

A low-angle photograph of the iconic clock tower of Imperial College London, featuring a prominent green dome. The tower is set against a clear blue sky with a few wispy clouds and a white contrail. In the foreground, several large, vibrant yellow flowers with green leaves are in focus, partially obscuring the lower part of the tower. The overall scene is bright and sunny, suggesting a pleasant day on campus.

Imperial College
London

Preparing for your fellowship interview

Advice from the
Postdoc Development Centre
to help you succeed

The world-leading Postdoc Development Centre (PDC) at Imperial College London aims to provide postdocs and fellows with relevant, high-quality training and development opportunities. Its unique programme of services supports early career researchers to cultivate the skills necessary to produce research of the highest quality whilst making well-informed career decisions.

Since 2009, the Centre has been helping postdocs and fellows at Imperial to:

- Develop a wide range of new professional skills and improve existing ones.
- Plan and execute career next steps.
- Build and strengthen professional networks.
- Identify and apply for fellowships in their field.
- Maximise the impact of their CV.
- Prepare for job interviews with mock interviews and interview coaching.
- Meet other postdocs and fellows across Imperial to develop social and professional networks.

To find out more about the services offered by the PDC or to speak to a member of the team, email:

pdcsupport@imperial.ac.uk

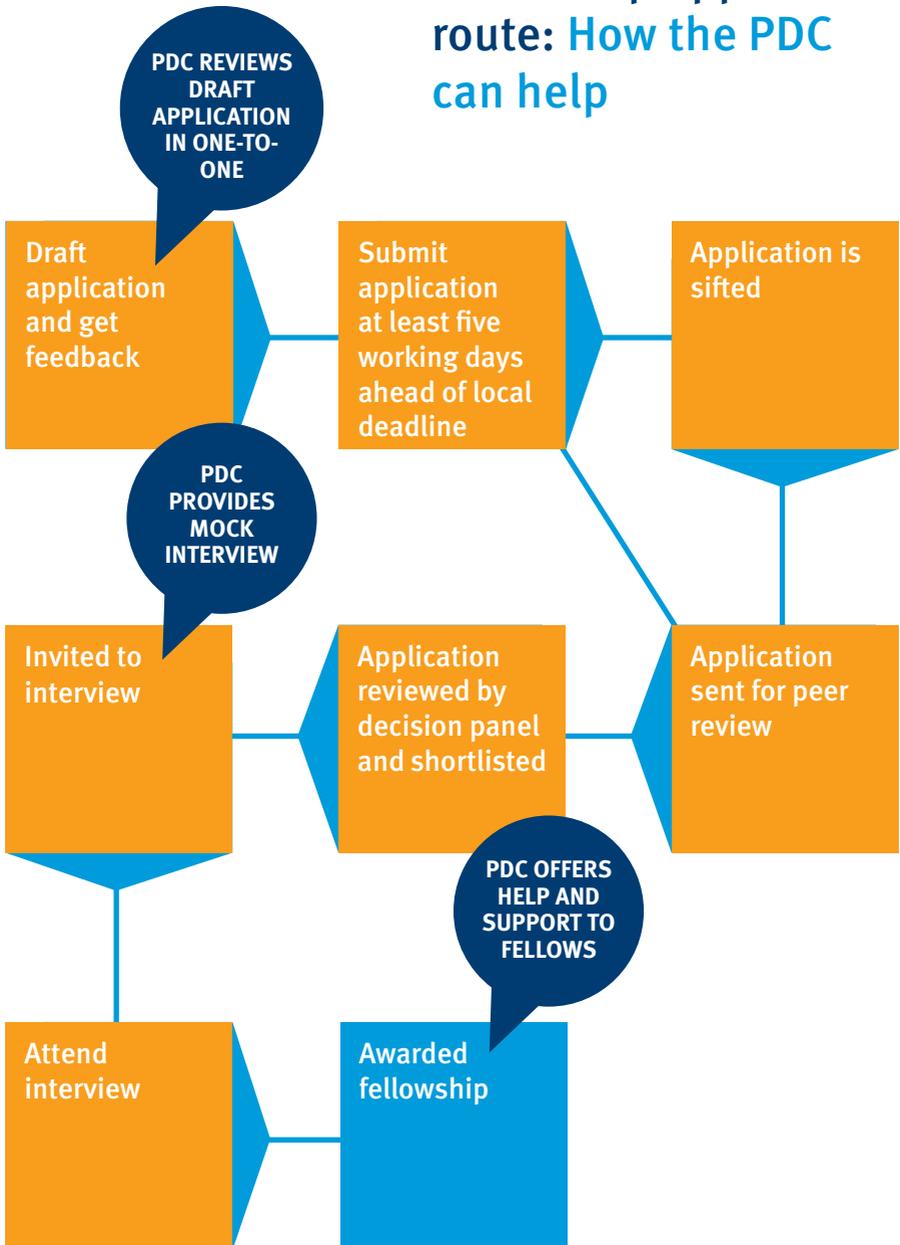
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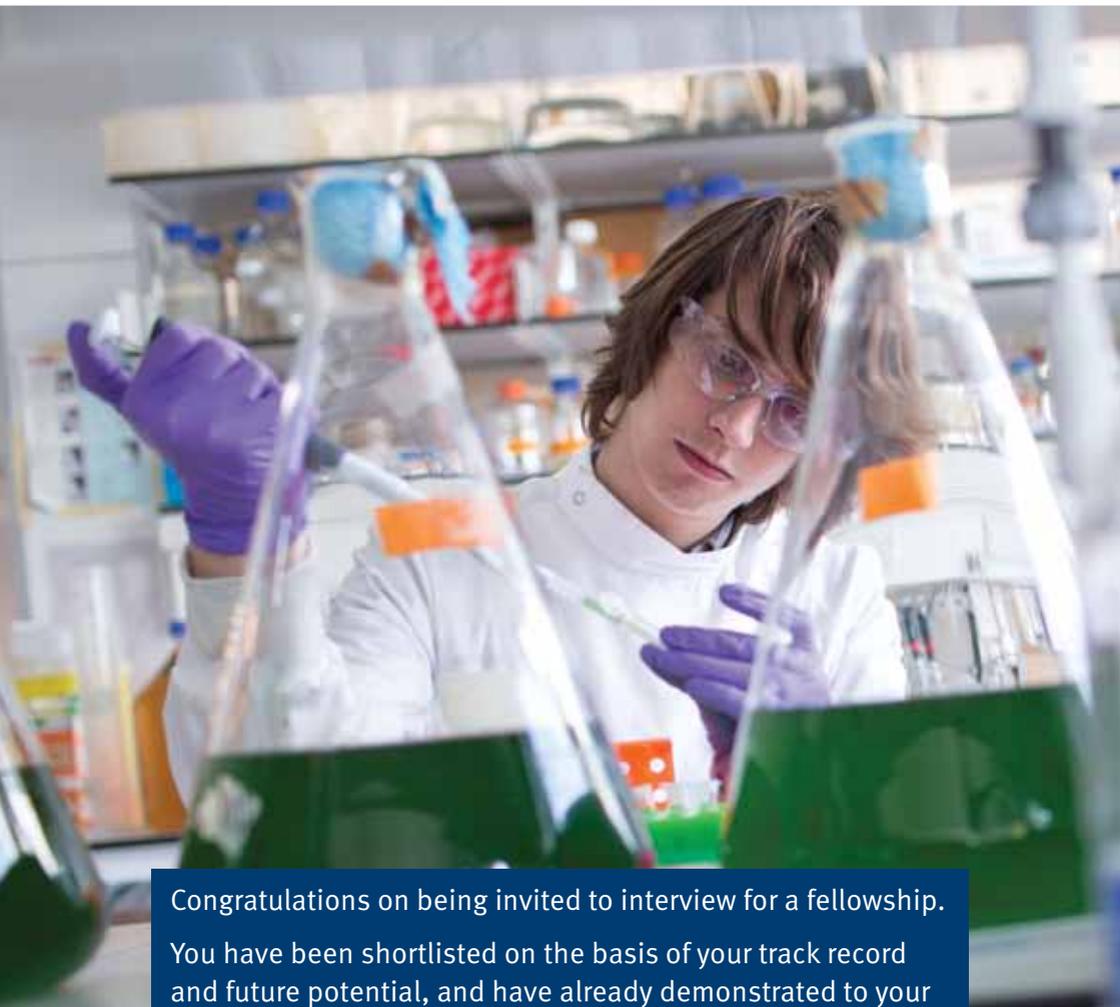
www.imperial.ac.uk/staff-development/postdoc-development-centre

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Fellowship application route: How the PDC can help





Congratulations on being invited to interview for a fellowship.

You have been shortlisted on the basis of your track record and future potential, and have already demonstrated to your reviewers' satisfaction that you are a strong candidate for fellowship funding. Only a small percentage of applicants are invited to interview, so you can feel confident that you have a robust case for support and a good chance of succeeding if your interview goes well.

This booklet is designed to help you prepare for your fellowship interview. It contains information and advice from the Postdoc Development Centre, fellows and members of fellowship panels from across the College.



What is a fellowship?

Fellowships are personal grants awarded to outstanding researchers. They are designed to help recipients develop their academic careers by providing funding to undertake a programme of independent research, often sponsored by a more senior academic, whilst offering some protection from other responsibilities such as teaching and departmental administration.

At your interview, a panel will judge you and your proposed project. This is your opportunity to prove that you are an exciting emerging scientist with the potential, credibility and drive to succeed in your field, and that you are proposing a project which is novel, feasible and has impact.

Preparing for a fellowship interview

The three P's

Remembering the three P's can help to focus your interview preparation:

PERSON

Make a strong case that you are building an excellent research career and are ready to further develop your research independence. This will reassure funders that a fellowship is a natural next step for you. Consider:

- Evidence which highlights your track record and indicates your future potential.
- Proof that you are best placed to successfully deliver this research project.
- Your publication record, identifying any articles which you have published in high ranking journals and/or which have had a demonstrable impact on your field of research.
- Collaborations; particularly those which have resulted in successes, those with potential and/or those which have an interdisciplinary element.
- Measures of national and international esteem, such as invitations to present your research at notable events and institutions.
- Evidence that you have research leadership potential or are developing your leadership (commensurate with your career stage).
- Evidence of developing research independence (commensurate with your career stage).
- Your long term academic research vision. You can develop this by projecting yourself forward ten years: Where will you be? What will you have achieved? How will your field have developed as a result? Be ambitious but realistic and focus on your broader scientific contribution.





Think about your longer term objectives (beyond the fellowship) and how the fellowship will help you to accomplish them.”

PROFESSOR CHRIS HANKIN •
DIRECTOR, INSTITUTE OF SECURITY
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

PROJECT

Build a strong case to justify financial investment in your research by demonstrating why your proposal is feasible, exciting and important. Consider:

- Convincing the panel that the research is timely and should be funded now.
- Demonstrating that you have clear, realistic research objectives and a robust, feasible plan to deliver them.
- Showing that your hypothesis is well grounded in up-to-date research.
- Demonstrating that your methodology is fit for purpose and that you have the skills, facilities and resources required to complete the research.
- Describing how your project represents good value for money.
- Highlighting the significance of the project for the field, giving details of likely outcomes and their potential impact.
- Outlining potential for commercial exploitation and/or short and longer term socio-economic benefits (if applicable).

PLACE

Justify your choice of institution, department, lab and sponsor(s). If you are intending to hold your fellowship at Imperial, state clearly why this is the best – or better still, the only – place to conduct your research and how you will ensure that you develop a research programme that is distinct from the work you have done to date with your current Principal Investigator (PI). You might include:

- Access you will have to specialist equipment, specimens and facilities.
- Complementary knowledge that will benefit your research.
- How your sponsor will contribute to the success of your research.
- Potential for collaboration(s) within your host group, department and institution.
- Opportunities for your professional development – such as access to the support of the College’s Postdoc Development Centre.

Preparing for your interview

Your performance at your interview will influence the panel's final decision, so it is very important that you think carefully about what you want to say and how you want to come across in advance. No matter how busy you are, give yourself as much time as you can to prepare.

Research your panel

Fellowship interview panels vary widely in their size and composition. Most are comprised of between three and fifteen members, at least one of whom will often be an expert in your field. Try to find out who is on your panel and spend some time researching their work. Do not contact them, but do find out as much as you can about them. This will help you to pitch your interview at an appropriate level of technical detail and could also provide insight into how panellists might approach your proposed research and the types of questions they might ask you.

Arrange mock interviews

Arranging a mock interview in advance of your fellowship interview will give you the opportunity to hone your presentation and interview skills in a realistic but supportive environment. They are particularly useful if this is your first formal interview, your first fellowship interview or you have not been interviewed for some time.

The purpose of a mock interview is to boost your confidence by giving you an insight into the interview process, providing you with an opportunity to practice answering some of the questions you are most likely to encounter and giving you constructive feedback that you can use to improve your interview technique.

If you have time, organise both a technical and a general mock interview.



TECHNICAL MOCK INTERVIEWS

To practice answering questions that focus on your research, you can organise a technical mock interview in your department. Invite senior colleagues – including non-specialists in your field – and former and current research fellows to attend. They have been through the interview process and many have sat on academic panels so their insight can be very useful.

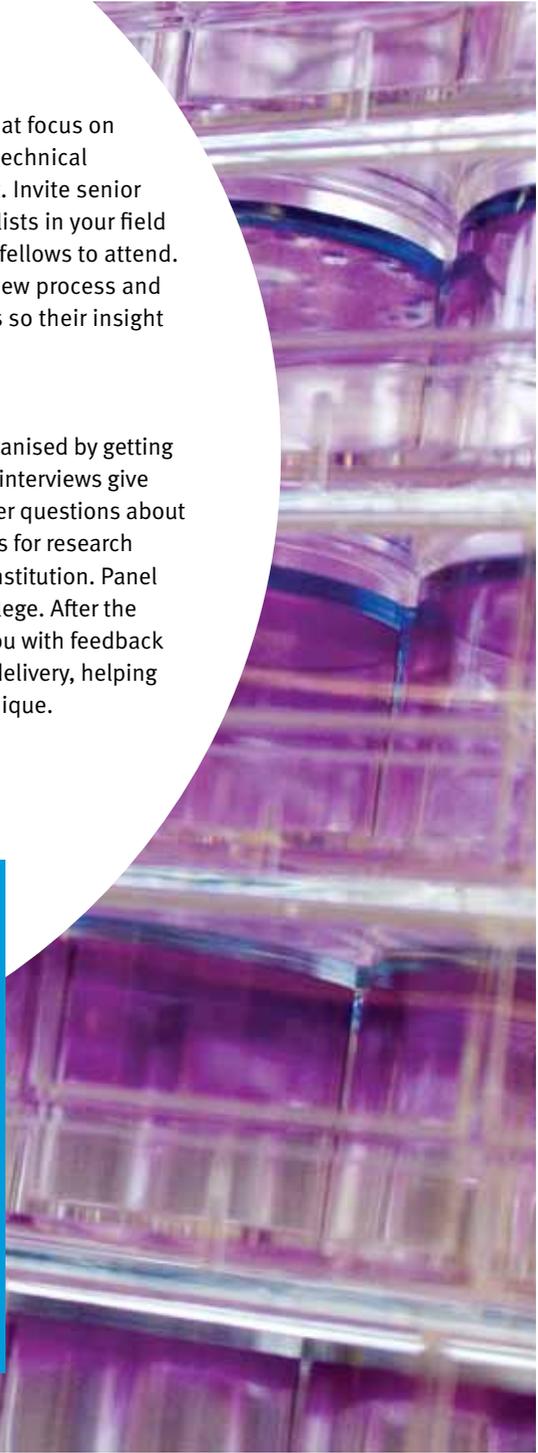
GENERAL MOCK INTERVIEWS

General mock interviews can be organised by getting in touch with the PDC. These panel interviews give you experience in answering broader questions about your project, career goals, readiness for research independence and choice of host institution. Panel members come from across the College. After the interview, your panel will provide you with feedback and coaching on your content and delivery, helping you to improve your interview technique.

“

The mock interviews were the most important part of the practice. I organised three, with a variety of participants. I tried to pick people who would give me sharp questions covering all facets of my project – clinical, engineering, basic science.”

DR NEIL CLANCY • IMPERIAL JUNIOR RESEARCH FELLOW



Preparing your presentation

You may be asked to make a presentation at your fellowship interview. Presentations can come at the beginning of an interview or be separated from the question and answer (Q&A) and held at a different time. In either case, it's important that you give yourself plenty of time to prepare and practice so that you deliver a clear, concise and relevant presentation.

The content of your presentation and the length of time you have to present will depend upon the requirements of your funder. Some funders request brief research updates whilst others might ask for a detailed overview of your track record and proposed project. Some funders offer candidates the opportunity to use PowerPoint. Others require candidates to make their presentations without visual aids or using only a flipchart and pen.

Before you begin preparing your presentation, make sure that you read the instructions carefully, understand exactly what is being asked of you, and make a plan to deliver accordingly.



TOP TIP

If your work is multi-disciplinary, ensure that you can answer questions to an adequate level of technical detail relating to all disciplines covered by your proposed project.

Formatting your slides

The most effective visual presentations contain slides that are uncluttered, easy to read and which contain information directly related to the key messages being delivered. If you are preparing slides:

- Use a clean, minimal, logo-free template to avoid distracting your audience.
- Use a simple, logical layout, making your presentation easy to scan.
- Make sure that diagrams, charts and pictures are clear and fully visible when projected onto a large screen.
- Keep your visual messages simple and straightforward: you can go into detail in person.
- Avoid acronyms, overly technical terminology and jargon.
- Do not prepare more slides than you can comfortably deliver in the time that is available to you.

Developing the content of your presentation

The most effective presentations provide a clear, concise and compelling case for funding. To achieve this:

- Make sure that you have fully addressed all of the questions and/or topics you have been asked to cover, allowing sufficient time for each.
- Try not to leave key content until the end of your presentation. If you run out of time, you don't want to rush or skip any vital information.
- Try to pitch your presentation at the right level for your audience. Remember, most panels are a mixture of discipline specialists and senior scientists who are not expert in your field of research.
- Communicate the scientific breadth of your proposed project and its potential impact rather than focusing on the details of particular experiments. Aim for the 'big picture' to communicate the potential impact of your work.
- Remember the three P's: person, project, place. Aim to convince the panel that you are best placed to conduct the research, that the project is timely, exciting and feasible and that the institution you have chosen is the best place to take it forward.

TOP TIP

Don't forget to introduce yourself. You can use your first slide to do this.

Practicing your presentation

Once you have prepared your presentation, it's important that you practice until you can deliver it confidently.

- Practice alone to improve your delivery, making absolutely sure that your presentation runs to time. You will not be allowed to run over on the day.
- Practice the start of your presentation until you can deliver it confidently without visual aids. Getting off to a good start can help to settle nerves on the day.
- Practice delivering to colleagues and friends. Ask for feedback on the tone and content of your presentation: Are you conveying your key points clearly? Is your presentation interesting? Are you addressing all of the questions? Are you convincing? Does your enthusiasm for the project come through? Could you use a prop or visual aid to help explain a concept?

Delivering your presentation

- Try not to rely too heavily on visual aids. Address your panel directly, making comfortable eye contact whilst speaking rather than staring at your slides. This will ensure that you, not your visual aids, remain the focus of the panel's attention.
- When speaking about your research to date, try to highlight your personal contribution, using 'I' rather than 'we' wherever appropriate in order to emphasise your developing research independence.



Interview Q&A

The Q&A section of your fellowship interview can last between 20–45 minutes. The types of questions you will be asked vary by funder.

Some interview Q&As are purely technical and research focused whilst others encompass your research history, vision for the future and career trajectory.

What will I be asked during the Q&A?

Though it is hard to know in advance what the panel will ask, you can get an idea by:

- Asking current fellows in your department about the sorts of questions they were asked at interview. They are a great resource as they have already successfully managed the interview process.
- Researching your funder online paying attention to their mission, vision and priorities.

“

Before my fellowship interview, I went around with a piece of paper in my pocket and noted down all the questions I could imagine being asked. I asked senior colleagues and fellowship holders for ideas and I had my PDC mock interview. I was prepared for about 80% of the questions that came up in my interview.”

DR ROB NYMAN • EPSRC FELLOW

Delivering clear, confident and concise answers at interview

It is important that you think in advance about what you want the panel to know about you and your research and how you want to come across during your interview. There is no need to practice until you have memorised answers word for word, but preparing some of your key messages and getting used to talking fluently about yourself and your research will help you to deliver clearly, concisely and confidently on the day.

- Practice talking about the technical aspects of your research and have a strong understanding of the timelines of your research.
- Look at your application with fresh eyes and prepare yourself to answer robust, challenging questions on the potential risks involved in your research and the contingency plans you could put in place to mitigate them.
- Think about how your proposal fits with the funder's strategic priorities.
- Have a very clear understanding of the project's feasibility: how will it be budgeted, managed and the objectives delivered?
- Practice talking about your research vision and your medium and long term career goals. Be clear about how the fellowship will help you to achieve these.

Preparing questions for your panel

At the end of your Q&A you might be asked if you have any questions for the panel. You do not have to prepare questions but if you do, try to avoid asking for information which you could easily obtain elsewhere, for example from the funder's website or your host institution. Try also to avoid taking too much of the panel's time with your questions, as this might not be welcome.

“

I spent over two weeks making sure I knew the science inside and out, and dissecting my proposal for any details the panel might ask for or challenge me on. If I hadn't done that, I don't think they would have given me the fellowship.”

DR KATRINA LYTHGOE • HENRY DALE FELLOW

The day of your interview

There are a number of things that you can prepare in advance to help make the day of your interview run as smoothly as possible.

Before your interview

- Think about what you'll wear and make sure you're dressed carefully and appropriately. Don't assume that casual attire is acceptable. If in doubt, dress up rather than down.
- Make sure that you know where you are going and plan your route well in advance, factoring in any potential transport delays to ensure you arrive in good time.
- Bring a copy of your application, a copy of your presentation (if you are giving one) on paper or USB, any copies you wish to give to the panel and any props or equipment you will need.

Managing your nerves

You might feel nervous on the day of your interview. Don't worry, your panel appreciates that this is a significant occasion, and that you are likely to feel nervous. There are a number of things that you can do to ensure that you are still able to perform well at interview:

- Feeling prepared will help you to feel confident.
- Take one or two deep breaths before entering the interview room.
- Practice the beginning of your interview. This will help you to get off to a good start.

Whilst it is completely normal to feel nervous at the beginning of an interview, it's also common to feel more relaxed as the process unfolds. You might even find that you enjoy your interview.



Get as much feedback as you can and if you don't get the fellowship, apply again."

DR ALEX CASSON • FORMER IMPERIAL JUNIOR RESEARCH FELLOW



Panels are looking for someone who is excited about their science, is able to stick up for their ideas, and can be a leader in their field."

DR CLARE LLOYD • WELLCOME SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW, NATIONAL HEART AND LUNG INSTITUTE

During your fellowship interview

There are a number of things you can do to help make sure that your interview goes well.

- Body language is important. Try not to be too rigid, but be wary of appearing too laid back.
- Don't be afraid to compose yourself before answering a question. You might take a short pause, or make a short statement, such as: 'let me think of a good example'.
- Answer questions succinctly and don't waffle.
- Don't assume that the panel will be as familiar with your application as you are. Be prepared to repeat important information from your application in both your presentation and your Q&A.
- If you are asked a question you don't know the answer to, it's best to be honest. You could suggest how you might access the answer, but try not to bluff.
- If you aren't sure what you are being asked, seek clarification. It's much better to ask the panel to repeat a question than to answer incorrectly.
- Be confident, but not arrogant. Grounding positive statements about yourself and your research in evidence will help you to avoid the appearance of arrogance.
- Don't be put off if you feel you are being asked very difficult questions. Robust questioning can be a sign that the panel are impressed with your potential and are testing you.
- Don't let the end of your interview take you by surprise. Use any final questions to sum up your strengths and make sure that you have conveyed the information you wanted to about yourself and your proposed research.

After your interview

Regardless of the outcome of your interview, it's always useful to obtain feedback from your panel. If you are successful, you might receive information on the panel's perception of your strengths and potential areas for growth.

If you are unsuccessful on this occasion, remember that fellowships are exceedingly competitive and that many fellows submit multiple applications before being awarded funding. The fact that you have been shortlisted is an encouraging sign that you are a competitive candidate, and that you should persevere. The panel's feedback can help you to prepare a stronger application next time.

If you would like to discuss your feedback and how you could use it to improve future applications, please contact the PDC at pdc-support@imperial.ac.uk to arrange an appointment.

Preparing for your fellowship interview: Checklist

■ Arrange your mock interviews

■ Research the interview process

- Read literature sent by your funder carefully, highlighting any specific instructions.
- Speak to current fellows in your department.
- Check funders' websites for successful applicants' case studies.

■ Research your panel members (if possible)

■ Prepare your presentation

- Read instructions carefully and highlight key requests.
- Address the questions or topics requested, allocating appropriate time and space for each.
- Use the requested format (e.g. flipchart, PowerPoint).
- Check that any slides are clear, concise and uncluttered.

■ Practice your presentation

- Practice alone and in front of others.
- Practice delivering confidently without relying on visual aids.
- Make sure your presentation runs to time.

■ Prepare for your Q&A

- Get to know your application inside and out.
- Identify potential problems and risks and how you will mitigate these.
- Practice answering key questions about your track record, research vision and path to independence.

■ Submit your slides in advance (if requested)

■ Attend mock interviews, and review performance on the basis of your feedback

Sample fellowship interview questions:

Pull-out sheet

- 1 Briefly describe the aims of your proposed project and explain its novelty.
- 2 How did your research proposal come about? Did you receive any help writing it?
- 3 Why is it important to do this research now?
- 4 Justify your choice of host institution/department/lab.
- 5 Who else is currently working in your field?
- 6 Will you be using any new techniques?
- 7 What are the potential risks involved in this project, and how will you deal with them if things go wrong?
- 8 How will you measure your success during the course of the fellowship?
- 9 What impact might this research have on your field?
- 10 Does this project have the potential to make a socio-economic impact?
- 11 How would you describe your proposed research to a non-scientist?
- 12 How will you communicate your research to a broader audience?
- 13 How will you build and develop a research team?
- 14 What other sources of support are available to fund your research?
- 15 Can you give us evidence that you are developing research independence?
- 16 Tell us about your best paper and the impact it has had.
- 17 Where do you see yourself in 10 years' time? How will this fellowship help you to achieve this?
- 18 Why should you be awarded this fellowship?

Postdoc Development Centre

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