

Starting Point Series

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**YOUR CAREERS SERVICE
YOUR FUTURE**

Interviews & Assessment Centres for Research Students

This publication is available in alternative formats on request.
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Employers and Assessment

When an employer is recruiting, it may be important to them to recruit someone with a postgraduate degree. However, if that was all that was required, they could simply take all those who applied with the right qualification and randomly select an appropriate candidate.

However, a recent Institute of Employment Studies / EPSRC study, looking at the recruitment of PhD Physicists reported:

“... virtually all the employers said that they assumed the technical skills [they required] would be associated with study at a postgraduate level ... Therefore, the main basis for deciding to recruit an individual was in terms of their complement of soft skills.”

Therefore, much of the selection process is designed to uncover not only what skills and knowledge each of the candidates has, but also to assess a range of other less clear cut aspects:

- Could you do the job – now and in the future?
 - How interested are you in the job and the organisation?
 - Would you “fit in” with the department and with the organisation?
 - **What** can you do – your technical (ie. subject-specific) and non-technical knowledge and skills?
 - **How** do you do it – how you apply your skills and knowledge at work (often referred to as “behaviours” or “competences”) ?
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Essential Preparation for Assessment

You are more likely to perform effectively in any assessment process if you have prepared thoroughly.

1. Research your life

- Revise your life so far
 - what did you do, when, and why ?
- Catalogue your achievements
 - these can be based on your academic experience, any paid or voluntary work or any social activities
 - include major and not so major achievements
 - focus on achievements within the last 3 years (most of your pre-university achievements will be past their sell-by date by now)
- Review your achievements
 - highlight the skills and knowledge you needed to demonstrate for each achievement

2. Research the job and the employer

- What does the job involve?
- What does the employer do, what makes them unique?
- What is it like working for the employer?
- You can use a range of sources
 - the advert, and any job or person specification (ask the employer if they have these)
 - organisation website – may include employment / careers information
 - information about the organisation’s products / services / courses
 - your contacts – particularly good for finding out about the culture of an organisation, and what the employer values in its employees

2. Practice talking about them

- Can you talk about your achievements and make sense of them for someone who wasn't there?
- Can you make the most of describing your life?
 - for example, you can't always assume that employers will understand the value of your postgraduate degree unless you make it explicit for them.
- Can you convince someone else that you really want the job, and give good reasons why?

Interviews

The importance of presentation

Trained interviewers will work hard to look for evidence that you could do the job for which they are recruiting. However, even for professional interviewers, the impact that you make personally is likely to affect their decision. Partly this is because *how* you behave in a work setting may be almost as important as *what* you do. It is also because interviewers are human, and how they feel about you personally (i.e. do they like you?) inevitably has an effect. Therefore, it is critical to think about your personal approach.

- Smile – makes a radical difference at the start of an interview
- Think about your body language – don't slouch or sit hunched up, don't sit rigidly, but avoid waving your arms around too emphatically
- Make good eye-contact with your interviewer – don't try to outstare them, but avoid constantly looking over their shoulder, at the ceiling, looking down ...
- Make the tone and speed of your voice sound interested and confident – if you sound fed up or defeated, you will encourage the interviewer to think of you that way

Final preparation

A successful interview is a two-way process. It also gives you the chance to assess the organisation - are they offering what you want? Assuming you have done the preparation already mentioned, the final tasks are:

- To re-read your application
- To prepare your own questions to ask the interviewer

Types of Interviews:

1. Single

This is a one to one meeting between the candidate and the employer. It's the nearest thing to a "conversation" and should allow for an open exchange of information. Of all the types of interview, it is the most relaxing for both interviewer and candidate. You may however have difficulties if you feel that the interviewer has taken an instant dislike to you - there is no one else to "appeal" to. This type of interview is often used by smaller organisations. Larger organisations may use the single interview as the first stage in the interview process. If you get through this, the second stage tends to be a panel or series of sequential interviews.

2. Panel

The panel or board interview involves being questioned by a number of interviewers, in turn, at the same interview. They are popular in some organisations as they allow a range of people to assess the candidate and to participate in the selection procedure. The number of interviewers varies but there is usually a chairperson (who co-ordinates the questioning), a specialist who knows about the job in question (usually a line manager), a personnel manager and occasionally a psychologist. Boards are usually set up to see a number of candidates in turn, with the decision about who gets the job left until all have been interviewed.

From the candidates point of view they can be fairer but are usually more stressful. They are a particularly popular means of selection in academia and the public sector.

3. Sequential

This is where a series of interviews, usually two or three, are carried out by different interviewers in turn. It allows for a range of impressions to be gathered and for the final decision to be made by a group. In theory this should make the process more democratic and less prone to bias. In practice the senior executive usually has the casting vote. This sort of interview is used by many large organisations.

What Questions Might You Expect?

Below are listed some of the most usual categories of questions asked.

Knowledge of vacancy

- What do you know about...?
- How would you define consultancy/marketing/personnel etc?
- What do you understand by the term management?
- What qualities/skills do you have which you consider make you suitable?
- Why do you think you would make a good...?
- Do you think you can cope with the professional examinations?

Knowledge of organisation

- What do you know about our business / organisation?
- What do you think of our application form / brochure / website?
- What did you think of our presentation last night? (Make sure you attend if there is a pre-interview presentation locally!)
- Why have you decided to apply to us?
- What do you think of our products/services?
- Who do you see as our major competitors?
- What do you consider to be the main difficulties facing our management?
- What do you think will be the most important opportunities / difficulties facing us over the next 5 years?

Career motivation / direction

- Why have you applied for this kind of work / career?
- What do you see yourself doing in 5 / 10 years time?
- Are you willing to move - how mobile are you?
- For which other jobs / careers are you applying?
- What do you want out of life?
- What other employers have you applied to?
- What aspects of your previous work have you enjoyed / hated?

Education record

- What made you decide to do your postgraduate degree?
- What have you learnt from your postgraduate degree which will help you in this job?
- Why did you choose this subject?
- Your "A" levels / school results seem disappointing, what was the reason for that?
- Why should we take a postgraduate instead of an undergraduate for this job?
- Explain your project to me (either technically, or to a lay person)?

Evidence of skills and behaviours

- What are your main strengths?
- What is your biggest weakness?
- Have you ever been required to explain a complex idea to an individual? (How did you do this?)
- On your current course, how do you schedule your time and set priorities?
- Tell me about the best / worst decision you ever made. (What have you learnt?)
- Have you ever felt that you achieved an objective through sheer persistence? (Tell me about it)
- Tell me about the best team effort you've been part of. (What was your role and contribution?)

Academic interview questions

It is difficult to predict all the questions used in academic interviews – some of which can be very idiosyncratic. However, these are some of the questions which have been asked at recent academic interviews. They generally fall under three main headings:

Course Content / New Course Development

- What are your strengths and weaknesses in relation to your subject matter?
- Which course would you not want to teach on and why?
- Would you make any changes to the current undergraduate programme?
- How would you market x course to an overseas institution?
- Where do you see the potential for new course development?
- What would you like to teach?
- What topics would you like to see covered in the new Masters in y?

Teaching Skills & Methods / Pastoral Care

- What are you able to offer this University in the way of teaching?
- What innovative teaching methodologies have you used?
- What teaching skills and techniques have you developed over the past year?
- Do you see any room for change in the way we teach large groups of students in lectures?
- What are the differences between teaching undergraduate and postgraduate students?
- What are your views about student assessment?
- You usually teach in small groups of 20 but the intake this year has been increased to 80. What would you do differently?
- During your time at x, how did you manage the pressures of teaching and research?
- Do teaching and research compliment each other?
- How do you see advances in technology impacting on the role of the lecturer?
- Large numbers of 1st year students are dropping out of courses in the Department. What would you do about it?

Research

- Where do you see your research fitting in with the interests of the Department?
- What ideas do you have for further research and what are the potential sources of funding?
- How useful have you found the internet as a research tool?
- When do you hope to finish your PhD?
- What plans do you have for publishing your PhD?
- What is your research plan for the next three years?
- Where do you see your research going in the next few years?

Answering Questions

There are often no right or wrong answers – in addition to the content of your answers, the interviewer is observing how you're saying things and how you're coming across.

- Always be positive. Even when talking about things which have gone badly for you, try to think positively about what you have learnt from the experience. Think of the positive optimistic response.
 - Be enthusiastic.
 - Speak clearly and not too fast.
 - Be ready to recognise the simple question calling for a brief answer.
 - Don't pretend to know something of which you are ignorant, or try to answer a question you haven't understood. Ask for clarification.
 - Don't automatically worry if the interviewer asks increasingly difficult questions, or takes an opposite stance to something you have just said – they may just be testing how far they can push you because they think you're good, or be playing devil's advocate to see how well you can hold your ground.
 - If you realise afterwards that you have answered a complex problem-solving question incorrectly, don't be too downhearted. It is often the *process* you come up with to solve the problem, rather than the final answer, that they are checking.
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Your Questions To The Interviewer

Your questions are not just the chance to gain information for yourself. They give a message to the interviewer about how interested you are in the job, and what you think is important, both in the job itself, and for making your decision.

Ideally, think of 6 - 10 questions you could ask – list them on a piece of paper or in a notebook and keep them handy during the interview. This means that you won't have to worry that you will forget them all and be lost for words at the end of a gruelling interview. In addition, if they *have* answered all your questions (not unusual at the end of a full day of assessment exercises), you can reach for your list, and demonstrate that you "had thought of these questions, but they have all been answered, thank you very much"

Here are some ideas for questions you could raise:

- What makes the difference between your best recruits for these positions, and the others?
- How have your best recruits progressed in the past?
- I understand your firm operates performance appraisal - how would my performance be evaluated during the first year?
- As a postgraduate, I have particularly strong analytical (*or problem solving or research*) skills – where could that be of most benefit in your organisation?
- I'm really interested in starting in IT / marketing / finance. However, is it possible for potential managers to move into other job functions as they progress?
- Can you give me a fuller picture of your training programme? (*assuming this is not made clear in the literature*)
- What groups of people will I be working with in my day to day job?
- Where would I be based - is this particular function located solely in...?
- What are the possibilities of using my languages?
- Are there opportunities to work overseas?
- Why is your company so successful - what would you say is the secret?

- What do you make of the recently announced trading loss?
- Is your firm planning a new programme of expansion or are you entering a period of consolidation?
- How do you see the company performing over the next few years?

A fall-back is to ask the interviewer themselves what they most like about working for the organisation – many interviewers are only too happy for a brief chance to talk about themselves at the end of a long day listening to everyone else.

On the other hand, bearing in mind the impression you are trying to create, here are a few of the question to avoid:

- How much will I get paid?
(You will want to know this, but it creates a very mercenary impression if asked at the interview)
- Will I start on a higher salary / grade than an undergraduate?
(Many organisations don't distinguish between undergraduate and postgraduate starting positions and worry that postgraduates will think themselves "above" their graduate vacancies – this question will probably confirm their fears)
- What about the holidays / pension scheme / canteen / car parking / public transport to the site?
(Not very strategic – you can find this out when they offer you the job)
- Questions about the job, organisation or training, covered in the recruitment literature or website
(The Personnel department probably spent many hours writing this, and won't be impressed by someone who hasn't bothered to read it)
- Very "clever" detailed questions about the organisation e.g. "On page 34 of the annual report ..."
(The interviewer may not have a clue – embarrassing them won't improve your chances)

After the Interview

Make some notes about the interview including a self-evaluation of your performance. The information can be helpful when reviewing your progress and if you get invited for a second interview.

Assessment Centres

An assessment centre isn't really a place; rather it is a lengthy process for selecting people for jobs. The process of selection involves:

- **Assessment on a number of dimensions** - for example leadership ability, team working, decision making.
 - **A range of assessment techniques** - for example interviews, psychometric tests, individual and group exercises.
 - **A number of assessors or observers** - this should in effect make the selection process fairer. The decision to hire is made by consensus.
 - **Several candidates can be observed together** - this makes the selection process more meaningful as you can be assessed both individually and as part of a team.
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What will happen at an assessment centre?

Familiar things like interviews and tests will take place. In addition you may be asked to take part in any of the following:

Individual exercises

These exercises are concerned with organisational skills, time management, prioritising, analytical reasoning and communication.

In-tray

The in-tray exercise is designed to simulate the administrative features of a job. You will be asked to deal with a range of items. For example you may be given a mass of material such as e-mails, faxes, memos, letters, telephone messages, reports and computer printouts. You have to decide what needs doing first and then actually do it. The exercise is often complicated by a messenger, calling at your "office" every half hour or so, delivering more material.

The exercise is measuring your ability to prioritise as well as more general communication, planning and organisational skills. There is seldom enough time to complete everything so it also acts as a measure of performance under pressure.

Presentation

The task will be to give a presentation to a group of people. The group is usually composed of other candidates and the assessors. The topic might be one you've selected or one that you've been given. You need to think of two different aspects of the presentation:

- The information you are trying to convey – how much knowledge of the subject does the audience have?
- How you convey the message – unless this is for an academic job, this is unlikely to be in the style of the academic presentations which you are used to giving.

These exercises focus on communication and presence.

Role Playing

These usually involve you dealing with realistic situations. You may be confronted by a dissatisfied customer and asked to deal with him/her in an appropriate manner. Usually the other person/people are played by actor or some of the assessors. The task itself might be one of fact finding, decision making or negotiation.

These exercises again focus on communication and presence.

Group exercises

These exercises are usually concerned with leadership, team membership, motivation and problem solving.

- **Leaderless discussion group**

This involves the candidates being placed in groups and each group discussing or debating a particular topic. Each person in the group is monitored by an assessor and once the task is started the group is left to organise itself. The assessors are looking for the emergence of a leader and the sort of roles that people adopt.

This sort of exercise is used to assess action, team membership and communication skills.

- **Assigned role groups**

This follows the same idea as the leaderless discussion group, but each team member is given a role to play. For example, each member might act the part of a manager from a different part of the organisation. You are usually asked to negotiate with the others and argue a case for your own department. In this sort of exercise there will always be winners and losers. It doesn't matter whether you win or lose because it's the quality and structure of the argument that is important.

This sort of exercise is assessing communication skills, presence and action.

- **Practical team exercises**

These can be undertaken both indoors and out. A typical indoor exercise is for the group to be given various materials and be given a task of constructing a bridge. The outdoor version would involve bridging a gap over an actual river.

These exercises are aimed at identifying action competencies such as leadership, motivation and drive and sometimes creativity.

Making the Most of Group Exercises

There are two aspects to most types of group exercise – *what* you contribute in terms of completing the task set, and *the way* you contribute to the group overall. Each of these is important, with the latter often being the most critical part of the group selection process.

Play to your strengths

The selectors are not expecting you to be an expert on the subject under discussion or the task to complete, but they do want to see evidence that you can make an effective contribution to the group.

It is important to get involved but avoid the temptation to dominate the group. There are many valid ways to make an effective contribution to a group e.g.

- by including others in the discussions
- by making sure the group keeps to time and completes the task in hand
- by coming up with the creative ideas
- by organising people
- by checking details

It is often an ineffective use of resources in a group if you all try to do the same things, wasting time and causing unnecessary duplication. Split up large tasks and allocate different parts to those best suited to them. This does require that you take care to coordinate the group and have regular review and check points, so you don't find out at the last minute that you have all been working at cross purposes. However, using the diverse strengths of the group members and delegating tasks can often achieve quicker, better results and is an important part of effective teamwork.

Make a positive impact

You can improve your chances of being selected by the impact you make in any group activity. Think about the way you interact with others, how you can influence them and how you can ensure the **group** achieves its goal, even if your personal approach would have been different.

- **Keep your contributions short**

Your point is more likely to be understood and to have impact if you keep it reasonably short.

- **Avoid interrupting others to make your contribution and do not let others interrupt you**

In some discussions it is difficult to make your contribution. Once speaking there is a temptation to make several points for fear of not getting in again! This creates a vicious circle. Avoid it.

- **Keep your non-verbal behaviour assertive**

Both the **volume** and **tone** of voice are important here. Speak too quietly and you will lose impact and be open to interruptions.

Use eye contact to "catch the Chairperson's eye" to get your contribution in, then distribute your eye contact amongst members. Direct it to members for whom it is most relevant. This enables you to judge how your contribution is being received.

- **Timing your contribution**

If you want to influence a discussion it is not just **what** you say that counts but also **when** you say it. Raise points at the relevant time for maximum impact. Don't wait until the last minute before airing an opposing view – if others are on the verge of making a decision they will be irritated if you suddenly come up with opposition.

- **Getting a reaction to your contribution**

If you follow the first two suggestions you stand a good chance of getting a reaction. If, however, no one reacts – then ask the group or an individual for a reaction.

- **Changing your mind**

This is a valid thing to do, especially in light of new information or better ideas. Be honest and open about it – not apologetic.

- **Falling in with the majority**

If after exploring all the options you find yourself in the minority and time is pressing – it can be appropriate to "fall in" with the majority rather than prevent the meeting from progressing.

- **Not falling in with an apparent majority**

You have a responsibility to make your doubts and disagreements known. It is important not to let the discussion be dominated by others whose point of view may be less valid than your own.

- **Deciding which issues to make a stand on**

If in a discussion you find yourself out of line with the majority view being expressed, there will be many issues on which you could take a stand. There is a danger that if you take a stand on **every** issue it will become counter-productive and you will be labelled as awkward and negative. Make sure you know what you are talking about if you decide to make an individual stand on an issue.

How can the Careers Service help?

Do you need practice?

Especially if this is your first interview, consider whether you need a practice session at the Careers Service. We offer mock interviews, including recording you on video if required – great for seeing the impact of body language. Ask at the information desk in the Careers Resource Centres.

Reference Materials

A range of reference books and other materials are available in the Careers Resource Centres (please ask at the information desk):

Going for Interviews - AGCAS Information booklet (includes information on assessment centres)

Preparing for Interviews - Reference file in the Careers Resource Centres

“Why Ask Me That?” - AGCAS video on first interviews

“The Assessment Centre Video” - AGCAS video on assessment centres

Books

Moving On In Your Career: a guide for academic researchers and postgraduates – Lynda Ali & Barbara Graham, RoutledgeFalmer, 2000

The Graduate Career Handbook – Shirley Jenner, Pearson Education, 2000

The Guardian Careers Guide: Interviews – Christine Ingham, Fourth Estate, 1997

Winning at your Interview – Michael Stevens; Kogan Page, 1992

Secrets of Successful Interviews – Dorothy Leeds; Piatkus, 1993

Web Sites

The following websites cover interview skills from a postgraduate perspective:

Research Councils' UK GRAD Programme guide for postgraduates – Interviews
http://www.grad.ac.uk/2_2_5_3.jsp

University of Manchester Careers Service guide to interviews -
Available on our website www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/applications

Ph.D. Interview Preparation Guide For Positions In Academia - Trina Segó & Jef I. Richards
<http://advertising.utexas.edu/JR/InterviewPrep.html> - Guide for preparing for academic interviews in the USA