

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
FACULTY OF LAW

OPEN DAY 2017

Admissions to Cambridge

Speaker: Mr Henry Mares

The first thing I should do is to say welcome and it's a delight to see you all here, it really is. I think this is a lovely faculty and I hope that you consider applying here but whether or not, this is just a talk about the process of applying. So in this talk I am not trying to sell you the faculty in a particular way, I am just trying to talk you through the actual processes that you would engage in if you were applying and the factors that we would look at. So this is who I am, my name is Henry Mares. I am one of the faculty access officers. If you were turning up – I realise none of you are – but if you were turning up in October as a new student here I would be teaching you criminal law. So the first couple of weeks you get lectures from me in a room, probably actually in this lecture theatre for a couple of hours a week. This is the generic email address that you could use if you have questions about applying to study law at Cambridge: access@law.cam.ac.uk. Don't hesitate to email and somebody will reply to that. Either me or Claire Fenton-Glynn, who you might have just already met, will reply to that with an answer to your question, but at any time during this talk just yell out if I don't see you or stick up your hand and say, "You make no sense," you know, "Explain," and I will try to explain it or I might say, "Talk to me afterwards," or something like that, right, or of course just email us.

There are open days tomorrow and the day after in all the colleges as well. I would urge you to consider, if you haven't already, going around looking at the colleges, talking to people there. Here are some other websites. Hang on a second, I am going to go back one slide. If you email access@law.cam.ac.uk and say, "Henry, could you send me these slides?" I will just send them to you, right. So don't stress about writing everything down if you don't want to right now, just email and I will just email you the slides. There is nothing private or confidential obviously enough on them, all right. Here are some websites that will be helpful. The main faculty one, ba.law.cam.ac.uk has all the official information you could possibly want. There is a blog that we run, medium.com/thinkcambridgelaw. That has a lot of information too and I will come back to that. myheplus.com also has a lot of information that you might want to consider, especially closer to interviews if you get an interview here. All right, so consider the open days, go have a look at the colleges for reasons that will become obvious if they are not already obvious.

The process – and I will go through all these in turn – you apply to study law at a college of the university via UCAS or you can make an open application, right, and you will be allocated to a college. You would be interviewed in December. It may be slightly different if you are from overseas and you are interviewed overseas but generally speaking if you are applying here and you are a British or European student you will be interviewed in Cambridge in December. At interview you sit a short test, I will go through that in a moment, and then in January you would get a letter in the mail or an email saying, "Dear so-and-so, thank you so much for your

application. Wonderful, see you in October,” or whatever the letter does say, hopefully it would say that, right. So I will go through all of these in turn now, okay.

You need to choose a college or you can make an open application and then the university would just allocate you to a college. All the colleges will take law applicants so don't stress about it. You can choose using whatever criteria you want. New/old, central/quiet and distant, big/small, that's entirely up to you, all right. However, some colleges are only for women so don't apply to them if you are a man, right. Some colleges are for mature applicants, by which we mean people who are over 21 when they arrive, right, so if you are going to be over 21 you can apply to those. You could also apply to any other college but obviously if you are going to be 18 when you arrive, don't apply to a mature college.

All colleges make their own decisions but the criteria they use are the same. So do some research, that would be a sensible thing to do. All colleges make their own admissions decisions. I can't emphasise that enough, right. Each college is sovereign and so if you have detailed, specific questions about something involving your background and admission to law, you may be better off approaching a college and saying, “Hello. I'm thinking of applying to St Custard's college. You know, could you advise me on whether my qualifications meet your criteria?” Right, because it's the college that will ultimately make that decision, not me at the faculty. You don't apply to the faculty, you apply to a college. Are there questions about that? Right, so when you are applying via UCAS you will be saying, “I want to do law at St Custard's,” or, “I want to do law at New College Cambridge,” or, “I want to do law at one of these colleges,” or, “I want to stick in an open application and then please allocate me to a college.” No questions, so this all super-familiar, great, okay, right.

The admissions criteria, well, each college will make its own decisions. The criteria are the same, right. So every college has agreed to use the same criteria. So it shouldn't matter which college you apply to, I think, is the ultimate thing but the college can provide more specific guidance. Is this making sense? It's difficult for me to tell. I have been so institutionalised now. You know, I arrived in 2002 from Australia. Now it all just seems second nature to talk about Michaelmas term and things like that but it may seem baffling to you and in that case just say, “I have no conception what you're talking about,” and then I will try to explain it. Otherwise I am just going to motor along because we don't have that much time, but please do ask questions. All right, none of you want to be the first person to ask a question but that's all right, okay.

So the admissions criteria, okay, so these are those criteria that I just referred you to: academic ability and the potential to flourish at the university, right. Thus your ability, self-discipline, motivation, commitment, desire and potential to go beyond what you have learned so far. There's no secret here, right. Essentially our admissions decisions are made on the basis of our analysis of how academically strong you are and how hard you are going to work; that's it. So if you want to know the secret, it's not a secret and I am telling you the answer now, right. It is to be really strong academically and demonstrate that you are willing to work really hard and the best way to do that is through your track record or past achievement, I think. Right, okay.

Well, students who want to study law, so if you wrote, you know, “I actually want to... I want to dance, that's what I really want to do, but I'll go to law school.” We might think, “Really? Wouldn't you be better off at the dance academy or something?” So not to trivialise it but we do want people who want to study law. You don't have to want to be a lawyer but you need to at least sort of say you want to study law and why you want to do that is entirely up to you. There are good reasons to do it, I think. It's interesting, it's rewarding, financially and other ways too,

etc., etc., etc., it can help the world, etc. Those reasons are up to you but you need to want to study law and if you really want to be an art historian, if you really want to dance, if you really want to cook, you know, these are wonderful things to do, right, but you wouldn't necessarily want to study law to do those things, okay.

Other things are not criteria for admissions, such as, for example, I mean, it makes the world a better place if you play the violin really well, it does, right. It's just irrelevant for the purposes of getting to Cambridge to study law. I mean, it may be for the purposes of applying to do music, I'm not trivialising it, right, or doing essentially anything that's non-academic. You know, that's lovely, it makes the world a better place perhaps, but for the purposes of applying to do law, truly, we would view as essentially equal shadowing a barrister and helping out at your auntie's local corner store on weekends to earn some money and help her, right. Both of them would demonstrate time management skills, both of them would demonstrate, you know, that you are doing what you can with your time. Neither of those things are particularly academic but that's okay, right? I mean, people do other things too. Grade A at violin, the Duke of Edinburgh award, being school captain, playing rugby, debating, great things to do, not going to get you into Cambridge. It's not going to bar you from getting into Cambridge but let me put it this way. In ten years of admissions decisions it's just never come up in a decision meeting, right, that someone has done any of these things. Just people read it, it's just irrelevant, okay.

So what do we look at? Well, we look at everything that we have, information about that that is relevant. Your academic record, your school reference. You have no control over your school reference, I imagine, right, but, I mean, we will certainly read it, with a pinch of salt. I mean, there was a girl who applied from Singapore when I was teaching in Oxford and they said, "Astoria is really a prima donna." I think they meant that in a bad way but she was talented. We let her in and she did well, so, you know, so don't stress about it is my point, right. The personal statement, we will come back to that. Your performance in the Cambridge Law Test, we will look at, I will come back to that too. Contextual data about your school and how many people they send to Oxbridge and things like that, we will look at that too. So we can interpret your school results in context and we look at your performance at interview as well.

Academic record, okay. It's in your interest to do well at school and to get good grades. So if you are looking for the secret, as I say, it's not a secret. I'm not saying go crazy, right, this isn't an excuse to tell your parents that you can't help with the washing up because you have got to study tonight, right, to get into Cambridge, it really isn't. Be a sensible human being but work hard at school, right. Eat leafy green vegetables, get some sleep, do a little bit of exercise; these things will help make you a healthy human being who can study hard at school, right, all of these things are good. Grades are helpful, I think. The standard offer here is A*AA if you are doing A levels, right. The average and just the average incoming student to do law at this university, has above two A*s, right. Quite a few of them have three A*s, some of them have four A*s, some of them have 45 in the IB, etc., etc., right.

The applicant pool is strong but you are definitely in the mix if you are predicted A*AA so please apply. Don't think, "That's it, there is no point in applying," right, I'm just saying the standard offer is A*AA. So if you think, "I'm likely to get three Bs and that's what my school is likely to predict for me," then all other things being equal I guess it's unlikely that you will get an offer here. That doesn't mean that you're a bad human being at all or anything like that, right, it's just you are unlikely to get an offer here because it's so competitive to get in here and because grades are important for us. Are there questions about this? Yes.

Q: I don't know if you will be able to answer this but how does that translate into like Scottish qualifications?

Yes, okay. So if you just have a look on the university website it will say what we expect in Scottish Highers, it will say what we expect in Irish qualifications, the European Baccalaureate, the International Baccalaureate, everything, it's all listed there, okay. If you are thinking about subject choices and maybe... I don't want to say too late, I mean if you have already made your choices then sort of don't stress about this, right, but if you still have some choices about what to drop or to take next year, what to take in future, the university provides advice on this too. If you just Google "Cambridge subject matters" you will get a document which will tell you that to study subjects like law we recommend as fundamental subjects English literature, history, languages and maths. Other good choices to combine would be another language, history, classical civilisation, econ, further maths, geography, philosophy, religious studies or another science. Other possible subject choices can be useful preparation, right.

So listen to the university's advice. I don't think it would eliminate you if you didn't have one of those first three or four subjects at all, at all, right, but if you are asking for advice this is the advice that we would give you. Does that make sense? So don't sit there thinking, "Oh my lord," you know, "That's it, I'm doomed," at all, at all, that would be completely the wrong impression, but if you still have the opportunity to make some choices, this is what I would recommend, following the university's advice. So there are questions and you are too polite to yell out. So the gentleman in the red shirt and then the gentleman in the green shirt, yes.

Q: How much emphasis is there on GCSEs?

We will look at them. So the first thing I have to say is the decisions are matters for the colleges, right. The colleges will look at your GCSEs but we also know GCSEs are changing. So they are now on a 1 to 9 scale, blah-blah-blah. Some people develop and change radically between their GCSE years and their A level years, that's fine. It wouldn't rule you out if you had a few grades that weren't optimal in your GCSEs, it absolutely wouldn't. What we would look for is a trajectory where your GCSEs are... you know, you are moving upwards. So you have a few dodgy GCSEs, fine. You are getting good A level grades, excellent, right, then we will expect you to keep improving like that. Is that an answer to your question? That's all I can really say. Yes, and the gentleman behind you?

Q: You have got languages up there, does that count, for dead languages as well, like Latin or Ancient Hebrew?

Those are languages to me, yes, yes. So Latin, Classical Greek, Ancient Hebrew, Sanskrit, yes, things like that, they all sound good. Okay, those are languages. Yes, more questions? Yes, lady at the back.

Q: So if you have taken two sciences and maths in your first year, then in your second year is it possible to amend it in terms of dropping... having done half of an A level and then changing to another so by the time you are entering university you have only done half of what you have recommended to do but—

So I am just going to stop you because... maybe let's have a chat about this at lunch if you are lunch or something like that, right, I will be there. Don't freak out, right. I mean, you don't have to have done an essay-based subject. We've had many people who have done three sciences

and people who have done maths and two sciences, stuff like that. These are not rules, these are just suggestions so, whatever you do, don't stress about this at the moment. Yes?

Q: Do you consider the EPQ?

Do we consider the EPQ? Yes, for sure. We will look at everything that's academic. The EPQ, informally speaking, is sometimes rated as about half an A level. I think it's rare for offers to be made on the basis of the EPQ but, yes, we would absolutely have a look at it. Gentleman in the green, yes, putting up your hand and then I will move on, yes. That's you with your hand up, yes, yes.

Q. Do you consider native languages and study of the natural world.

You have to check with the college that you are asking about that, yes. Sorry to weasel out of that question but, yes, check with the college, okay.

The personal statement. In your personal statement, this is the university's advice, you could explain your reasons for wanting to study a subject, demonstrate enthusiasm and commitment to the subject and I guess you would then say, "How do I do that?" right, and you say, "I like the idea of studying law because" and then you would point out why you want to do it, right, what makes you enthused about it. Express any particular interest from the field. "I want to study law and in particular I want to study commercial law/criminal law/international law," whatever it is. You don't say that, that's fine too. We would admit you even if you didn't specify a particular interest.

Outline how you have pursued your subject interest in your own time, however you do that, right. Maybe that's following cases in the newspaper, maybe that's going to court, maybe it's shadowing a barrister, maybe it's none of those things. That certainly would not rule you out, right. So even if you couldn't really demonstrate you have pursued this interest in your own time, it certainly doesn't eliminate you at all. The other thing I would say about the personal statement, this may be used as a starting point for discussion. So someone might say, "I have seen your personal statement. You say that you have done blah, tell me about that," right. It's an icebreaker, don't freak out about it, but it would be sensible to reread your personal statement before you turn up to interview, it would be sensible not to lie in your personal statement, it would be sensible to proofread it and have someone else proofread it too. Take the personal statement seriously but don't stress over it for the purposes of getting into law at Cambridge.

For the purposes of getting in here we will interview you, right, if you are a serious prospect. So the personal statement is to some extent subsidiary in a way that it isn't at other universities. We know that for other universities, they may care about the fact that you play grade A violin, right, so you might want to discuss that in your personal statement even though strictly speaking it's irrelevant for the purposes of getting into Cambridge. So we won't freak out if we see that in the personal statement. We will go, "Okay, that's fine," right, just we give it no weight, but some other university might, right. I mean, Harvard, maybe Harvard in assessing its incoming class to Harvard College goes, "The incoming class looks great except we need another saxophonist. This person," so like slot them in there, right, but we don't do that, we really don't. We are just looking for academic talent, okay.

Questions about the personal statement. The one useful thing I have seen in a personal statement is, in fact, a situation where someone didn't have very good GCSEs and so in a personal statement they said, "I know my GCSEs were affected by the following things, blah-blah-blah-blah-blah," and they explained it. "However, you know, that reason has gone away now and, in fact, I am doing much better in fifth form or wherever they were." So that was a helpful thing to say and then the school reference backed that up and so that was useful information. Don't stress over the personal... I know you have control over it so you feel as though you should really, you know, spend hours agonising over the placement of a comma as though you are writing a poem or something like that, right, but it's not like that, you know. Take it seriously but don't stress about it. Recall, as I said, other things are not criteria for admissions, right. So this is my point about playing the violin or something. Put it in your personal statement if you want, because Birmingham might care or Harvard might care but we won't, right.

In particular, let me just say, if you apply for law here we would have no idea if your parents are in jail or if your parents are on the Supreme Court, right. If some applicant tried to shake my hand with some weird secret society handshake I wouldn't even know what was going on, you know. So I tend not to shake applicants' hands. I am pouring out water as they enter in because I am sort of weird that way. So just there is no mystery. We are not going to throw a rugby ball at your or anything like that, you know, truly, truly, I am not lying about this. Okay, the interview. The interview is generally in December and unless you are an overseas candidate it will be in Cambridge. It's cold in Cambridge in December. It's a lovely day today but it's really cold in Cambridge... I am just going to check something, so okay, that's fine. So dress warm in layers, things like that, right. Once again, people think they have some control over the interview so they need to stress and prepare and things like that. There's not much you can do, I think, apart from relax, get some sleep, eat leafy green vegetables, do a little bit of exercise but not too much, things like that, right. So don't stress about it.

You don't need to know any law. We want to see how you think, right, that's the main thing we are interested in. How you respond to someone else's arguments. We are looking for logic, reason, commonsense, intellectual flexibility. Think carefully about what you say. I mean, please do articulate your thoughts. Given the choice between just sitting there thinking, "There are many options here," and saying, "Well, there are many options here," in answering your question, articulate what you are saying but use your words carefully. Different interviewers may have different approaches. So in some colleges there may be concern to sort of look into your eyes and see your soul and things like that, right, and in other colleges you are essentially facing something like an oral IQ test when you sit down, right. Okay, run these exercises. That's the beauty of the Cambridge system, right. There will be multitudes of different approaches.

If you're curious, on the faculty blog on the Medium website, so if you just Google "medium thinkcambridgelaw interview example", right. Don't do that now, but if you did do that you would find an entire law interview that I gave two years ago, the entire transcript of it essentially, right. So we just said, "This is what we do. Sit down, hello, have a glass of water." There will be three exercises. First exercise, blah, second exercise, blah, third exercise, blah. "Any questions for us?" "No." "Thank you so much, goodbye," you know, and that's the way the interview will run. So have a look at that if you are interested but, as I said, different interviewers may have different approaches so don't take that as the only possible interview method, right. When you come to interview, at interview and not before interview, unlike the LNAT, at interview you will sit the Cambridge Law Test. Don't stress about that either. It's an

hour long, it's free, you will sit it when you come to interview. All you have to do is write one essay in an hour. We look for aptitude, not for legal knowledge. There are sample tests on the ba.law.cam.ac.uk website, right. So if you go to ba.law.cam.ac.uk there are sample tests there. Like when I was your age there's no way I would have looked at a sample test but I probably didn't work as hard as you do, right. I would have gone, "I'm a genius, I will get in," and I would have not looked at the tests and I probably wouldn't have gotten in, right.

So have a look at these tests. They are free so it would be sensible to do that, right. Here's an example of one of the essay prompts. "As society becomes more sophisticated there ceases to be a need for general rules. All justice should be individualised. Discuss." So even if you are sitting there thinking, "I have no idea what I would write here," don't panic and don't panic in December. You've got an hour. Sit there, think, sketch out a response, write a plan and then actually write your essay, right. You have got tons of time, all the time in the world, right, so just be slow, be calm, don't panic, write an essay, and you could write something, anybody could write something as a response to this, right, so don't stress about it. In January you would receive a decision, perhaps via the winter pool.

So in January you get a letter. As I said, there is a system. So let's say you apply to St Cuthbert's College, they say you are really good but they don't have enough space, they might send you to another college or that college could choose you out of a sort of pool system. There's information about this on the website too. So in January you receive a decision. You might get pulled to a different college than the one you apply to. That's just a benefit to you, I think. Okay, for more information these are the websites that I said, or email me or ask your preferred college. If you have more questions, ask after lunch. I'm afraid I'm already... well, it seems like just a few minutes, I think I have already gone on too long. Is Claire Fenton-Glynn at the back there? What happens now? Potential applicants, "Law at Cambridge, the students' view" will be in this room and then there will be a parents, guardians and teachers' question and answer session, I think, next door. So parents, guardians, teachers etc. if you could move next door.