Succeeding at Academic Interviews for PhDs and Research Staff

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Today’s Topics

• Principles behind interviews
• Presentations
• Academic interviews
What is an interview for?

For the recruiter:
• To assess the candidate against the CV
• To explore the candidate’s potential

For the candidate:
• To assess the employer against the advert
• To explore the opportunity in more detail
Interview Structure

- Candidate presentation on research, teaching, or academic-related matter
- Panel interview with senior representatives from department/faculty/institution
Principles behind Interview Questions

• Explore your competence in key skills or expertise
• Assess your communication and self-presentation skills
• Assess your qualities under pressure
• Explore your potential to deliver in areas not specified in the job advertisement
So what you need to do is...

- Identify and understand key components of job
- Select examples that demonstrate your relevant skills/expertise
- Practise expressing those examples concisely and effectively
- Know what else you offer that is of interest
- Research and understand the job context
Academic Job Presentations

Teaching
  – Style, Content

• Research
  – Past, Future

• General
  – Thematic (e.g. RAE)
  – Income generation

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Tips for a good presentation

• Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse!
• Take presentations on USB stick and CD and if possible email ahead
• Do you need handouts? If so keep them to one side
• Short time limits require structure, clarity, conciseness
• Keep to three key points
• Try to anticipate some questions and prepare outline answers
Presentation: Teaching

• Specific lecture or tutorial
  – Show you understand a course, understand subject methodology
  – designed to test your knowledge and delivery style

• Open choice lecture
  – Chance to show your ideas and understanding
  – Structure the course reasonably thoroughly
  – How does it fit in overall programme?
Presentation: Research

• What level do you pitch at?
• Current or future research plans?
• Scale of the project discussed?
• Development of existing work or new area?
• New area can be risky if you don’t know it well yet
• Target possible publication and conference outcomes
• Remember in 20 minutes you can’t cover all that much!
• What do you think the greatest challenges facing HE are at the moment?
• What ideas do you have for attracting donors/generating income?
• How can new technologies be implemented to improve our teaching and learning strategy in this subject?
The Interview

• Social skills matter from the moment you arrive
  – Be polite, clear, friendly
  – Talk and listen
  – Make good eye contact
  – Don’t criticise other academics in the field – it’s a small world!
• Try to look beyond your nerves - get a sense of the workplace
• Over-dress rather than under-dress!
Interview Technique

- **PREPARE AND PRACTISE!**
- Expect to elaborate on detail from your application and the job specification
- Rehearse some opening lines to obvious questions, and choose good examples that fit key skill/expertise requirements
- Give yourself a moment to think before answering
- Be positive
- Keep your answers informative but not too long
- Avoid too much context, focus on outcomes
- You can keep your options open: ‘I’m interested in the possibility of….’
- Try to use an objective view of your achievements rather than describing your experience in minute subjective detail
- Make good eye contact with all panel members
Be a STAR

Useful model for planning answers and explanations

- **Situation:** *Keep this brief*
- **Task:** *Clear objective*
- **Action:** *What did YOU do?*
- **Result:** *Show objective met, or if not, why not*
Academic interviews

• Presentations
  – Teaching
  – Research
  – General – HE culture or issues, subject issues
• Meeting the department team
• Interview with panel of senior academics, faculty, and HR reps
• Prepare examples from your research and teaching, past and future
Opening Gambits

- Your CV looks very disjointed – can you explain that?
- Why do you want this job?
- You’ve just returned from fieldwork – what was that like?
- I believe you already know X in our department... [Keep your answer professional!]
Teaching Questions: Subject

- What techniques do you find particularly useful to explain [...] concept in a lecture?
- What part do you think [subject] professionals should play in HE education?
- How might you make current developments in [...] relevant to a particular course?
- What relationship does your subject have to the broader social sciences? (esp finance, business)
- How would you find teaching in a business school/interdisciplinary faculty environment?
Teaching Questions: Reflective

• What have you gained from the PGCert?
• Describe how you would handle a difficult tutorial dynamic
• How do you think your teaching could develop further?
• What are the advantages and challenges of team teaching?
• How do electronic resources influence your teaching techniques?
Teaching Questions: Syllabus

• What courses would you teach in our existing UG programme?
• What specialist courses could you develop for UG3 and MSc level?
• How does your research contribute to the syllabus here?
Research Questions: Current

• Why did you choose your PhD topic?
  – Specific follow-up drawing on your expertise/research
• What has been your main theoretical contribution to the subject?
• What has been your main empirical contribution to the subject?
• What publications have you/do you expect to deliver in the next 12 months?
  – Conventional routes
  – Creative routes – co-editing a book, conference proceedings
Research Questions: Future

• How will your PhD research develop?
  – Specific follow-up
• What additional areas are you interested in?
• What might you bring to our research group? What research group could you establish?
• What networks do you bring?
• Where do you think this subject area is going? What are the new topics which will arise?
• What consequences will arise from the recent work of X on Y?
What questions should you ask?

• Consider the departmental culture – do I fit personally and as a researcher?
• What scope is there for me to develop as researcher and teacher?
• How do they treat new staff – big 1\textsuperscript{st} year classes, lots of admin…
• If you have specific questions, ask 2 or 3 max.
Resources

- Careers Service website has lots of interview practice resources
- Practice interviews with PhD Careers Adviser
- Talk to your supervisor or other friendly academics and get insight and advice
Any Questions?

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30 minute appointments Wednesdays and Thursdays