

PhD students: Interviews

This handout is for PhD students facing interviews for roles outside academia, as well as for academic-related roles. Have a look at the other Careers Service handout on 'Interviews' for further tips.

WHY INTERVIEW?

The interview process enables the interviewer to find out more about you: how motivated you are, whether you are able to do the job and how you will fit in with the existing team. The interviewee benefits by gaining a better idea of whether this is the job for them. The interview might be a 1 to 1, panel interview, telephone interview, or conducted via Skype. Whatever the format, you need to prepare well to ensure you come across positively on the day.

TYPES OF QUESTIONS

Interviews for roles outside academia. Numerous websites give examples of interview questions (see further information). Although you can't predict exactly what you could be asked, you are usually asked about your motivation and competency. So prepare for these aspects in particular.

You might also be asked specific technical questions or hypothetical, scenario-type questions such as 'What would you do if x happened ...?'. These are less easy to prepare for, except by reminding yourself of key aspects in your academic or other experience that is relevant to the work of that organisation.

Interviews for academic-related roles – it's hard to predict questions. You could be asked about your current and future research and motivation (e.g. 'Why have you applied?', 'Why this particular research group/lab?', 'How do you plan to take your research forward?', 'How do you see your research fitting in with the research here in our group?', 'Where do you see yourself in 3/5 years time?') or asked questions that probe your analytical and communication skills (e.g. 'How would you interpret this set of data?', 'What further work would you suggest doing to verify 'x'?', 'Explain to me the aims, methodologies and outcomes of your PhD in language that could be understood by someone outside your area'). You could even be asked how society might benefit from your research, how it could be applied or who might be interested in funding it. If you're applying for a role with teaching or pastoral responsibilities, expect to be asked about these aspects too.

HOW TO PREPARE

Before every interview you should have thought about the reasons you are applying and the best evidence of why you are suitable.

Demonstrating motivation. Now is the time to apply your well-honed research skills and find out all you can about the organisation and role! This is particularly important when moving outside of academia: you will be asked to explain your reasons for making this career move after a PhD. Prior research enables you to sound convincing when explaining what attracts you to the role. Start with the organisation's own website for:

- the latest news, press releases and annual report executive summaries; try to gain an impression of their most notable achievements and overall trends
- there may be a dedicated 'careers' section where you can find out what they seek in employees, and the training and professional development available
- staff profiles/mini biographies can give you an indication of how your career could progress once you've joined

Make a note of anything that impresses or interests you - including any questions that occur, as interviewers usually ask if you have any questions. This is another opportunity to show your interest in what they do, and in the training and career development possibilities. Avoid asking about salary and conditions, however!

To gain an overview of the sector/profession as a whole, have a look at websites of relevant professional bodies or associations and recommended careers resources.

Make sure to talk to anyone you know working in the organisation for insights into their culture and values.

Demonstrating competency. Interviewers for roles in industry or commerce will be looking for evidence that you have the competencies they seek, such as team-work, communication, leadership, time-management and commercial awareness. So you should find out what they seek by re-reading the vacancy information and checking the organisation's website - make a list of all their requirements. Then brainstorm as many examples as you can that offer any evidence of your suitability; examples can be from all areas of your life – your PhD and previous academics, extracurricular activities and work experience. Focus on the last five years or so. Below are some examples you might have as evidence.

- Your PhD has involved managing a complex project, on



your own, involving time and resource management, collaborating with other researchers, guiding or leading a student on their research project, teaching/undergraduate demonstrating, presenting at conferences and writing peer-reviewed publications.

- Your other work experience has perhaps increased both your commercial and industry awareness.
- Your extra-curricular activities, including any positions of responsibility you've had, will have developed a range of transferable skills. For example, responsibility for lab resources or on a committee, science communication or outreach activities, music, sport or volunteering all demonstrate valuable skills and qualities.

Remind yourself what was difficult in any given situation you faced; recall specific details that show the scale of the problem and note down words or phrases that describe specific actions you took using positive action words (see the CV Handout for examples). Think about what the outcome was, and what you learnt from the experience.

Structuring your thoughts using a framework such as 'STAR' (Situation, Task, Action, Result) will help you prepare key points and communicate them clearly in the interview. Practise talking through your examples out loud.

You should re-read your application/CV before the interview as you may be asked to expand on certain aspects. Ask yourself: 'What in my background or experience will be of particular interest to this employer?', 'What are my main strengths and weaknesses?'. Be positive about both: recognise that you learn from any setbacks or mistakes to improve in the future.

For academic-related roles, prepare beforehand by reminding yourself of your key research achievements as well as how you have gone about planning and carrying out your PhD to achieve the overall aim. Ask yourself: 'What hurdles did I face and how did I overcome them?', 'What have I learnt in the process?'. You should also consider how your current research interests fit with the research going on in the organisation to which you're applying and how you see your research career developing.

COMMUNICATING POSITIVELY ON THE DAY

Be yourself, be positive and be genuine! It's only natural to feel nervous at interviews, but there are things you can do to come across as more confident and more competent too.

- Be aware of body language, the way in which you communicate often says more than the actual words you speak. So, for example, smile now and again, speak enthusiastically, maintain good eye contact with the interviewer, shake hands firmly and sit upright.
- Arrive well in time and looking smart; acting 'cool, calm and collected' will help you to feel it.
- If you get very nervous, there are techniques you can use to try and keep nerves under control; thorough preparation, as well as a 'mock interview' with a careers consultant, will certainly help too.

You may be asked questions you find difficult, for example technical or 'case study' type questions. When faced with these

- talk through your thoughts out loud and show how you are approaching the problem posed; there may not be

one 'right' answer and even if there is, interviewers are interested in your thought processes and whether they are logical, intuitive or a combination

- don't be afraid to ask the interviewer to clarify a point or for more information if you need it
- don't panic if the interviewer asks increasingly difficult questions or seems to adopt the opposite view point to you as they may be testing you - usually a good sign!
- if your mind goes completely blank, you could ask for a moment to think about the question or even come back to it later

LEARN FROM YOUR INTERVIEW EXPERIENCES

If you are not successful, you can ask the employer for feedback. Spending time reviewing which aspects you found hardest and how to improve in future will help ensure your success eventually. And talk to a careers consultant.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Available from the Careers Service:

- **Online** - Imperial College Careers Service has information on applications and interviews at www.imperial.ac.uk/careers as well as a 'Quick Guide to Interviews'; see also www.prospects.ac.uk; www.wikijob.co.uk/interview-questions gives examples of specific questions, provided by sector and company name; Be My Interviewer – www.jobsite.co.uk/bemyinterviewer; WetFeet – access the online library via www.imperial.ac.uk/careers/wetfeet; www.vitae.ac.uk has advice on successful interviews and academic job interviews; www.academiccareer.manchester.ac.uk gives tips on academic interviews; www.jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips has tips on Skype interviews
- **Reference Books** - which give examples of so-called 'perfect' answers to interview questions and advice on handling nerves, etc.
- **Events** - The Careers Service and the Graduate School offer workshops and seminars on Interviews and Assessment Centres. See the events section on JobsLive
- **Careers Consultants** - You can book a 'mock interview' appointment and get some practice and feedback on your interview skills

For information on the disclosure of disability or specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia please see information on the Careers Service website:

www.imperial.ac.uk/careers/disclosure