Interview skills

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1. Introduction

The recruitment process for a number of university degree programmes is likely to include an interview. For example, applicants to degrees in teaching, nursing, social work, the health professions, and all degrees at the University of St Andrews, are likely to be invited to interview. Section E aims to help you work on your interview skills.

Even if you don't need to attend an interview for the programme you have applied to, you should still have a go at completing this section. You will no doubt need to perform at interview at some point in the future, and it will also help generally with your skills development and self-awareness.

2. Tips

Try speaking out loud when practising your answers to questions - it will sound different to what you've tried to say in your head and will help you to finds ways to express your thoughts clearly and coherently. The more you practise expressing yourself out loud, the better you are likely to perform at an actual interview.

Always reflect after an interview on what positives you can take from the situation. What went well and what have you learned? If feedback is offered, it is always a good idea to ask for it. Even if the interview did not go as well as you had hoped, try not to be too dispirited. You may well have done better than you think. In any case, try to view it as a useful experience. If you can learn from it, you will no doubt perform better at the next interview you do.

3. Find out more

See the information on the UCAS <u>website</u> on preparing for university interviews. Your tutors are also a source of help and advice, and are likely to have considerable experience in guiding students through the process.

4. University interviews

There are a number of degree programmes which, at most universities, will include an interview as part of the recruitment process. The degree programmes for which you can normally expect an interview include nursing, teaching, social work, health professions (e.g. physiotherapy or radiography etc.), art, some science degrees and degrees at the University of St Andrews. University admissions staff will use the interview to gather further information about your interests, experiences, skills and ambitions in order to determine whether you are a suitable candidate for the course.

The university interview is not aimed at catching you out and the university staff will want to give you the opportunity to perform as well as you can. Interviews are a nerve-wrecking experience for most people but do try not to put too much stress on yourself by worrying about it. The key to a successful interview is preparing for it properly.

If you view the interview preparation and performance simply as part of your SWAP Programme and prepare for it as you would a presentation at college, then it will likely be a more manageable and less stressful experience.

5. Exercises

Take your time working through the various exercises and suggestions. You might find it helpful to try some of the exercises with others so that you can gather feedback and compare notes.

Exercise 1

What do you think the main purposes of a university interview are?

Purpose 1	
Purpose 2	
Purpose 3	

Now compare your ideas with the information below.

The purpose of a university interview

A university interview has many features in common with a job interview. For example, both involve on a two-way process where both the interviewer and the applicant are seeking more information. In this case the interviewer/university want to find out whether you are a suitable candidate for study whilst the applicant/you might want to find out more about what that study will involve. As well as being an additional 'filtering' mechanism for the university, the interview is additional opportunity for you to find out more about it and about the programme of study. Remember, you will be studying on your chosen course for at least three years so it has to be right for you. Know your worth, present your answers as well as you can so that the interviewers can be convinced of your suitability, and ensure that you find out exactly what the course will entail so that later on you can make an informed decision about whether or not to take up your place.

The university will use the interview to explore further some of the aspects of your UCAS application form. You may, for example, be asked to expand on some of the statements you have made or some of the example you have cited in the form. If you have referred to specific skills that you possess, you may be asked to talk about examples of when you have used them or about how you

have developed them. You should therefore ensure that you have read through your UCAS application beforehand and given some thought to what they might want to know more about.

The university will also want to explore your understanding of your chosen subject and of the career it might lead to. If, for example, you are applying to a primary education degree, you will be expected to show that you have a good and accurate understanding of the role of the classroom teacher, and of some of the challenges they face, as well as some of the key recent developments in education policy and the impact these have / might have on the classroom. This is your opportunity to demonstrate your commitment to your chosen subject or career. You should aim to have specific reasons prepared rather than generalisations. The university will want to see that you have a genuine enthusiasm for the subject(s), are keen to explore it in greater depth, and have the commitment and motivation for university level study.

[Remember: The interview is only one part of the decision making process. Your initial application has enabled you to reach this stage. The interviewers want you to do well. It is in their interest to put you at ease so they can get the best out of you. They won't be trying to trip you up - in fact they'll be doing the opposite].

University interviews:

- Allow university admissions staff an opportunity to find out more about what you've written in your application.
- Are an opportunity for you to demonstrate your commitment to your chosen degree subject and eventual career.
- Help university admissions staff to check whether you have a realistic understanding of both the degree course and your chosen career.
- Help university admissions staff assess whether you will be able to cope with the demands of higher education.
- Are an opportunity for you to demonstrate core skills and highlight any key strengths and experience.

Exercise 2 (know your interviewee type)

Tick the statement that most closely describes you.

I sleep like a baby the night before an interview

1	I dread interviews.				
2	I look on an interview as a chance to show what I can do.				
3	I just turn up and hope for the best when I go to an interview.				
1	I think interviewers try to catch you out				
2	I prepare every detail for an interview				
3	I think the decision is made before the interview				
1	The night before the interview I am up late preparing				

3	I go out with my friends the night before an interview				

1	On the day of the interview I don't eat or drink	
	·	_

3 On the day of the interview I grab a coffee on the way 1 I go into the interview and do nothing until I am spoken to 2 I go into the interview and greet each interviewer by name 3 I go into the interview and sit down but say nothing 1 I say as little as possible in reply to questions 2 I take any question as an opening to talk about my abilities 3 I don't think interviewers are really interested in the answers I give During the interview I am concerned about giving the wrong answer 2 During the interview I talk as much as I can

On the day of the interview I have a hearty breakfast

During the interview I answer questions as briefly as I can

1	At the end of the interview I leave the room as quickly as possible			
2	At the end of the interview I have lots of questions for the interviewers			
3	At the end of the interview I ask when I will find out I haven't been successful			

1	I go straight home after the interview without talking to anyone		
2	I go over each question in detail with colleagues, stressing the good points I made		
3	I go straight to the pub		

Now see what your answers say about you.

Mostly 1

2

3

You need to do some further work on your confidence in order to be successful. Make the most of the opportunities during your SWAP programme to develop your communication skills. Speak to your tutor if you have serious difficulties. And try to remember that almost everyone, no matter how many interviews they attend, feels nervous in an interview situation. Even interviewers often feel quite nervous.

Mostly 2

You might need to be careful that you do not talk too much. While you want to get across your key points, the interviewers like to talk too! If you are overly chatty or start to waffle you are more likely to say something you'd rather not. Ask your tutor for feedback on your performance in class if you think this applies to you. Talking too much can be a sign of nervousness and you might need to work on trying to control it. If you are inclined to talk too much, you will need to be particular careful in any group interview situation so that you don't dominate the discussion. (This is discussed in greater detail later).

Mostly 3

The chances are you are being overly pessimistic! Remember the interviewers want you to do well and will be trying to encourage you to make the most of your strengths. Only you can develop a positive attitude. Interview preparation is vital to giving yourself the best chance to succeed at interview but if you go in thinking that you are going to fail, then you probably will.

Mix of all 3

If you had a mix of all three numbers, then you are doing well! Almost everyone can develop strong interview skills - it's a matter of identifying where you can improve and finding ways to develop those skills and your confidence in them. As with any other skills, your interview skills can be improved. Using this booklet will help you.

Exercise 3 (preparing for interview)

Read through the list below and number them 1-15 in order of which you think is most to least helpful in preparing for an interview. You might find it useful to discuss this with a partner or in a small group.

	Action	Rank
Α	Finding out as much as possible about the university	
В	Spending time re-reading your UCAS personal statement	
С	Going over possible interview questions	
D	Bringing along references or testimonials	
E	Saving a statement prepared about why you want to do the course	
F	Reading loads of relevant publications about your chosen subject	
G	Making sure you have current knowledge of the career you are aiming for	
Н	Preparing a statement to show you are aware of current trends	
ı	Preparing a list of questions you want to ask the interviewers	
J	Preparing a number of anecdotes to show how good you are in different situations	
K	Gathering evidence about your hobbies and bringing this to the interview	
L	Bringing a copy of your application form to the interview	
М	Seeking the advice of family and friends about how you should handle the interview	
N	Making sure you have everything ready for the day and that you	
	have a good night's sleep	
0	Checking the times of public transport or parking arrangements	

6. Preparing for interview

People will have a different view of what will work best for them, but there are some issues you may wish to think about:

- **N & O** should rank very highly on your list of priorities. Missing the bus or trying to decide what to wear on the morning of the interview are sure to leave you flustered and in the wrong frame of mind for an interview. If you are driving and you are unfamiliar with the route, try it out the week before at the same time.
- **B & L** are also important. It is easy to forget the details included in your UCAS personal statement and you want to be consistent.

G is something you should definitely do if you are applying to a degree which leads to a specific career of profession.

F would be of little help in an interview situation. The interview will go past very quickly and if you start trying to relate all you have learned from lots of articles or journals you may miss out on

opportunities to talk about your skills and achievements. That said, you should be informed about what is current in your chosen career or subject areas – keep up to date by reading relevant news articles in relevant publications or websites.

D, E & K are also of limited value. Unless you are specifically asked to, do not bring bundles of papers to the interview. The likelihood is that you will spend time searching through them for something specific and become confused. There is also the danger that you may drop them all on the floor.

C is very important. It's really important to have given some thought to the questions you are likely to be asked and to have considered your possible answers. Your tutor might have worked through a series of likely questions with you. It's very unlikely that you will be able to think of every question you'll be asked but you should be able to make a good guess at quite a few of them. Given that the interview is aimed at finding out about your skills, experience and knowledge, you know that this will be the basis for the questions. Remember that the interviewers work to a tight schedule and so you should try to keep your answers clear and concise.

I is also a good idea. An intelligent question can definitely work in your favour at an interview by showing that you have researched the course / career and given it real thought. Don't ask a question just for the question's sake - actively listen for the answer and engage with the interviewer.

J It is a great idea to come armed with examples of times when you have successfully demonstrated the sorts of skills or attributes they are likely to be looking for. However keep the examples short and focus specifically on your own contribution to a successful outcome. Try to find real examples from your own experiences which illustrate the qualities expected in whatever profession you are hoping to work in. For example, for primary teaching, be aware of the qualities that make a good teacher and think of real-life examples which prove you have each quality. These examples can come from experiences in work, voluntary activities or family life. In some interviews you might be asked to describe a challenging situation and how you used your skills and experiences to overcome the difficulties. Here it's not the anecdote that is important, it is the way you dealt with the situation that is.

A is also important. You will be expected to have researched both the university and the degree programme you have applied to. You should have a good knowledge of the degree structure and content, including any placements. It will not reflect well on your application if you are asking for information that is readily available in the university prospectus or the department's website. On the other hand, if you ask a question which refers to that information it can be a good way of showing you have done your research.

Exercise 4 (to do list)

You will have little control over the timing of the interview. Make sure that you have worked your travel arrangements out in advance. Leave plenty of extra time in case you need it. It is obviously better to arrive too early than too late.

One way to organise yourself is to prepare a short checklist of everything you need to do to get ready for the interview. Try this below, but keep it short. A long list will only daunt you.

Interview to do list

1

2	
3	
4	
5	

Exercise 5 (on the day)

Below are three scenarios of things that may happen at the interview. Select the option that fits what you would most likely do and then look at the next page for some of our suggestions. If you would do something other than one of the options, write that in the space provided.

Scenario 1

The day of the interview has arrived at last. You have made a checklist and are confident you have remembered everything important. You have arrived in good time for your interview where some of your classmates are already waiting.

Do you:

- a) Start chatting to them about the questions you are likely to be asked.
- b) Say repeatedly how worried you are about the interview.
- c) Try to tell them a funny story or joke to take everyone's mind off the situation.
- d) Realise you have some time in hand and find a quiet place to have a cup of coffee.
- e) ?

Scenario 2

The interviews are running very late and there are several of you waiting. It is likely you will have to wait at least another half hour before you are called.

Do you:

- a) Try to find someone who can give you information about the delay
- b) Quiz the last person out from the interview about what has happened
- c) Go off and phone everyone you can think of to keep yourself busy
- d) Go to the shops
- e) ?

Scenario 3

You realise you have forgotten to bring one of the pieces of information you were asked to submit on the day of your interview.

Do you:

- a) Panic and try to get back home in time to retrieve it
- b) Think there is no point now in going in to the interview
- c) Phone your parents/partner and ask for the information to be brought over

- d) Try to pretend you knew nothing about this request
- e) ?

Here are some suggested answers to the three scenarios.

Don't worry if you wouldn't have taken the same course of action. The important thing is that you have thought about possibilities before the interview so that you are well prepared

Scenario 1

Much depends on where the waiting area is. If you are right outside the interview room the noise of people chatting can be annoying for the interviewers as can loud laughter if your jokes are particularly funny. If you are directly outside the interview room, be careful about the level of noise.

Saying repeatedly how worried you are will not only make you more anxious, it will also cause additional stress to those around you. You must bear in mind that the situation is stressful for everyone.

If there is a café very close to where the interviews are taking place, some time on your own to read over your notes is a good option. However, don't go wandering off to the café down the road. Interviews can be shorter than expected or one of the other candidates might not turn up, and so you need to be around if that should happen.

Scenario 2

It is not advisable to stray too far from the place of interview. Often if interviewers are running late they will an attempt to catch up. The only people who can really tell you about the reason for any delay are the interviewers and you wouldn't want to interrupt them.

Don't think about using your mobile – it should be switched off and stay off. Apart from the fact you want to use this time to put yourself in a calm frame of mind, you may forget to switch it off when you actually go into the interview room.

Of course going to the shops should be a non-starter.

Scenario 3

Unless you live within walking distance of the place of interview and know exactly where the information is, don't attempt to go back for it. It is unlikely that the piece of information is vital to your interview and phoning someone to bring it over is only likely to send everyone into a panic. Trying to pass the blame or lying about the situation is not to be recommended!

The best thing to do (which you will hopefully have thought of) is to explain the situation clearly to the interviewers and undertake to ensure that it reaches them within the day/by the next day.

7. The interview process

There are various types of interviews and you will usually be told beforehand what your interview will involve. For example, you should normally know in advance how many interviewers to expect, whether it is a group or individual interview, and whether anything additional will be expected of you (such as a presentation or a written exercise).

The interview is likely to be one of the following three types (or a mix of two of them).

Individual/one-to-one Interview

This is a one-to-one interview to assess your suitability for a particular degree course. The interview will be between you and an interviewer (although you may be interviewed separately by different people).

Panel (Team) Interview

Here you will be interviewed by a small panel of people, usually ranging from two to four. The interviewers normally sit on one side of the desk, the candidate on the other. The panel might include staff from different areas e.g. admissions staff and academic staff from the subject area. Each interviewer usually has a special interest and this allows for a range of questions.

Group Interview

It is not uncommon for interviews to be carried out in groups, particularly for applicants to primary education degrees. This is where applicants are divided into small groups and asked to have a group discussion on a particular subject (this will be relevant to the subject area). You will then be observed and your contribution will be noted. You will be assessed both on the content of your contributions, and on your communication skills. Although group interviews can be daunting, SWAP students usually for well in this situation as they will often have more relevant experience and more ideas to share than younger applicants.

Exercise 6 (preparing for a ono-to-one or panel interview)

Suggest t	Suggest three things you should think about or do before the interview.				
1					
2					
3					
Suggest t	three things to keep in mind during the interview.				
1					
2					
3					
Suggest t	hree things to think about after the interview.				
1					
2					
3					

Have a look at the suggestions below. How well do these match your own suggestions? Remember that the exercise is designed to get you thinking – there are no right or wrong answers.

Tips for before the interview

- Re-read your invitation to interview to ensure you have understood the format and purpose of the interview. E.g. will you be asked to provide evidence of anything in particular? Do you need to bring anything with you?
- Remember to review your UCAS application fully. Identify anything you might like to highlight, and anything they are likely to ask more about.
- Review the information about the degree programme on the university website so that you are up to speed on the structure of the degree and the subjects covered etc.
- Try to think up possible questions and practice your answers. You might find it helpful to ask a friend or relative to help with this. If your tutor or college arranges practice session then make sure to go to one.
- You may be asked to explain any gaps in your C.V., how you felt about any previous employment and why you chose a SWAP programme. Be honest and try to be positive.
- ❖ Think about your strengths and weaknesses remember you will be aiming to stress the positive and highlight your (relevant) achievements.
- ❖ Think about examples of situations where you have demonstrated the sorts of skills or attributes the interviews might be interested in. It will be useful to have some in mind if you are asked to provide examples.
- Make a short list of any questions you would like to ask them. These should be questions about the degree or the university.

Tips for during the interview

- Greet, smile and make eye contact with all of the interviewers.
- Take a moment to compose yourself and to think before you answer the question.
- If you aren't sure what is being asked then ask for clarification or for the question to be repeated.
- Avoid giving closed, one word answers. On the other hand don't waffle or get into unnecessary detail.
- Remember your body language sit up confidently, look interested, maintain eye contact.
- Be positive. This is not the time to complain about previous jobs or courses!
- Don't forget to ask your questions.

Tips for after the interview

Thank the interviewer(s) for their time and say that it was nice to meet them etc.

- It is perfectly reasonable to ask for an idea of when they might make decisions on applications.
- ❖ Take the time to reflect on how you felt you did and what you could have improve on. This will help you to do better next time.
- Don't be too hard on yourself. There will always be a question or questions you feel you could have dealt with better. You will probably have done better than you think.
- If the interview really was a disaster then try not to dwell on it. Use it as a learning experience and put it behind you. Focus on your students and remember that there will be plenty of other opportunities open to you.
- ❖ Be patient they will likely to interviewing a lot of people and it may be a while before you know the decision.

[N.B. If you have a significant problem on the day of the interview (e.g. illness, bereavement) which you think is likely to impact on or has impacted on your performance, then you should let the interviewers know immediately].

Exercise 7 (preparing for group interviews)

A group interview is frequently used for interviews for applicants to degrees in primary education or nursing in particular. It will likely involve being placed in a small group with other applicants, some of whom you may know but most of whom will be strangers to you. The group may include some SWAP students from other colleges as well as applicants from schools and from other college programmes. It will include applicants from a range of age ranges and backgrounds.

The purpose of the interview is to assess your performance in a group situation. The group will normally be given a topic (unseen but related in some way to the degree programme) to discuss within a set time limit. The interviewers will be observing both the nature and the quality of your contributions to the discussion. They will be assessing the quality of your contributions i.e. are you making sensible, relevant and knowledgeable comments? Are you showing a good and realistic understanding of the subject area / career? At the same time they will also be assessing the strength of your communication skills i.e. are you confident enough to contribute to the discussion? Do you convey your ideas in a clear and concise way? How do you treat other group members? Do you interrupt others or dominate the discussion? Or do you invite others to contribute and accept other points of view?

Therefore your comments must be relevant and knowledgeable and must also be delivered with an appropriate manner and tone.

Try listing three thin	igs you would do d	or consider in	preparation fo	r a group interview.

1			
2			
3			

Check well do your ideas match the suggestions that follow.

Tips for group interviews

- Read the title of the discussion topic carefully. Remember you must keep to the subject. It is difficult to prepare for this in advance although you will hopefully have had the opportunity to so some practice group discussions in college.
- Listen to other members of the group and look interested in what they have to say.
- Pick up on points made by others don't just come in with something you want to say unless it is relevant.
- Watch your body language. You should look open and interested. Don't sit with your arms folded or slouch in the seat.
- Make sure you contribute to the discussion. Look for an opportunity to present your case. Remember there is no right or wrong answer, it is a discussion and your points are as valid as anyone else's.
- Be very aware of your behaviour in the group. Don't dominate the discussion or interrupt others when they are talking. The Chair will take action if someone is talking for too long.
- ❖ If you see someone struggling to make a contribution, you might want to consider inviting them to comment on your views.
- Don't worry if you can't say too much as long as you make a contribution. Listening skills are equally as important and it is better to make a couple of good points rather than lots of meaningless comments.
- Remember everyone will be nervous as everyone is in the same boat.

There are some other aspects of interviews you should be aware of.

Situational questions

While it is unlikely that a university interview will be entirely 'situational', it may form part of the overall process. The purpose of these sorts of questions is to find out how you dealt with specific situations and to gather evidence of when you have been able to demonstrate specific skills or attributes. This is usually introduced by, 'Tell me about a time when/an occasion when...'

You should aim to:

- Outline the situation briefly.
- Describe how you reacted and the actions you took.
- Describe any decisions you made.
- Say what the outcome was and the part you played in it.

You should prepare for this happening by selecting a few relevant examples beforehand. It goes without saying you will choose something which shows you in a good light, but don't exaggerate or make things up. Remember the interviewers want to find out how you acted in a particular situation, not a long story about the occasion itself.

Exercise 8 (situations)

Read the questions below and think about how you would answer them. You can either do this as a written exercise or in note form Think about the situation, the actions and the decisions you took and how this impacted on the outcome.

Remember the interviewers are interested in what you did, so even if you were working with others, you would need to be careful to focus on what your own role was.

Question 1: Describe a time when you found yourself in a stressful situation. How did you cope and what actions did you take?

Question 2: Describe a time when you had to work successfully as part of a team to achieve a shared goal. What was your contribution?

Question 3: Can you talk about a time when you had to deal with criticism of your work or your performance. How did you deal with it and what did you learn from it?

Question 4: Can you give an example of when you had to organise and event or an activity? How did you go about it? What would you do differently next time?

8. Written Tasks

Occasionally an interview process may also involve a short written exercise at the end (this is usually only the case for social work or primary education). You should be able to write a reasonable amount in the time given but there is generally no upper or lower word count limit. What is important to note is that the written task is not a trick part of the interview. Write honestly in response to the question set and make use of your experiences as a SWAP student.

We recommend you allow plenty of time to check over what you've written and correct any errors of grammar or spelling. It's far better to have a concise, well-written statement than several pages of stream of consciousness.

Below you will find a short exercise which you should complete as directed. It can be useful to discuss the answer you give with the answer given by someone else in your group.

Exercise 9 (written task)

Read the question below and complete your answer in 15 minutes. You should be able to write a minimum of 200 words. Think about your own experiences and describe how you feel.

What made	What made you decide to enrol on a SWAP programme?						

9. How to present yourself: tips for success

Dress

You will want to present yourself in the best possible light and this includes being aware of any dress code. Although people tend to dress more casually nowadays, you should choose your interview outfit carefully. Aim to dress smartly and avoid wearing jeans / denim, ripped clothes, clothes with big or controversial slogans, and trainers or scruffy shoes. You want to give the impression of being a mature, professional and credible candidate.

First Impressions

Walk into the room with confidence and remember to smile. Don't rush forward and greet the interviewers as they will expect to take the initiative. Do say 'hello' or 'good morning / afternoon' as you are introduced to each one and return a firm handshake if one is offered.

Voice

Speak clearly and confidently. Don't mumble or whisper. If you find this difficult, practise in front of a mirror or with a friend or relative.

Take Your Time

Take time to consider the questions posed. Try to make at least two or three points for every answer but don't go on for too long. If you have a lot to say about a particular subject you might make a comment like 'I could say more about that if it's appropriate.'

Positive Reinforcement

You want to take this chance to convince the interviewers that you are the right person for their university.

If you are asked why you chose the particular degree/subject/career, have some answers ready which show you understand what is involved. Avoid giving the impression that other people are behind your decisions e.g. 'My mother thinks I'd be good at this' or 'When my friend was in hospital...'. Interviewers will usually want to see that you have taken steps either to get some relevant practical experience or have at least talked in some depth to people currently doing the job.

Your Questions

If you really don't have any questions or if they have been answered already, then don't worry about it. It is better to say that you have gathered all the information you need than to ask a question just for the sake of it. On the other hand, an intelligent question at the end of the interview can leave a very positive impression.

Remember to thank the interviewers as you leave.

10. Interview preparation checklist

Preparing for your interview

Action	Done
Re-read your invitation to interview to ensure you have understood the format and	
purpose of the interview	

Review your UCAS application fully. Identify anything you might like to highlight, and anything they are likely to ask more about	
Review the information about the degree programme on the university website	
Think up possible interview questions and practice your answers	
Make a list of your strengths and weaknesses	
Think about examples of situations where you have demonstrated the sorts of skills or attributes the interviews might be interested in	
Make a short list of questions you would like to ask about the degree programme or the university	

Practicalities

Action	Done
Make sure you know where the interview is being held and work out how you are going	
to get there and how long it will take. Do a practice run if need be.	
Sort out what you are going to wear the night before.	
Sort out anything you will need to take with you e.g. water, throat sweets, tissues,	
directions.	
If you have a health condition which means you will need special arrangements e.g. a	
particular type of chair or an accessible interview room, then make sure to let the	
university know well in advance.	
Turn your mobile phone off! Putting it on to silent is an option but it might still cause a	
distraction if it vibrates when you get a call.	