

Monday, 25 January 2010

How to prepare for a university interview

As universities begin to respond to your UCAS application, you might find that one or more of your offers are 'subject to interview'. Other universities meanwhile might not mention an interview as part of your conditions, but will invite you to attend an interview as part of a post-application visit (or similar). If you fall into either of these categories, read on...

In preparing this article I've avoided 'giving the answers' or suggesting responses to specific interview questions. Instead I've highlighted some key themes so you can approach your interview knowing that you've prepared to the best of your ability. A quick Internet search will offer you pointers of varying quality, although as it can be hard to distinguish the hearsay from the truth, combined with the fact that interviews might vary from place-to-place, I've instead chosen to focus on some of the basic issues. Here then is a list of 10 points to help you prepare for a university interview.

1. Determine the purpose of the interview

The first thing to work out is whether the interview will have a direct impact on your chance of being offered a place on your chosen university course. If your conditional offer is 'subject to performance at interview' then your suitability for the course will be assessed and you will most likely be in competition with other candidates. Naturally there's a clear need to give some serious thought to this interview. Where your interview doesn't have a direct bearing on your offer, there's less pressure 'to perform'. Nevertheless it's still worth trying to set a good impression, not least as the interview will most likely take notes during or after the interview. There's no guarantee, but if you just missed your conditions but came across really well during your 'informal interview' then there's a chance that the university might give you the benefit of the doubt and honour your place.

2. Find out the format of the interview

The picture most people have of an interview involves one or more members of a panel sitting behind a desk, firing questions at an anxious interviewee. The reality can be quite different, particularly when it comes to university interviews. Firstly, the interviewer(s) will probably try and put you at ease, on the basis that they'll get a better picture of you if you're relaxed (although that's not a signal for you to lean back in your chair and to put your feet up on their desk.) In some cases applicants will be interviewed by a panel, although it's more common for there to be a single interviewer. The interview will nearly always involve a 'one-to-one' session although in some cases it might also include some group discussion where you will be assessed on your ability to interact with other candidates. The interview might also be part of a longer departmental visit where you are shown the facilities and have the opportunity to speak to current undergraduates - although this part of the visit isn't assessed, it will be useful in helping you to decide whether the place 'feels right'. You're within your rights to phone or e-mail the university in advance to find out what the format that your interview will take and whether you are expected to bring any additional materials or evidence of your work.

3. Think about your interviewer

In the unlikely event that you know in advance who will interview you, you might want to do a little Internet research to see if you can find out about their particular academic interests - it might be that you share some interests which will provide you with a talking point during the interview. Nevertheless, it's more likely you won't know who your interviewer is beforehand. However, you can make some assumptions that will have a bearing on how you approach the interview. Firstly, there's a strong chance that your interviewer will teach on your chosen course, which means they'll be weighing up whether you would be an enthusiastic and successful student. Secondly, it's reasonable to assume that your interviewer will have a deep understanding and passion for their subject. Thirdly, it's likely that you'll be one of many candidates that that your interviewer will see, possibly all in a single, long day. Fourth and finally, it's almost certain that the interviewer will have a copy of your UCAS form to hand, and will have studied your personal statement. It pays to 'put yourself in your interviewer's shoes.'

4. Consider what the interviewer will be looking for

Picking up from the previous point, what qualities would a lecturer look for in a model student? Are there any skills or qualities that are vital for the course you have applied to? Do you have any experience or achievements that are directly relevant to the subject that will impress the interviewer? Can you show that you really know what his or her course or subject is about, or do you just have a vague feeling about it? Perhaps the prospectus might have some clues as to the type of student that would be suitable for the course...

5. Anticipate the questions you might be asked

It's difficult here to predict the questions that you might be asked as these might be influenced by the subject as well as the interviewer's personal preferences. However, it should go without saying that you should enter the interview room with clear and convincing responses to the following questions:

'Why do you want to study this course in particular?'

'What is it about this university that encouraged you to apply?'

'Do you have any relevant experience?'

'And what qualities or skills do you have that would make you a suitable student for this course or career?'

Put simply, it isn't enough to explain that "I want to study (insert your subject here) because I think I'll like it". Similarly, when asked which particular parts of the course interest you, replying "erm...just all of it really" gives the impression that either a) you haven't bothered to look at the course in detail and/or b) you're not really all that interested in the subject. You don't necessarily want to draft a written response to each question, although it might be worth taking some notes on how you'd respond.

You might wish to do some Internet research about questions that might arise, but bear in mind that for all the good information out there on the web, there's also plenty of irrelevant or inaccurate stuff. Basically, don't pin all expectation of what you might be asked in your interview, around what a stranger has posted on the web.

6. Decide what you want to say about yourself

One of the most common mistakes made by candidates is arriving at interview without having thought about how he or she wants to come across. It isn't simply a case of turning up and 'hoping for the best', particularly as you might be 'competing' against other applicants who have similar (or better) qualifications. So, what are your strengths? What evidence do you have that you would be a diligent student? How can you project your enthusiasm for the course and subject? Put simply, if you can't explain your qualities and suitability for the course, how are you going to convince the interviewer that you merit a place ahead of another student?

7. Have a dummy interview

It's reasonable to assume that your university interview will be the most important of its kind that you have been invited to attend in your life so far - after all, a university interview is going to have more bearing on your career than say, one for a Saturday job. It's a really good idea therefore to have a practice run before your interview. Having anticipated the questions you might be asked (point 5) then decided how you'll respond (point 6) why not get a friend or family member to perform the role of interviewer, while you play yourself, the applicant. As well as helping you to visualise what might happen in your interview, it will be a really good test of whether your answers sound convincing or whether you come across as vague, unprepared or unenthusiastic.

8. Remember, it's a two-way process

So far, we've considered how you can set a good impression at interview. It's worth remembering though that you have to decide whether the university and course is 'right' for you, particularly as you might have offers from a number of different universities. It's absolutely the case that you should approach the interview with the aim of giving a good impression, but think also about the impact the university has on you. After your interview you might want to reflect on whether you felt welcome, whether the atmosphere in the department was positive, did the facilities look up to scratch? So yes, make a good impression at interview but don't be afraid to ask questions of your own about the course, department, teaching method or any other areas that will help you to decide whether this is the place you'd like to spend 3 or 4 years as a student.

9. Don't be afraid to 'sell' yourself

Just like when you prepared your UCAS Personal Statement, if there's an occasion where you're justified in letting someone know about your strengths, then this is it. So if you're passionate about the subject or have some really interesting experience, don't be afraid to let the interview know. Mind you...

10. Be honest!

It's fine to 'big yourself up' as long as you've actually done all the things you claim! If you've done something unusual or interesting the interviewer will be keen to hear more, therefore if you've discovered the secrets of alchemy, you'll need to be able to talk about it. And remember, the interviewer will have a copy of your UCAS form to hand therefore what you say in the interview should match up with the written portrait you prepared before Christmas!