

Interview Report: PPE at Exeter College, Oxford

After originally applying to Balliol, I was reallocated for interview at Exeter and asked to arrive Sunday 6th December, told that I would be needed until Wednesday 9th. I arrived in college at roughly 6.30pm, was shown to where the list of interview times was posted, given a quick tour of the college by an undergraduate helper and then shown to my room, where I was left to settle in. Dinner was at 7.30pm, so after leaving my things in my room I headed down to the JCR where it seemed most of the other applicants were hanging around, before going into the Hall for dinner. We were served a three-course 'formal' meal, complete with Latin prayers - a bit daunting but definitely an experience, and gave us a chance to introduce ourselves over dinner. After eating, most of the interviewees went back to the JCR and chatted for a bit, and I decided to go up to bed about 10pm in order to give me time to read through some more of the day's newspapers and flick through some books with enough time for an early night.

The next morning we had ~~an interview~~ ^{a meeting} for all the PPE-ists, outlining how the interviews would run and giving us a chance to ask any questions. My interview that day was not until 3.05pm, the last of the day, so I spent most of the morning in my room reading through books and other material I'd brought with me, followed by much of the same in the JCR after lunch in college. My first interview was Philosophy and Economics. After a brief introduction, the Philosophy tutor launched into his first question ("Do animals think?"), which led onto a discussion in which he would suggest alternate points of view to points I made, and the same followed his second question ("Is there a link between God and morality?"). These questions filled 10 minutes, after which the Economics tutor took over. He basically set up a situation in which I was an investment banker, and had to decide whether to invest my money in a jewellery shop or a pawnbroker – the answer he wanted was not obvious, but he led me through the process to come to a conclusion, and then to apply this logic to further situations. Overall the first interview was not as terrifying as I'd imagined, and it became clear that the tutors *were* actually more interested in how we thought and not what we knew (as I know we're all told but never believe!). The rest of the afternoon was spent in the JCR with other PPE interviewees; half of us had had the Philosophy and Economics interview, and half the Politics and Philosophy (which I was due to have the next day) and between us we realised that none of the questions were mostly based on actual prior knowledge or anything mentioned in our personal statements, and for this reason I decided to try to relax a bit, rather than to stay locked away in my room trying to cram in hundreds of copies of *The Economist*. That evening, the JCR had organised a Pub Quiz in the college bar (my team coming a respectable third!), followed by a tense viewing of University Challenge, with neighbouring college Jesus competing. A while longer in the JCR, and then another early night followed.

My Politics and Philosophy interview on Tuesday wasn't until 2.25pm, again the last of the day. Having realised I couldn't really be more prepared than keeping up with current affairs I spent the day reading newspapers and discussing with other interviewees in the JCR (sitting in the JCR with the other PPE-ists became quite a pattern!). 15 minutes before my interview, I went to collect a passage which we were to familiarise ourselves with to be asked questions on in the Philosophy side of the interview. We weren't allowed to keep a copy of the passage, but it was basically an argument stating that if something 'will' happen, it 'must' happen, is therefore 'necessary' and inevitable, and nothing can be done to change this end. There were questions at the bottom of the sheet asking for a summary of the passage, whether I agreed or disagreed and why, where I thought the weak points

of the argument were, etc. The tutor used these questions as the basis for the interview, but allowed the discussion to broaden at points, too; this interviewer was particularly forceful – every point I made had a better counter argument, and the majority of the time I had to admit I was wrong. It was actually this tutor who had given the welcoming meeting the previous morning, and he himself had said that they liked to see people who would accept other points of view as well as standing their ground when necessary; I tried to find a balance between the two and it made for an interesting debate. The interview then moved on to the Politics tutor, who began with the question, “Why do we have General Elections?”, to which I gave a number of answers. He picked up on the subject of democracy, and a discussion followed on direct democracy, its origins in Ancient Greece and its modern parallels in referendums. The conversation then moved on to analyse coalition government and majoritarian government, with a comparison of UK government and German coalitions. Drawing on my AS Politics syllabus, I found this the most interesting part of the interview, enjoying the chance to give my own opinions and have them challenged by such an expert – in particular, when I made the point that within a coalition government, compromises may be made behind closed doors and therefore become undemocratic, a point which the tutor swiftly countered by pointing out that, (he hated to tell me so) but surely there were many undemocratic secret compromises made behind the closed doors of the Labour Cabinet!

My interview being the last of the entire PPE group, we all used the rest of the evening to relax. We were told that details of any pooled interviews would be posted around 10pm that night, or the following morning, and so a group of PPE interviews and I decided to go for a meal outside of college and to see a bit more of Oxford. When we returned there were details of second interviews at other colleges for only 2 out of the 14 PPE-ists. After a few more hours sat in the JCR, we all retired to bed knowing that we may still have interviews the next morning. In the end, the 2 posted on Tuesday night were the only subsequent interviews, and the rest of us were free to leave.

As a bit of advice to prospective interviewees, I'd say to really try not to worry too much (although I know I did). I had a brilliant time at the interviews: the experience of meeting other people in the same position, and being able to discuss your chosen subject with the experts of the field is something to take advantage of! Being up to date with current affairs and obviously brushing up on your knowledge can't be forgotten, but I found that all you can do is try your best, and I've been lucky enough to secure an AAA Open Offer from the University.