

### ***Interviews: Postgraduate Applications***

There is no fixed procedure for interviewing for postgraduate courses and interviews are not necessarily held for all courses – some offers for Masters and Higher Diploma places are made on the basis of applications only. Interviews, when held, can vary considerably in length, structure, number of interviewers etc. depending on the institution and also on the department within the institution. Telephone interviews for some Masters courses may be held – particularly for international students. All candidates for PhD courses will usually be interviewed. An interview gives you a chance to see the department, meet potential tutors or supervisors and possibly current students. Occasionally, especially in the Humanities and Social Sciences you may get a group interview – try to make sure you speak up and make some contributions, while taking care not to dominate.

#### **Who will interview me?**

For most taught programmes you can expect to find the Programme Manager or Head of Department and/or a member of academic staff on the panel. For research programmes, the Research Supervisor will sit in on the interview. Remember that academics may not be trained interviewers, so you may occasionally have to take the initiative.

#### **What should I wear?**

Interviews for vocational courses are likely to be more formal than interviews for research and you will probably be expected to dress in exactly the same way as for a job interview.

Smart casual dress is usually acceptable for academic interviews. Interviews for research are likely to require less formal dress, but dress smartly if in doubt.

#### **What should I expect at an interview?**

When applying for postgraduate study, you will need to demonstrate a strong interest in the programme to which you are applying and outline why you are a strong applicant. There are many similarities to job interviews, such as the need to prepare well, to show enthusiasm and to ask appropriate questions. Academic interviews are usually less formal than job interviews, but occasionally you might get a grilling on your subject knowledge. Interviews for vocational courses are likely to be more formal than interviews for research.

#### **What are they looking for in an interview?**

Interviewers will be looking at several issues when they ask you for interview.

They will want to find out about you as an individual. In essence, they want to find out:

- Can you do the course? (your knowledge, skills, experience).
- Will you do the course? (your motivations, commitment, goals) and
- Will you fit in? (personality, characteristics). Are you a good team member?

This is especially important in smaller departments. They will also be looking for evidence of your enthusiasm in your subject. Make sure you keep up to date with recent developments, etc. They will also be looking at your ability to think for yourself – your capacity for independent and original thought, your ability to communicate and reason.

Be prepared to discuss and to state your opinions rather than giving the answer that you think they want. They will be looking more at your ideas, attitudes and opinions than at getting the right answer.

- Your reasons for study: This will help give them an idea of your motivation and also your commitment to the course. Think through your reasons for wanting to do further study before you go to an interview. For example do you want to:
  - Develop specialist expertise in some aspect of your first degree subject?
  - Have a complete change of career direction into a new, possibly vocational, subject area?
  - Develop some new skills and enhance your employment prospects?
  - Enter a profession, e.g. teaching, social work, for which a postgraduate course is essential?
- Your potential for academic/practical work (where applicable) in order to assess how well you will cope with the requirements of the course/research. Before the interview, think about the kind of skills that will be relevant to go on to undertake further study and how you have achieved them. You may want to include examples of the following:
  - Research skills
  - Written and verbal communication skills
  - IT skills
  - Commitment and perseverance
  - Ability to use your initiative and work on your own without supervision
  - Problem solving skills
  - Analytical skills
  - Practical skills (where applicable)
  - Work experience (where applicable).
- The interviewer will also be interested in your future career plans and will want to know that you have understood the relevance of your course to your longer term career plans and that you understand and can fit into the department.

#### **How can I prepare for the interview?**

- Read the draft of your application and personal statement or CV again to familiarise yourself with what you wrote. The interviewer(s) will pick out points from your application form/CV for further discussion and clarification. This will help you to anticipate questions they may ask you, and work out in advance rough answers to commonly asked questions (see below). This will also help you to prepare any questions you will want to ask about the course.
- Some interviewers are very passionate about their subject and expect you to have a keen level of commitment both to the subject and academia. Be ready to answer or discuss subject-specific questions or topics.
- Check out the research interests of academic staff in the department (often on the department's website) because you will be working with staff. Learn about your research topic (especially PhD students) as you will be expected to have some level of knowledge at the interview. Also prepare any questions you have yourself about the course and note any questions you want to ask.
- Research both the institution and the town. Make sure that you look round both the campus and town before you go home. Try to speak to current students in the department and have a look at notice boards to see the type of institution you are applying to join. Try to find out the career destinations of postgraduates from that course – sometimes the Department or the Careers service may have information here.

- Be prepared, be enthusiastic, be honest and genuine. Smile, make good eye-contact, arrive early.
- Avoid simple 'yes' or 'no' answers: if you are asked a closed question, such as 'Have you enjoyed your course?' open it up.
- Budget for the interview – remember that unlike interviews with some employers, you probably won't be reimbursed.
- Talk to people who have done a similar interview in the past and ask them about their experience.

### **Typical Interview questions**

#### **Why do you want to study this subject/course/research programme?**

Show your enthusiasm and passion for the subject. Make reference to relevant modules from your undergraduate study, projects or a dissertation that have led you to wish to develop this interest further. If you have a career aim, show how the course will help you achieve this. Explain the unique contribution your research will make to a university as well as how it will fit with existing research (if appropriate).

#### **Why this university/college?**

Demonstrate that you are familiar with the research strengths of the department and how it is regarded in the academic community. It may be the structure of the course, flexible study options, methods of assessment or the state of the art facilities that attract you. If you already study at this university, present this as a positive feature.

#### **What skills can you offer?**

Interviewers are interested both in academic and personal skills. On the academic side show the taught skills you have, such as skills of analysis, IT and research skills. On the personal side demonstrate that you have transferable skills, such as communication and presentation skills, time management and can work in a team. Do not just list skills; explain where you gained them (from work experience or undergraduate projects) and how this will benefit the course.

#### **What do you intend to do on completing this course?**

Even if you don't have a clear career aim at this stage, some sense of direction will signal that you have a reason for completing the course and may be more committed to it and doing well in your studies.

#### **How do you intend to fund your study?**

Ensure you have prepared well for this question. Check out any possible sources of funding, including from the university, well ahead of time to see if you would be eligible. Be prepared to show how you would fund a course personally, if you are not successful in grant applications. Perhaps you will work and study part-time or use a career development loan.

#### **Which part of your degree course did you enjoy the most?**

Ensure that you show enthusiasm for study/research. Mention parts of your current course that link to what you are applying for or that you excelled in. Expand on this by showing that you also do your own personal reading around the subject. You might be asked a philosophical or thought-provoking question or, for more vocational courses, how you would handle tricky situations or moral dilemmas.

**What do you feel are the main differences between undergraduate and postgraduate study?**

This is your chance to show that you have the skills and qualities needed for independent research and study. Demonstrate that you understand that postgraduate study involves taking a more proactive attitude to study, including independent reading, critical thinking, time management, problem solving, tenacity and self discipline.

**Why should we accept you?**

This is a gift question. It gives you the chance to use a prepared answer. State your strengths, skills and relevant experiences putting them in the order that creates the best impression.

For technical questions –

see <http://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/interviews/ivscience.htm#TECHNICAL>

**Questions for you to ask**

Try to ask at least one question in the interview as this will indicate interest and enthusiasm. Make sure you research the website and the prospectus to ensure the information is not already available there. However, prospectuses are frequently lacking in detail and there may be questions that you must ask in order to have the information necessary to reach a decision. Questions might include:

- What are your requirements for this course/research?
- What are the tutorial/supervisory arrangements?
- What are the sources of financial support? What is the likelihood of financial support?
- Are there any awards or grants available?
- Who has sponsored previous students?
- What are the destinations/employment prospects of previous students?

For further resources,

see: <http://careers.nuim.ie/students/jobsearch/interviews/index.shtml>

<http://postgradireland.com/>

<http://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/postgradmenu.htm>