

**UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
FACULTY OF LAW**

OPEN DAY 2016

Admissions to Cambridge

Speaker: Mr Henry Mares

Thank you very much. My name is Henry Mares. I teach here at the faculty and welcome to the Faculty of Law. I hope this talk is interesting. It probably won't be quite as entertaining but, nonetheless, for what it's worth, this is a public service essentially to dispel some of the myths that accumulate around applying to this faculty and to Cambridge in general. In the event, there will be time for questions at the end and then there's a question and answer session as well after this, but if something occurs to you as a question just put your hand up, or yell out if I don't see you, and I'll try to answer it directly if it's relevant to the thing that I'm talking about. So, I teach legal history and criminal law and legal philosophy here in the faculty, and for a college called Sidney Sussex which is just one of the many colleges here in the university. This is a general, centrally-produced slide show about applying to do law. If it's of interest I hope you do apply. I certainly think that it's a pretty good faculty. I used to teach at Oxford, also a very strong faculty. I like teaching at both places; the classes are small. Most of my students are much smarter than I am; they work incredibly hard; it's just a pleasure to work with them, it is really is, and the work is very interesting.

The first threshold issue would be what we're looking for in law applicants, and this is essentially from our website; academic ability and potential, motivation, enthusiasm for the course. We're looking for people who are bright and who are going to work hard, right, to sum up these criteria. What's interesting about the criteria that we've advertised is what's not included, right? So, what's not included amongst our criteria is that you come from a particularly fancy background, or that you play polo, or that you like swanning around in a blazer and boater, or anything like that. It's just irrelevant. The criteria are just academic ability and willingness to work very, very hard. We can't open up your brains to determine these matters and so we look for proxy signals of your academic ability and your willingness to work hard and we do that through our admissions testing and interviews and your school grades and things like that. Those are the properties that we use to determine the extent to which you meet our requirements. It's not a requirement that you want to be a lawyer, merely that you want to study law because you find it interesting. Of course, most people who want to study law do it because they want to be lawyers, but you don't need to say it. You don't need to lie and say, "Oh, no, since I was two I wanted to be a lawyer," if that's not actually true. You're welcome, that's fine if it is true, you don't have to pretend; all we want is that you apply; that you're interested in studying and working hard. Just to repeat myself, but it's true. So, my point, really, don't fret about meeting the criteria. Work hard at school, apply, see what happens. Don't stress about it. I know there's a lot of stress, right. In summary, it's not a reductive... I'm truly not trying to sound patronising or anything like that, it's just what are you going to do, you know? Work hard, choose academic subjects, you know, be a good student, apply and then we'll see.

Okay. Overview of the admissions process. This is pretty straightforward. You have to submit an application via UCAS on, you know, the general, centralised processes. It's a bit earlier than for some other universities. In the first term of the academic year we get all these applications and decide whether or not to invite you to interview. You will be interviewed in late November/early December, just after our undergraduates have gone home. At interview you'll sit the Cambridge Law Test and then in January you'll get a decision. I'll go through these steps in more detail. The deadline is slightly earlier if you're applying from overseas, I hasten to add, and then you've got a further week to fill out a supplementary application questionnaire specific to Cambridge; we just ask for a bit more information which you can provide. The college to which you have applied decides whether to invite you to interview. Fine. Then you're interviewed, etc. Okay. Questions about this part, I'll go through all these steps in more detail. Let's have a look at the important parts. Applying, course choice. Well, there's only one law course to apply to here in Cambridge. It's not the case that if you apply to law with studies in Europe that's a separate UCAS entry, it's just law, and then if you want to spend a year abroad you will decide that later on. You need to choose a college, if you'd like to choose a college, or you can just say, "I don't mind which college I end up at," and then you can make an open application and that's absolutely fine. If you make an open application the university will allocate you to a college and then you'll be treated exactly the same as anyone who personally decided to apply to that college. Purely anecdotally, I don't think I even know, come interview, who's applied directly and who has made an open application and ended up at my college. It's just they're treated exactly the same. It makes no bones, so don't stress about it. If you have a strong preference for a particular college then apply to it if you'd like to, right, but if you don't really mind then just make an open application and don't worry about it and don't distract yourself from studying at school, which is the most important thing you could be doing right now. So don't fret. I think law is a subject that's available at any undergraduate college in this institution. All of them are good. Most students are happy whichever college they end up at. Some colleges have very old architecture; some colleges have very modern brutalist architecture; some people prefer one or the other, that might be because some colleges are slightly closer to the centre of the town, or to the law faculty; other colleges are further away and quieter, whatever, there also might be some colleges are bigger or smaller. These are relevant criteria, perhaps, if you feel strongly about any of them, but if you don't, then don't worry about it; just make an open application.

You have to write a personal statement as well. Given the qualities that we're looking for: people who are bright, interested in law, and who can manage their time, you know, you'd want to set out things that deal with those issues in your personal statement. But we know that you're also writing a personal statement with an eye to other universities to which you're applying. You would be foolish and I don't recommend you only to apply to Cambridge. That doesn't strike me as a sensible strategy for anyone, so you have to write with an eye to whichever other universities you're also applying and they might be very interested in the fact that you play tenor saxophone or whatever other extra-curricular activities you do. I'm not at all sneering at these extras, they make the world a better place if you do them, so please do them, but they're not going to help you get into Cambridge in any particular way. So, the fact that you talk about these things in extra-curricular in your personal statement is fine; it's sensible to do that because some other university might care; we don't particularly care about the substance of these things except that it might be some evidence of your time management skills. So, by all means talk about them in your personal statement, but don't stress about them from our perspective, is the message I'm trying to convey. The personal statement: convince us, if you can, that you want to study law and that you're going to work hard. There's other evidence for that too, the fact that you've worked hard at school. Make sure it's accurate. Don't try to

mislead us and say stuff that's untrue. It's just not worth the stress of doing that. Write clearly, grammatically. There's no need to have a host of extra-curriculars. Those would be the bullet points here. Okay?

Q: Excuse me?

Yes, sir.

Q: You said what you don't want. What do you want then?

I guess the point I'm trying to convey is that, given that we do interview people and we do a bunch of other tests as well, and that we get your grades, for us at Cambridge, I think the personal statement is perhaps less important than it would be for other universities. So some sense of the fact that an applicant wants to study law at university and why they want to do that might be helpful. Some explanation of anything sub-optimal in academic track record might be helpful. Those might be helpful. Otherwise, generally there'll be a lot of content aimed at other universities, I think. The admissions interviews will be run by the colleges to whom you've applied or to whom you've been allocated. There is some variation between interviews and techniques of interviews. This is not something to be daunted by but something to embrace, I suggest to you. It's possible that, and indeed, although I don't do this myself, I know other colleagues do, it's possible that material in the personal statement may be the starting point for a broader conversation about somebody's interests if the particular interviewer thinks that that's relevant. All I would say is do not be alarmed if someone doesn't do that because many people don't; some people do. So, some people say, "I see that you've written here that you're very interested in this recent issue of..." whatever it is, the legal issues involving the war in Iraq, that was popular a few years ago. People would say, "I'm very interested in the legal issues in the war in Iraq". So, someone might say, "All right, great. Tell me about that," and it might go on from there. Someone else might just say, "Great, you're interested in that, lots of people are, let's talk about something else that you haven't prepared," right. They might deliberately not focus on your personal statement. There's variation. So, is that an answer to your question? Yes. Okay. So it can be helpful as a starting point though I would emphasise, well, to go back a step, I'd be wary about making claims to legal knowledge in your personal statement if you're actually unsure about the legal issues involved, because someone may well be interested in following that up if they think that that's relevant. I probably wouldn't bother, but someone else might. So be careful about those things.

Colleges will vary in their criteria for deciding to whom it is that they make an offer of an interview, but in Cambridge we tend to interview quite a few people, and it's generally people for whom it's reasonable to expect A*, AA, or the equivalent when they complete. So we look at what information we have and try to work if it's someone who's in that ballpark or not, and if they are in that ballpark then we are likely to invite them to interview at the college, but it's a decision for any particular college. At interview you may well be in an office such as the one pictured, which is far nicer than my office, sadly, and you'll sit on a chair or sofa and people ask you questions and have a chat. I can't emphasise enough that techniques differ and some people are very interested in trying to understand you as a person and look into your eyes and see your soul, and other people are not and may just say, "Okay, this interview will be three exercises. Exercise one is this. Okay, done. Exercise two is that. Great. Okay. Done. Exercise three is this. Okay. Done. Fine. Thank you so much", you know, move onto the second interview now. So, there is some variation in these things.

It's likely, although it's not for any particular college, that you'll be asked to engage in some legal reasoning task or something akin to that. The kind of reasoning involved might look something like the problems that you've just discussed with Janet O'Sullivan and Graham Virgo in the previous session. But I'd also suggest that if you want you can have a look at this website, www.myheplus.com, which is run by this university, and there are several videos there where members of the faculty explain legal issues and there are little questions and then they discuss them and things like that. So if you're interested – and this is free; you don't need to buy expensive books, but you're welcome to, but you don't need to – this is free and you can just have a look at that.

So what are we looking for in admissions interviews? Well, these are the same criteria that we always look for: intellectual curiosity; suitability for the course; willingness and ability to engage with interviewers. But I can't stress enough that we're not looking for knowledge of legal matters. You don't need to know any law. You don't need to drop in terms like 'mens rea' or 'actus reus' or 'res ipsa loquitur' or anything like that. People do sometimes; generally they just confuse themselves, so just try to answer the question. The only piece of advice I can really meaningfully give you is engage, think aloud so people can see what your reasoning process is, or hear what your reasoning process is, as opposed to just sitting there hesitantly, or apparently hesitantly. You may be the most brilliant person in the world, you probably are really, really, really smart, but if we can't see evidence of that then we just don't know. So think aloud; talk aloud; explain your reasoning and that will be quite helpful, I think. Try to treat it like an exercise or a game, right, and don't get too stressed, if that's possible. I know people do but, please, all I'm saying, it's not worth it. Right. At interview then you will be asked to sit the Cambridge Law Test. We don't require the LNAT, as it's called, although many of you will sit it for other universities. Instead there's a one-hour test which is the same at any college you go to now. You'll be given a passage to read and then you get asked to write two essays on it in English. That lasts for an hour. Every college uses the same test. It's straightforward. There are examples on the Law Faculty website and so the best preparation for this, I think, is to look at those examples and work through them in an hour. You don't have to do that. You don't need to know any law, but it would be sensible to see what the test is like. It would be sensible to do some preparation. It's very straightforward. It's not something to be alarmed about but I would suggest it would be helpful to do some practice and to think, when you're doing it, to write carefully in sentences and paragraphs and things like that.

So, overall, what information do we consider? Your academic record, your predicted performance, your reference from your school, your personal statement, your performance at interview, your performance in the Cambridge Law Test, and then the college will weigh these things up and make their decision. So they might make you an offer. Typically they'd say, "We're happy to offer you a place. Please do come if you can get A*AA or an IB score that's roughly the equivalent." They might, unfortunately, say, "Thank you so much for applying but I'm afraid we just don't have the capacity to offer you a place in the coming year," or you might be placed in the pool. So many colleges say, "You seem very strong. We don't have room for you ourselves. We'll place you in a collection of files and then another college that does have room can look through that collection of files and decide to make you an offer." So this is a pooling system and it works quite well. Once again, purely anecdotally, in my college we've taken somebody from the pool three years ago; she's graduated with first class honours this year, very strong degree. She's off to Oxford to graduate school and then she's got a job offer at one of the leading commercial law firms in the City. So people do flourish and they come through this and it works quite well, anecdotally speaking. So that's a, sort of, back-up safety net for the admissions process. So you're placed in the pool, after the pool you might get still

rejected. That's a harsh word. We may not be able to offer you a place, is a politer way of saying that, or we may be able to make you an offer if you're placed in the pool. There's further information on this website which is specifically directed towards admissions to the undergraduate programme ba.law.cam.ac.uk. It has information about interviews. This is where you find past examples of the Cambridge Law Test as well, so I commend it to you.

All right. Then, otherwise, in this room, essentially now will be the students' view, as I understand it, and next door, in LG18, will be a question and answer session for parents, guardians, and teachers. So those of you who are parents, guardians, and teachers, and not prospective applicants, should move to LG18 next door. The students remain here.