

Setting the Record Straight

A review by Geoff Parks (Director of Admissions for the Cambridge Colleges) of:
Oxbridge Entrance - The Real Rules

By Elfi Pallis

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In this book, published in September 2003, Elfi Pallis seeks to help students from less privileged social and educational backgrounds to win places at Oxford and Cambridge. This is a laudable aim that both universities share, and there is much in the book that will indeed be helpful to its target audience.

Ms Pallis does an excellent job of identifying and describing what is good and distinctive about the two universities and why it is worth going to them. She also tries very hard to dispel some of the myths that continue to dog the images of the two universities - her statement 'Well, "Brideshead" it ain't, not any more' will be quoted with relish by admissions tutors!

The book is aimed squarely at the parents of state-educated students and contains a lot of good advice about how to support their studies and give them opportunities to engage with their subject outside school. The advice on helping prepare for interview is also very good.

Ms Pallis has clearly gone to a great deal of trouble to research her subject and much of what is written is well informed. However, given the premium she has placed on providing her readers with accurate, up-to-date information to maximise their chances of success, there are a disappointing number of factual errors. While some of these, such as the misspelling of College names and the incorrect attribution of credit for educating the present Secretary of State for Education, are harmless, others are rather more serious. Knowing that Cambridge admits about 280 medical students a year (a fact easily established from glancing at the University's prospectus) rather than the 150 quoted might make quite a difference to a potential applicant's thinking.

There are three significant areas where, in the interests of prospective applicants, the record needs to be set straight:

Cambridge vis-à-vis Oxford

A general problem with the book, certainly from the Cambridge perspective, is that Ms Pallis seems to have done most of her research at Oxford and just assumed that things will be the same at Cambridge. While many of the differences between the two universities, such as terminology, are minor, there are also many significant differences that should have been mentioned but are not, such as the fact that the Cambridge Newton Trust Bursary scheme is considerably more generous than its Oxford counterpart (which is detailed) or that the qualifications required to study Medicine at the two universities differ.

Admissions

In stark contrast to her praiseworthy eagerness to dispel myths surrounding student life at Oxford and Cambridge, Ms Pallis actually perpetuates the myths that surround their admissions processes. While the hallowed pages of last year's *Wisden* lament the fact that Cambridge admissions tutors select solely on academic criteria, as early as page 5 she alleges that sporting prowess influences admissions decisions. Indeed, the book is littered with similar unsubstantiated claims. No current Oxford or Cambridge admissions tutor would recognise some of the features of the system described in this book, though some of our long-gone forebears might have done.

In trying to find out why some applicants are successful and others are not, Ms Pallis has spoken to teachers, parents, applicants and admissions tutors, and seems willing to believe everyone except the admissions tutors, even though they are the ones who make the decisions. Thus, while the selection criteria used by the Cambridge Colleges for undergraduate admissions state quite clearly that 'Selection is based overwhelmingly on academic potential', the author contends that to be successful an applicant needs to have a diverse extra-curricular CV, covering at least four of the five components in what she terms the 'kitbag':

1. Evidence of an academic interest beyond the school syllabus;
2. Have done voluntary work;
3. Play sport;
4. Involvement in music;
5. Holding a leadership role.

This is one of the points in the book where the advice offered slips from the misleading into the positively unhelpful. All admissions tutors would agree that 1 is important, and 2 can be for aspiring medics, but the others are entirely incidental. While a well-rounded education is almost always a good thing for the individuals concerned, it is certainly not a pre-requisite for gaining admission to Cambridge. In fact, we regularly advise applicants that if, in apportioning their time, they have to choose between exploring their chosen subject in greater depth (through, for example, additional reading) or acquiring more 'CV points', we would much rather they opt for the former than the latter.

A-level choices

The other significant area in which following the advice offered by Ms Pallis could actually be counterproductive to the chances of gaining admission concerns A-level choice, both in terms of subject combinations and number. Subject combinations designed to keep options open (maximise the number of courses that could be applied for) often create an applicant who is less than ideally qualified for the one they eventually choose, and Cambridge would prefer applicants thinking of stretching themselves, having chosen a coherent set of A-levels, to do so by stretching themselves 'vertically' by taking one or two Advanced Extension Awards rather than 'horizontally' by taking a further A-level.

Summary

The aims of the admissions policy of the University of Cambridge and its Colleges are:

- To admit students of the highest intellectual potential irrespective of social, racial, religious and (for UK/EU students only) financial considerations;
- To encourage applications from groups that are, at present, under-represented in Cambridge; and
- To ensure that each applicant is individually assessed, without partiality or bias, in accordance with the policy on Equal Opportunities, and to ensure that, as far as possible, an applicant's chance of admission to Cambridge does not depend on choice of College.

Elfi Pallis clearly shares these aims, and sought to further them by publishing this book. However, although it contains much excellent advice, this book is not the definitive, authoritative guide to admissions at Oxford and Cambridge it claims to be. A surprising amount of the information in the book is incorrect, and unfortunately some of its advice is misleading and even unhelpful. The only definitive, authoritative guide to Cambridge admissions remains the University's admissions web pages, which are constantly updated, supported by the advice and information provided freely by the Cambridge Admissions Office, the Cambridge Colleges and their admissions tutors, secretaries and web sites, and the University Departments.

Geoff Parks
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