved in a myriad of sports, hobbies or community-spirited activities. This is because the interviewers are primarily interested in applicants who:

- are capable of the necessary study;
- hold a fairly accurate picture of the subject;
- have researched the course and any career it may prepare them for.

Interviews for places at Oxford and Cambridge and medical schools are reputed to be especially taxing. Perhaps this is why publications and websites on how to tackle them go into considerable detail. Would-be doctors should certainly be aware of medical issues in the news, while Oxbridge applicants for, say English courses, ought at least to know the most recent winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature or Man Booker Award.

Finally, your son or daughter should expect an interview to be challenging, but also recognise that no-one will try to 'catch them out'. Candidates are much more often judged on how they approach a question rather than on how much they know.