



# University Interviews Guide

## Part 1: General Aspects



1. 'Why have you applied for this course?'
2. 'Tell me more about yourself'
3. 'Is there anything you'd like to ask?'
4. Personal preparation and presentation

## 1. 'Why have you applied for this course?'

The question that crops up in interviews time after time is simply this: 'Why have you applied for *this* course at *this* university?' It is therefore essential to have your reasons clear in your mind (an answer such as 'I think it will be interesting, fun, exciting, etc.' is really not adequate). If you are completely sure about your reasons for applying, you will be much better equipped to respond confidently to an interviewer, who will be looking to discover your motivations and commitment to the course.

The best way to clarify your ideas is to go back over the thought processes that led to your decision in the first place. So, think back.

Choosing your subject

Initially, you probably asked yourself the following questions.

- 'Am I interested in continuing to study something that I enjoyed at A level/AVCE?'
- 'Do I want to do something that leads to a certain career?'
- 'Do I want to study something new that I feel I might be very interested in?'

Look at the following two examples. Do either of them reflect your own decision-making? The first is simple and straightforward. The second is more complex, and probably closer to reality.

### Example 1

'I'm enjoying and doing very well in my maths A level. I don't have a definite career idea yet and I'm not interested in studying anything new. I have looked at related degrees such as economics, computing and management studies but I feel that I would like to take the maths to a higher level at university.'

### **Example 2**

'I am doing politics A level along with English and history. My strengths are very much in the essay-based subjects. I am thinking about studying politics with philosophy and I may want to become a solicitor.'

The second example encompasses all three of your initial questions: you would be carrying on with politics; you would be able to enter your chosen career after doing a CPE (Common Professional Examination) conversion course; and you are picking up a new subject that you think will interest you. It is probable that you had originally considered doing a law degree but you realized that, for law, the actual university you go to is very important and you felt it would be easier to get on to a politics and philosophy course than a law course.

Now let us look at each of the initial questions in turn and consider some of the additional factors that should have influenced your decision.

### **If you have chosen a subject based on your A level/AVCE subjects, did you consider the following?**

- Even if you do a degree that is a continuation of one of your A levels, there are still going to be marked differences in content. For example: an economics degree will involve far more statistics than the A level; a biology degree will include far more chemistry than the A level (hence the common requirement for chemistry A level).
- Some arts subjects, such as English, are incredibly competitive – the standard offer from most traditional universities would be AAB or higher. Did you consider whether you could get what you wanted from a degree by studying some other subject (for example, modern languages, philosophy, cultural studies, American studies, modern European studies)?
- Science degrees in subjects related to A levels (chemistry, physics, biology, maths) are much more flexible in their entry requirements, especially at the clearing stage. The difference in the range of choices open to a student with three arts A levels at CCC and a student with three science A levels at CCC are striking.
- Even if you do not know what career you would like to go into, and you have therefore chosen a subject you have enjoyed at A level, did you still think about the career implications?

### **If you have chosen a subject based on your ideas about your future career, did you consider the following?**

- A large number of careers now have graduate-only entry – either officially or unofficially. Teaching, professional surveying, professional engineering, chartered accountancy and medicine are some examples.
- Some careers require a specific degree (for example, pharmacy, hotel management) while others just require a degree (for example, chartered accountancy, retail management). It is worth noting that for some careers, such as chartered accountancy, employers can be very concerned about your original A level results.
- If you choose a degree that is career specific then it must match your own personal profile. Does it reflect your interests, does it suit your abilities, does it accord with your values and attitudes? The way to find out is to do some research: if possible get some work experience; talk to people who work in the career area; look at information in careers libraries and on the internet.
- What if you change your mind? How easy will it be to gain entry to another career field? This will vary from one vocational degree to another, but very often core skills gained in one degree can be useful for another career area. For example, a primary teaching graduate will have acquired very useful communication skills that can be applied to other areas of work.

## **If you have chosen a subject based on developing an interest in something new, did you consider the following?**

- New subjects can be divided into two categories: degrees with a career link and degrees with no obvious career link. Which is yours?
- Examples of degrees *without* an obvious career link include anthropology, philosophy and classics. Students choosing such subjects are prompted by their personal interests, but they also need to read up about their subject and research courses through university prospectuses. People, particularly parents, often worry about the employment prospects of these graduates; in fact, their levels of employment tend to be the same as for other non-vocational graduates.
- Examples of degrees *with* a career link include psychology (though only a minority of these graduates become professional psychologists) and media studies (though such graduates are in no way guaranteed entry into the media). Remember that the main reason to study these subjects is that you are very interested in the content of the course – what may follow on from them in terms of a career is a bonus!

## Choosing a university

Let us now presume that your decision about what to study has been made. How did you then narrow down your choices to the six you put on your UCAS form? Your main considerations would probably have been: course content; your predicted grades; the location of the university; the reputation of the university.

### **Course content**

- Many degrees will be very similar to each other, either because they have to meet the requirements of professional bodies (for example, law, medicine, psychology, electrical engineering) or because past practice has led to degrees in certain fields having similar content (business studies is one of these).
- If course content was fairly similar, did you look into the methods of assessment (exams, assessments, modules) as a means of narrowing down your choices? Different methods of assessment suit different people.
- On the other hand, some degrees with the same title vary greatly in content (geography, history, media studies and languages are examples). Did you look closely at the course information to see what you would be getting?
- Some courses provide great variety through the range of options on offer. Some universities have an in-built system for giving you a wide range of choice (for example, through faculties). Did this influence your decision?

### **Predicted grades**

- These will have been based on a number of things: your GCSE results; your AS level and module results at the end of the lower sixth; your overall performance in the sixth form. Schools are now expert at predicting the right grades for students, so you have to trust them. If schools get it wrong, it is normally because they have made the predictions too high.
- The more popular the degree course you apply for, the higher your predicted grades need to be. For example, English, law, medicine and veterinary science will normally require AAB (or even higher). If you are not predicted these grades then your application will probably be unsuccessful. Were you realistic when you chose your course?
- Some degree courses, such as chemistry or mechanical engineering, are experiencing a decline in applications and you may have decided to take more of a risk. If the university was looking for BBC and you were predicted CCC you may still have a chance of being made an offer.

### **Location of the university**

All kinds of issues come into play here and it really boils down to personal preference. So how did you decide where you wanted to go?

- Did you think you would prefer a greenfield site, redbrick university or city campus?

- Would you like to go away or be a home student?
- Were you influenced by religious or family issues?
- Was the nearness to or distance from home a deciding factor?
- What about the costs of being a student in a particular city?
- Does the university provide accommodation or do you have to find it yourself?
- Is there a good ratio of male students to female students?
- Are you a supporter of the city's football team?

### Reputation of the university

In the past, a university's reputation might have rested pretty much on hearsay. Nowadays, there is more information on which to base a judgement. The HEFCE Research Assessment Exercise and the Quality Assessment Authority Teaching Quality Survey are the main sources of independent assessment. This information is available in *The Times Good University Guide*, published annually.

Finally, have you thought carefully about your reasons for wanting to go to university? Sometimes people use university as a means of leaving home, or of delaying going into full-time work. This is fine up to a point. However, we would suggest that, for anyone contemplating a university course, *at least one* of the following points must apply.

- You know your academic strengths (confirmed by exam results or teachers' opinions) and you would like to continue studying a particular subject at university.
- You have a career idea that matches your interests, abilities, values and attitudes.
- You have developed an interest in a new subject that matches your interests, abilities, values and attitudes.

So now let us ask the question again: why have you applied for your course? Hopefully, you have an answer.

## 2. 'Tell me more about yourself'

As well as questions specifically related to your chosen course, interviewers are highly likely to throw in some more general topics for discussion. In doing so, they are trying to discover more about your personality, your values and your outlook on life. Here is a list of examples, with some hints from us about how to formulate your answers. Remember: you could be asked some or none of these questions.

At the end of this section you will find some very perceptive comments given by real-life sixth-formers soon after their university interviews. Their advice is worth reading.

### Sample interview questions

- Tell us about your school subjects.
- What grades do you expect to get?
- What is your strongest subject?

Ø Make sure you are positive in your answers. If you have found a subject or topic difficult, what steps have you taken to overcome this?

- Why have you applied to this university?

Ø This is your chance to show that you have read the prospectus, looked at the website and visited on the university open day.

- Why have you applied for a deferred entry?
  - What plans have you got for your year off?
  - If you have had a year off, what did you do and what did you learn from it?
- ∅ Most admissions tutors will be happy with any gap-year plans, as long as you know what you are going to do, where you are going to do it, when you are going to do it, why you are doing it and who you are doing it with.

- What do you do in your spare time?
  - What books do you read?
  - What are your musical interests?
  - What sports do you like?
  - What is the outside interest you would most like to pursue at university?
- ∅ Please make sure that you reread your personal statement thoroughly, reminding yourself of any points that you might be questioned on.

- How did you become a senior prefect at school and what does it entail?
  - How did you get to be assistant editor of your school magazine?
  - What did you do for your Duke of Edinburgh's Award?
  - Tell us about your work experience.
- ∅ Think about how these questions can be related to the course you are applying for.
- What have you got to offer this course?
  - Why do you think we should accept you?
  - If I made you an offer of AAA, would you be depressed or would you think, 'Go for it!'
  - If you were a teacher describing yourself, what would you say?
  - What are your qualities and what are your bad points?
  - If you have a problem, how do you cope with it?
- ∅ Admissions tutors are now fed up with people saying things like, 'I'm enthusiastic, I can work in a team, I have good communication skills,' without any real evidence. Think of examples and evidence (maybe from a part-time job). Otherwise these statements are meaningless.

- Are you ambitious?
  - What are your main ambitions?
  - What are your career aims?
  - What challenges are you looking for?
  - Do you have any heroes?
- ∅ These questions are intended to discover whether you know where you are going in life and how you are going to get there. Someone who is hopeful about the future will always impress.

- What do you think about student loans and student finance generally?
  - Will you be living in halls or at home?
- ∅ Be honest, but try to see all sides of the issue.

### Students' comments

- 'The man who showed us round the department turned out to be the interviewer, so you have to be conscious of making a good impression *all* the time.'
- 'Make sure you can justify/defend *everything* you put on your UCAS form.'
- 'It's important to be properly prepared. I made a list of all the possible questions I would be asked and how to answer them. I also made a list of all the questions I could ask about the course – number of teachers, types of projects, etc.'

- ‘I had developed some outline answers in my mind, which were very useful, but I’m glad I didn’t go into the interview room with a set of stock memorized answers to a set of stock questions. I was asked questions I wasn’t quite expecting and I was asked questions from a different angle to how I was expecting.’
- ‘My interviews might have gone badly if I hadn’t prepared some questions of my own to ask, as the very first thing they asked me was, “Have you got any questions?”’
- ‘It’s good to know a bit about the college and course beforehand. For example, I was asked a question about social anthropology, which I was prepared for because I knew it was the tutor’s research area (you can look in the course prospectus).’
- ‘They didn’t ask me about things I hadn’t learnt at school. They didn’t try to catch me out. Or if they did it was too subtle for me to notice!’
- ‘After having had five Cambridge interviews I can quite confidently say that they are not as daunting as you might expect.’
- ‘He was very hostile when I walked in. He sat with his feet on the desk, chewing gum, throughout the interview.’
- ‘The phone rang in the middle.’
- ‘I think that the hostile interviewer was just trying to put me under pressure to see how I would react.’
- ‘The panel did not look up once. They simply took notes and made no comment to my answers. At the end they told me they had many people to see, so they interrupted me as I was answering a question and asked me to leave. So I was really surprised to get an offer of CCC. The interview was dreadful and I was expecting a rejection.’
- ‘I arrived slightly late due to transport problems but they didn’t seem to mind. It did, however, put me ill at ease and I was somewhat disorientated as I was called for interview as soon as I arrived. This should be avoided at all costs!’
- ‘The people interviewing you are the cleverest in the world. There’s no point trying to trick them by pretending to have read books you haven’t – they personally know the authors!’
- ‘Never pretend you have nice intelligent hobbies such as art or stamp collecting – these guys are experts on everything.’
- ‘As I was leaving the room one of the interviewers wanted a sheet of paper back from me and held out her hand. Embarrassingly, I shook it. So there goes my place then!’
- ‘Don’t be worried if everyone around you seems like a brain in a jar – it’s not all they’re looking for (I hope)!’

### **3. ‘Is there anything you’d like to ask?’**

At some point in the interview you will probably be asked if you have any questions. Sometimes this will come at the end of the interview. Some interviewers, however, will make it an integral part

of the conversation and the question may come quite early on. The important thing is not to ask a question just for the sake of it. Only ask something you really want to know the answer to.

You will probably have questions about the content and structure of the course (read the prospectus carefully). If these have not already been covered during the interview, then ask.

In addition, here are some ideas for you to think about. Information about the following areas is not always included in prospectuses or departmental brochures and so may form a basis for your questions.

- The career prospects for graduates.
- The opportunities for post-graduate research.
- The study facilities. (Is the course taught on a single site? Is there a departmental library?)
- The way the course is taught. (Are there lectures, seminars or tutorials?)
- The personal support for students. (Is there a personal tutor system?)
- The placements for sandwich courses. (How are they organized? Who is responsible for finding the placement?)
- The accommodation situation.
- The possibility of meeting some students currently on the course.

## 4. Personal preparation and presentation

### *Points to remember*

- The fact that you have been invited for an interview means that the university is interested in you, so that is half your battle won.
- In any interview, as in any conversation, there should be a two-way interaction. Make sure you participate and contribute.
- An interview can last anything between ten minutes and an hour.
- Interviews are usually conducted by one interviewer, but there could be two, three or even four of them.
- There is no such thing as the perfect interview.

### *Preparation*

- Read carefully any material that is sent to you before the interview, so that you know what to expect when you get there.
- Reread the university prospectus and details about the course.
- Photocopy or print off your personal statement and reread this thoroughly before the interview.
- Prepare some questions you may want to ask (see previous chapter). Make sure they have not already been answered in information you have been sent by the university.
- Plan your journey. If an overnight stay is involved, plan for this as well. Do *not* be late or in a rush.

### *Presentation*

- If you are applying for a vocational degree (for example, medicine or hotel management) dress smartly and appropriately.
- For most degrees, dress in clothing that you feel comfortable with, and that will not distract the interviewer from the points you want to make.
- Do *not* chew gum – whatever course you are applying for!

- Think about what your body language is conveying. Do *not* sit slumped in your seat wearing a baseball cap! It is important to engage with the interviewer from the start.
- When it comes to handshakes, sitting down, starting to talk, and so on, take your lead from the interviewer.
- Work on making eye contact, regulating your voice levels and putting across an appropriate level of friendliness and warmth.