



THE SUNDAY TIMES

THE SCHOOLS BLOG



The Oxbridge Lottery

"Hi, sir, thought you'd like to know I got an offer from Oxford to read Law..." "Sorry, sir, bad news from Cambridge - they don't want me..." For as long as I have been a headmaster, the Christmas holidays have been characterised, at least in part, by the agonies and the ecstasies of pupils (and their parents) arising from what is often called the "Oxbridge lottery". Boys and girls who have, in many cases, been used to success in all that they have attempted to date, put themselves through a process which is, by turns and in varying degrees, demanding, exhilarating, unprecedentedly stressful, tortured and tortuous, devastating or joyful.

Each year, whilst wishing to congratulate the successful boys and girls for their victory over fearsome odds, I have wondered how to sooth the feelings of those who have tasted the bitterness of perhaps their first serious "failure". What are the right words to say to a fantastic boy or girl who is in in no way the lesser for having applied, even if the offer did not materialise?

We will often say, "It's a lottery - don't take it personally." But as I know, whether as a teacher, a headmaster, or, this year, as the parent of an Oxbridge candidate, it doesn't feel like a lottery to the candidates. It may feel compassionless - although I would say this is not the usual complaint - or whimsical, or simply "unfair", but candidates know that, in many cases, they have been the subject of a personality and aptitude test of unnerving precision. Outcomes may seem wrong, or simply unpredictable, but it is not quite correct to call the process a lottery, when, of all universities, Oxford and Cambridge are the most demanding and exhaustive in their selection process.

A candidate for Oxford will probably have to sit a subject-specific exam at their schools in November; they might be required to send in some written work; they will have researched not just the university and the syllabus, but tried to work out the quirks of the collegiate system, unique to Oxford and Cambridge, and as baffling to some as the laws of cricket are to others. They will have completed their UCAS form, with its dreaded personal statement ("I have longed to read Veterinary Science at St Jude's ever since my beloved pet rabbit died in my arms when I was five years old..."). They will, at many schools, have been given practice interviews which can usually be certain only in one respect: they will in no way resemble the real thing, and vast quantities of advice, often inaccurate or hopelessly out of date.

The majority will be called to interview. There, the candidate will be left to entertain himself or herself in an undergraduate room for maybe three or four days, a monotony broken by the intense severity of real combat - two interviews lasting maybe half an hour each. If not called to another college, the candidate is told to go home, and a letter will then perhaps arrive before Christmas Eve. A Cambridge candidate will endure a brisker interview process, but with its zealous attention to every single mark on each of the AS modules, a key part of the Cambridge selection methodology, it is no less unnerving or precise.

So, far from seeming a lottery, the entry process can seem almost unbearably personal in its sharp and unwavering attention to each candidate. At no point in their lives, will they feel so publicly weighed in the balance and either found wanting - or, more happily, sufficient.

No wonder, then, that boys and girls are so drained by the process. Even those who succeed are often acutely aware of friends who they think should have won offers but have not done so - for any of a hundred reasons - and feel a sense of guilt or unworthiness about their own success.

This is when it is important for teachers and parents to find the right words, and to show the boys and girls we are there to support them. But it is just as important for the candidates to move on, forget all about Oxbridge, settle down to the challenges of the new term, and prove themselves anew in other challenges, and in the exams that will really count: their A level or IB exams at the end of the year.