

This is a summary of a presentation given by the admissions tutor of King's College, Cambridge on 27 April 2009 at the English College in Prague. The main aim of the presentation was to help students to decide if Cambridge University or, more specifically, King's College is the place they want to study at in the future and to give practical information about the application procedure. The presentation was divided into sections, indicated by the headings.

Why Choose Cambridge?

One answer is obvious ; Cambridge is one of the world's best universities. A second answer is that it shares only with Oxford one special feature, which is its college system. Cambridge has faculties, like any other university, and students go to these for lectures and seminars in their subject. Then there are the colleges. These provide for everyday needs, such as accommodation, food etc. They also provide one individual (or very small group) tutorial, again in the student's subject, per week. This gives students a lot of individual contact time with a person who teaches them. The tutorial is based on a piece of written work the student has done and is given by a professor who teaches in the student's faculty but is also a member (fellow) of the student's college.

How to Choose a College

Firstly, the majority of students apply to one Cambridge college. It is not possible to apply to more than one but it is possible to make an open application to the whole university. All colleges generally offer all subjects and offer an equal quality of education, facilities etc. Students generally choose a college on the basis of its size, atmosphere, architecture, distance from the city centre etc. This choice is often a matter of personal feeling, so it is a good idea to go to Cambridge and look at different colleges, if possible. As for King's College, three points were made related to its recent history which might increase its attractiveness for Slovak (Czech) students and which suggest that it is (relatively speaking) an open-minded, tolerant institution :

1. King's College was the first of Cambridge's older colleges to admit students from the UK's state schools in large numbers. This was in the 1960s.
2. It was the first of the older colleges (in the 1970s!!) to admit women.
3. Five years ago, King's College discovered that only 7% of its undergraduate intake was educated outside the UK. It was determined to increase this proportion and, today, over 20% of undergraduates were educated abroad. The college believes that this is a positive development in all respects. It wants to continue to encourage applications from non-UK students.

Academic Requirements

Cambridge University generally requires Slovak students to achieve at least three ones in Maturita. It also requires foreign students to achieve an overall band score of seven in the IELTS academic test, with no score below seven in any of the four parts. Cambridge, like all UK universities, makes conditional offers, ie the student can go there if they achieve the required grades/scores. Cambridge courses are very focused. There are not many courses which offer a combination of subjects. This means that, before applying, students must think extremely carefully about whether the course really is the right one for them.

Costs

EU students are treated the same as UK students. Cambridge charges a tuition fee of 3,200 British pounds per year. This covers the cost of teaching only. Students can get interest-free loans from the UK government to pay for this. The loan becomes repayable only when the student graduates and starts to earn more than 15,000 pounds per year. Students must also cover their living costs. The university estimates that these are generally around 6,000-7,000 pounds per year (including accommodation at the college, food etc). It was emphasized that, although these costs are high, it is more affordable to study in the UK than in the US. Also, there are funds available in the colleges to help students from less wealthy families meet some of their costs.

Application and Selection Procedure

A student wishing to study at Cambridge in academic year 2010/2011 must send an application to UCAS (University Central Admissions System) before October 15, 2009. Students will name Cambridge University or one of its colleges as their first choice (of four) on the UCAS form. There is a supplementary form specific to Oxford and Cambridge and students might be asked to send samples of academic work. King's College receives 750 applications per year for 120 places. It immediately rejects around 10% of these applications. The other students are all invited for interview. Interviews take place in the second, or possibly third week in December. Students applying to Cambridge must keep these weeks free. They must attend the interview when the college says. It cannot be postponed for any reason.

The interview consists of a written test followed by at least one 30-minute interview with a professor of the subject the student has applied for. The interview is subject-specific and very academic. It consists of questions the student probably cannot answer(!) because the interviewers need to see how students deal with complex academic problems. The interview is designed to be equally difficult for all students, whatever examination or assessment system they have experienced previously.

In January, students hear the college's decision. Three decisions are possible :

1. Rejection. This happens to the majority of Cambridge applicants. It was stressed that students must consider their 2nd, 3rd and 4th choices on the UCAS form very carefully to ease their next steps.
2. Rejection because of lack of space. The college the student has applied to is full but the student is considered to be of the right caliber to study at Cambridge. His/Her application is circulated to other Cambridge colleges who may or may not offer a place.
3. Conditional offer. See above.

It was stressed that, overall, the colleges of Cambridge University provide a supportive, welcoming environment and most foreign students are happy there.

Questions

This section details questions asked by the audience followed by the presenter's response. Only questions which did not ask for repetition of points in the presentation and which are relevant to Slovak students are given here.

Are students assessed on the basis of coursework or examinations or both?

Almost exclusively on the basis of examinations. Exams cannot be postponed or failed. Students must complete coursework assignments but these provide part of the basis for examinations rather than being part of the final assessment.

Should the personal statement, which students must write as part of the application, be academic in focus or should it detail personal interests as well?

It should be academic in focus. Personal interests which students detail in the statement should provide a context for their academic interests. Cambridge are interested in whether a student has the necessary academic interest to study there, not in whether the student is a sociable person or does many things in his/her spare time.

Is it possible to apply to Cambridge and Oxford at the same time?

No. Nor is it possible to apply to, eg, more than one Cambridge college at the same time. However, it is possible to make an 'open' application to Cambridge University, not specifying a preference for any particular college.

There are many possibilities to pursue sporting or artistic interests at Cambridge so isn't the university interested in whether a student has such interests?

The student's academic interests and ability are the university's priority and it does not compromise on this point. Any outside interests a student pursues should be in his/her spare time and must not interfere with academic work.

Do the colleges provide accommodation?

Yes. Rent for this is one of the student's living costs. The colleges subsidise this rent, to make it more affordable, and students do not pay during the summer. This means, of course, that they are 'kicked out' of the accommodation when the summer holiday starts. Nearly all students, with very few exceptions, live in their colleges.

Are there any courses at Cambridge which offer a combination of subjects?

There are not many. Most Cambridge courses are very focused and students must therefore choose their subject with great care. Generally, if a student wants to study a more diverse course, Cambridge is probably not the right university for him/her. However, there are exceptions. Natural Sciences at Cambridge includes study of five different sciences in the first two years and three in the final year. There is also a course entitled Politics, Psychology, Sociology and International Relations(!) Some courses also have a foreign language element within them.

Are there any advantages or disadvantages to making an ‘open’ application rather than one to a particular college?

A possible disadvantage is that an open application will go to one of the colleges with the lowest number of applications per place. These colleges are not less popular because they offer a lower quality of education but because they are generally more modern, less picturesque, less well-known and further from the city centre than the more popular ones. This might mean, in theory, that an ‘open application’ has a slightly better chance of succeeding than an application to a particular college.

Note

Students interested in applying to Cambridge or Oxford University for 2010/2011 must send their completed UCAS application forms, including personal statement and teacher’s reference, before October 15, 2009. Students interested in studying in the UK but not at Oxford or Cambridge must do so before January 15, 2010. It is important to plan these applications carefully and start examining the possibilities as early as possible. Summer 2009 is not too soon to start. Students must also respect the fact that a teacher’s reference for UCAS is a detailed document of 4,000 characters and takes a long time to write. It is absolutely unacceptable for a student to announce that he/she requires this reference one day before the application deadline. Requests for references should be made at least two weeks before the deadline.