



## SPA good practice on interviews

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SPA good practice statements are kept under review and updated as appropriate. Your comments are invited and appreciated, please contact [enquiries@spa.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@spa.ac.uk).

## Introduction

SPA's good practice on interviews has been developed to support higher education (HE) providers to be proactive in their management and review of interviewing applicants for admission to HE, ensuring applicants are interviewed fairly, effectively and without discrimination. This good practice will be useful for HE providers looking to evaluate their policy and procedures and includes guidance on the purpose and type of interviews, considerations throughout the interview process, training for interviewers and example interview questions.

SPA acknowledges that 'one size does not fit all' in terms of HE providers' policy and practice for interviews. Individual HE providers must decide what is relevant and appropriate for them, ensure that this is made clear in their admissions policy and make the requirements transparent to applicants. Interviews, particularly for very competitive courses, can be the subject of scrutiny, debate and challenge by applicants, the public and the media. Transparency with regard to selection criteria and the interview process should help HE providers to minimise the likelihood of such challenge.

To supplement this good practice statement, we have created an online module on interviews for [SPA's good practice toolkit](#). The toolkit has been developed to make our resources more accessible for HE staff working in admissions and related areas, to make it easier to share our materials with colleagues and consider them in your plans and reviews, and to support staff training. In addition, SPA's National Expert Think Tank (NETT) on fair admissions considered the use of additional admissions assessments, including interviews, by HE providers and developed a framework for selecting, or not selecting, to use them as part of a fair admissions process. HE providers may find it useful to consult the [NETT guidance](#) alongside this good practice.

HE providers must comply with consumer protection requirements to provide clear, accurate and timely information to applicants, including regarding the role of the interview in the overall decision-making process. For more information see the Competition and Market Authority's (CMA) [advice to UK HE providers on consumer protection law](#).

HE providers should monitor and regularly review their interview policy and procedures. Some HE providers ask applicants to provide feedback following an interview which can help them to monitor the effectiveness of the process and identify areas of improvement or potentially discriminatory practice.

## Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA)

Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) is the independent and objective voice on UK higher education admissions. SPA promotes professionalism, fair admissions and access to higher education by developing and leading on evidence-based good practice in the recruitment and selection of students. For more information about SPA and our good practice, visit [www.spa.ac.uk](http://www.spa.ac.uk).

## Disclaimer

This good practice statement is for general guidance only, and should not be taken as a list of obligations or a legal document. SPA emphasises that it does not offer legal advice and cannot take any responsibility for actions taken based on this information. HE providers must always take their own legal advice as they see appropriate.

## Why interview?

Interviews can benefit both applicants and HE providers. Interviews can provide applicants with an opportunity to demonstrate their communication and/or analytical skills, their interest and motivation to study at the HE provider, and interest in the subject and/or the specific course. They enable HE providers to seek a more detailed understanding of the applicant and delve deeper into the applicant's interest in the subject than can be expressed via their application form.

HE providers should take time to evaluate the purpose of an interview. This will help determine its relative weighting within the overall decision-making process, guide the interview structure and types of questions to ask and help improve communication with applicants ahead of the interview. It is important for HE providers to be clear about the validity, rationale and purpose of interviews and about the structure and process pre-interview, on the day and post-interview. If an interview does not appear to add value, it poses an unnecessary barrier that wastes both the applicant's time and the HE provider's. If the purpose is unclear, HE providers may wish to investigate further to decide how effective or necessary interviewing an applicant is. If evaluation shows that the interview does not add value nor support the [principles of fair admissions](#) HE providers may opt not to interview at all.

HE providers will have different reasons for using interviews and will attach varying levels of importance, relative to other factors, to interview performance. Some HE providers may require applicants to attend an interview as part of the admissions decision-making process and some professional bodies require interviews to be held as part of selection for courses leading to a particular profession, for example teaching. HE providers may choose to interview for only some or for all of their courses. Whatever the position, HE providers must ensure that the importance of, and selection criteria for, interviews is clear:

- in their policies and procedures published on their websites
- in course profiles
- in information sent to applicants
- and to all those who are involved in the interview process, internal and external to the institution.

Staff involved in deciding who to interview must understand and be clear as to the criteria on which applicants will be chosen or indeed not chosen for interview; this should also be made clear to applicants.

## Types of interview

Addressing the purpose of an interview will help HE providers determine what type and format of interview would be most suitable. There are three broad categories of interviews and whilst many interviews will include aspects of all three, it is important to identify which best represents the main purpose for interviewing. This will allow HE providers to set appropriate expectations for both staff and applicants.

### Assessment interviews

There are instances where the application form cannot itself fully demonstrate an individual's potential to succeed on their chosen course, so face-to-face discussion is an effective way of assessing suitability and giving applicants a chance to 'prove themselves'. Assessment interviews can help determine whether or not someone meets the HE provider's entry requirements or has

potential to demonstrate suitability in other ways. This type of interview may be most common in areas such as:

- art, design and performance-related courses, where ability and talent needs to be assessed
- research studentships, where there is no taught element and the scale of existing subject-specific understanding and commitment is critical
- professional courses with competence standards, where a professional, statutory or regulatory body requires additional scrutiny of suitability
- diagnostic support, where additional pre-sessional or in-sessional academic or non-academic support could be offered if required to improve student success
- recognising non-standard or experiential learning, where further questions may need to be asked to better understand an individual's circumstances and how well that demonstrates suitability to succeed on the course.

HE providers should consider what exactly the interview is assessing and aim to have well-structured assessment criteria that can be consistently applied.

### **Selection interviews**

There will be times when the application form is sufficient for demonstrating an individual's suitability, but not for choosing between such suitable applicants. Selection interviews may be used to give each suitable applicant the opportunity to demonstrate their strengths relative to others and allow improved differentiation between them. This type of interview may be most common for highly competitive courses with high volumes of applicants with similar grades or other demonstrations of academic excellence.

Transparency in selection methods, to demonstrate they are reliable and valid, is vital. It is important that this information is available to applicants and their advisers and the methods consistently applied by all interviewers.

### **Recruitment interviews**

Some interviews are not intended to aid the evaluation of an application but instead aim to encourage the applicant to choose the HE provider as their firm choice. These are not strictly interviews as they do not inform a decision on the part of the HE provider but are a recruitment tool to market the course and institution. They could provide applicants with the opportunity to make a more detailed assessment of their choice and have face-to-face discussions about academic content but HE providers should be aware of the risk of misleading applicants, causing unnecessary anxiety, pressure and cost, and potentially disengaging them from that choice.

SPA has noted an apparent rise in the number of HE providers carrying out interviews solely for recruitment purposes and strongly recommends that HE providers should make clear in advance to applicants whether or not such an interview is part of the decision-making process. HE providers should carefully consider whether these should be referred to as 'interviews' at all.

SPA recommends that the same principles apply to recruitment interviews as for interviews which do form part of the decision-making process. Applicants should be sent detailed information in advance including an explanation about the type of interview they can expect as this will help them to prioritise and prepare properly. It may be worth providing them with a template to plan the sort of questions they may wish to ask, areas of the institution to see and method for rating how well it

matches their requirements for HE study. From a recruitment aspect this would allow HE providers to emphasise their strengths and help the applicant make an informed decision.

If an interview is used purely as a recruitment tool, HE providers may wish to consider seeking feedback from applicants following interview. This ensures the purpose of the interview is being fulfilled and applicants do not view it as an unnecessary barrier to admission. HE providers should consider the cost and time implications for applicants attending these interviews, particularly if they have already visited on another occasion.

### **Interview format**

Interview formats will vary between HE providers and courses but it is important to create a positive environment in which interviewees are given the opportunity to perform to the best of their ability. A good environment will help to ensure the most suitable applicants are admitted, that all applicants are given the opportunity for equal consideration by interviewers and that no applicant is discriminated against.

Whilst being professional, interviews can also be friendly and a pleasant experience for interviewees and interviewers. They are a two-way process and provide applicants with an opportunity to decide whether the particular HE provider and course is right for them. Applicants should be informed that there will be an opportunity for them to ask questions.

Interviews could take one of the following formats:

- an individual, structured interview
- a group interview to assess skills of interaction
- a multiple-mini interview (see below)
- a semi-structured interview which can allow conversation to enable some interviewees to give a fuller account of themselves
- an interview where questions are not prescribed but interviewers have a clear set of themes or areas to explore
- an information-giving activity, if students are progressing within an institution or partnership from one level to another, for example from a Foundation Diploma to an undergraduate degree.

### **Multiple mini interviews (MMIs)**

Some HE providers choose to use multiple mini interviews rather than a more traditional interview process, particularly for admission to courses in medicine, as they can be viewed as being a better predictor of academic performance and professional behaviour.

SPA considers the use of MMIs good practice as they give applicants practical opportunities to demonstrate their skills and enable HE providers to test a wide range of skills. Additionally, they ensure that all interviewees have the same experience and are seen by a number of interviewers. MMIs allow more interviewees to be assessed simultaneously, reducing the number of interviewers required. It may be more difficult for applicants to be coached in how to respond in an MMI assessment, which may help to ensure a more level playing field for all interviewees.

HE providers will approach MMIs in different ways but interviews will typically consist of short, multi-station assessments, each designed to test a different skill. Applicants move around a circuit of timed stations where they are assessed using a range of different types of exercise. These typically include role-play exercises (sometimes HE providers employ actors to ensure the situation is as realistic as possible), problem-solving and decision-making exercises. Some HE providers publish examples of these exercises on their websites. Applicants are likely to spend a short amount of time, for example five minutes with each assessor, before a recorded voice or buzzer tells them to move onto the next station.

Assessors score each applicant independently and good practice recommends they are scored against a set of agreed criteria. Staff with responsibility for the management and administration of MMIs should ensure assessors are appropriately trained and are aware they should not discuss the performance of applicants until after their scoring and report forms have been completed and collected.

HE providers may wish to establish a working group to agree on appropriate and effective MMI assessments, drawing on the requirements and outcomes outlined in the [General Medical Council's Outcomes for graduates guidance](#). Each station should assess a different skill and the same skill should not be tested twice. Some HE providers pilot questions with enrolled students to test timing and effectiveness.

MMI assessments are likely to include some of the following:

- assessment of motivation
- initiative and resilience
- team work
- insight and integrity
- commitment
- written communication
- verbal communication
- problem solving
- empathy
- moral reasoning
- effective learning style.

### **Video conference, Skype and phone interviews**

Some HE providers carry out interviews by video conference (VC), internet call service such as Skype or by phone if interviewees are unable to attend in person, for example applicants who are resident overseas or an excessive distance from the interview location; applicants for whom the cost may be prohibitive; or applicants who may be unable to attend owing to a disability.

Responsibility for the scheduling, timing and interview arrangements lies with the HE provider but it should be made clear to applicants that it is their own responsibility for arranging the VC, Skype or phone facility in their own location.

The same good practice guidelines should apply to VC, Skype and phone interviews as to interviews conducted in person, to ensure consistency across the process. A VC, Skype or phone interview should preferably involve the same interviewers that have conducted the face-to-face interviews for that course.

Key points for video conference and Skype interviews:

- Test the equipment/facilities in advance.
- Ensure the identity of interviewees is able to be verified, to ensure the correct person is being interviewed.
- Ensure the honesty of interviewees is able to be guaranteed, making sure they do not have access to helpful materials.
- Ensure interviews follow the same timing as face-to-face interviews.
- Carry out effective training for all interviewers to ensure consistency of process and reliability of outcomes.

### Timing of interviews

HE providers should give applicants sufficient notice of their interview(s). They should, within reason, consider specific religious holidays and observances which may affect interview attendance or timings during the day. UCAS Apply asks full-time undergraduate applicants to identify any dates they will not be available for interview and HE providers should take this information into account. HE providers might want to consider having interviews in school/college holidays or on Saturdays to avoid some applicants having to take time away from school/college. Allowance may need to be made for international applicants whose examinations may occur at different times to those in the UK.

If there are reasonable grounds for an applicant being unable to attend on a specific date, including ill health, an alternative date should be offered. SPA considers offering up to three alternative interview dates reasonable.

HE providers in remote areas or where applicants are coming from a distance may wish to structure interview timetables to suit travel timings. If an applicant has travelled a significant distance, allowance should be made for this and for possible jetlag in the timing of the interview.

HE providers must consider the number of interviews that will be manageable, for both applicants and interviewers. HE providers should consider the number of interviews conducted each day when timetabling interviews to ensure fair and equal consideration of each applicant.

### Before the interview

In the invitation to interview, applicants should be given a specific date by which they must respond to confirm their attendance, and confirmation of what will happen if they fail to accept or decline the invitation to interview. Applicants should also be made aware in advance of the consequence of non-attendance at an interview.

UCAS has an online mechanism to help HE providers inform full-time undergraduate applicants about interviews. Other HE providers use an online interview booking system which is linked to their

third-party software, or have developed their own booking systems. These allow applicants to easily choose from a range of available interview dates within a specified time frame and, if the system is linked to the HE provider's applicant portal, enable the applicant to easily retrieve interview documentation.

Invitations to interview should be sent in sufficient time to enable travel arrangements to be made. Particular attention should be paid when invitations are sent to applicants who are resident outside the UK. Decisions about whether to interview these applicants should be made as quickly as possible and HE providers may need to be more flexible regarding the scheduling, timing and location of interviews to ensure these applicants are not disadvantaged in any way. Invitations should be sent by email to allow the maximum time to make travel arrangements.

HE providers need to make applicants aware that interviews before a decision to make an offer are an important part of the admissions decision-making process and that they should therefore carefully follow any guidance provided.

### **Pre-interview information**

Clear information about the interview should be sent to each applicant in sufficient time for any pre-interview material to be prepared and so that they know what to expect from the process and on the day.

Pre-interview information should include:

- details about how to prepare themselves for the interview – both practically and in terms of answering and asking questions, and any activities to be undertaken on the day
- date, time, duration and location of the interview
- details of where to report to and a contact name and number on the day in case of queries, if they are late or become lost
- details of any facilities and/or equipment that will be available on the day, for example audio-visual, presentation facilities
- arrangements for staying overnight if an applicant is coming from a distance, for example HE providers may wish to include information on accommodation and local amenities to help applicants make their arrangements. HE providers may wish to consider options for on-site accommodation
- travel information, parking availability and a map which includes the specific building in which the interview will be held
- information about local crèche facilities
- a question to applicants in relation to any accessibility requirements they may have for the interview (see [applicants requiring additional support](#)).

Applicants travelling to the UK should be given some idea of the expenses they may incur whilst in the UK.



Some HE providers may offer financial assistance for applicants to attend interview, particularly if there is a widening participation/access context to the application. HE providers should consider whether or not such assistance is available and make their policy on this transparent and accessible.

Information should also be provided about the structure of the day, including:

- practical matters, for example meal times
- details of any activities which may be included as part of the interview day for the applicant and/or for visitors accompanying them. This may include tours of the campus, accommodation, academic department or library; talks with current students; a presentation with questions and answers. Information about these should be provided in advance of the day.
- any information about separate activities for visitors who come with the applicant. This could potentially indirectly enhance the applicant's experience and make it more likely that an offer may be accepted.
- If there is no programme of activities, maps and details of the campus, local cafes, restaurants and places of interest could be provided.

Interview guidance for both interviewers and interviewees should be transparent and readily accessible on the HE provider's website. HE providers should give applicants as much information as possible to help them prepare, mindful that in some cases they may have had little prior experience of interviews and no alternative advisers to turn to.

Applicants should be informed whether they will be asked questions about a specific area of their studies or a specific part of their application, or if the interview is to identify potential and motivation for the course or for a particular profession (such as medicine or teaching) beyond what has already been demonstrated.

If the interview concentrates on the specific course at the HE provider, applicants should be told that they will be expected to have undertaken appropriate research in advance of the interview. If background reading is required about which the applicant will be asked questions, applicants should be told this and provided with example sources of relevant information.

Applicants should be told in advance how challenging the interview is intended to be, including the way questions are designed to make them think. They should be made aware that they may be expected to apply existing knowledge to new situations, for example by discussing problems; demonstrating how they think rather than what they know; being able to argue a particular position and to put forward their own point of view.

Some HE providers publish sample interview questions or videos of mock interviews on their website which provide additional information for applicants about what to expect from the process. The link to the relevant webpage(s) should be provided for applicants to consult in advance of the interview. Applicants should also be advised to undertake mock interviews and/or practice answering interview questions.

It is helpful to give applicants specific examples of the areas the interview assessment will cover, for example:

- communication skills
- motivation for the course and for HE study
- academic potential
- evidence of independent thought
- understanding of relevant current issues
- maturity
- evidence of ability to meet the academic demands of the course
- evidence of ability to hold a cogent argument
- demonstration of problem-solving ability
- evidence of ability to apply knowledge
- relevant experience
- personal commitment
- informed enthusiasm
- perseverance
- initiative

### **Written tasks or tests**

Applicants should be given details of any written work or written test that forms part of the interview process or of any tasks that will be sent to them to be completed in advance of the interview. Applicants should be told of any particular features of the task or test in advance, for example a requirement to speak in a foreign language or a practical test such as a music test.

Reasonable adjustments to written tests, such as extra time or alternative formats, should be provided as appropriate.

### **Documentation**

Applicants should be given details in advance of any documentation they should bring with them on the day, for example formal identification. It may be necessary to satisfy a visual identity check, to ensure the correct person is being interviewed.

Some HE providers may use the interview day to check qualification certificates or to carry out health checks and/or requirements for processing criminal records checks or disclosure documentation. These processes should be kept separate from the interview process.

### **Recording**

Some HE providers make an audio recording of interviews. If this is part of the procedure applicants should be told in advance and the reason for this identified, for example the recording may be referred to in the case of a query or complaint. Applicants should be given an opportunity to inform relevant staff if they do not wish their interview to be recorded. Applicants should also be directed to the HE provider's policy on the retention and storage of records.

## Conduct of the interview

Trained interviewers may be members of academic or administrative staff, external interviewers employed and trained specifically for this purpose or existing students as helpers or ambassadors (see [training](#) and [current students and interviews](#)). The interviewers used should reflect a balance of ethnicity, gender and academic interest wherever possible.

Interviews should normally be conducted by a minimum of two trained interviewers. However, SPA recognises that staff resources and timetabling constraints may prevent this in some HE providers. In situations where only one member of staff conducts interviews there is an even greater need for appropriate recording of information and rationale for decision-making, to ensure evidence can be produced to justify interview outcomes.

If the interviews are for a course which has professional requirements, for example medicine, teaching, nursing, social work or veterinary medicine, the interviewers should consider including an experienced external professional and someone who is not connected with the course or profession. Some HE providers will include outside observers and/or National Health Service Trust members sitting in on interviews. [Competence standards](#) that set out entry requirements for a course should be reviewed to ensure that they are non-discriminatory, relevant, genuine and necessary.

If HE providers are interviewing applicants overseas the same good practice guidelines should apply, to ensure consistency across the process.

Interviewees should be given the names and roles of the interviewers on the day of the interview, if not before. Interviewers should introduce themselves to applicants at the start of the interview and may wish to consider wearing a name badge.

Interviews should be conducted in appropriate surroundings. SPA recommends the following considerations:

- Use an accessible office or room.
- The layout of the interview room should be non-confrontational, for example chairs arranged at angles to one another and thought given to interviewers not sitting behind a desk.
- The room should be heated at an appropriate temperature and water should be available for both interviewees and interviewers.
- The room should be tidy and well-organised.
- Reception staff should be informed of the interview arrangements and the course should have its own 'meet and greet' area.
- An appropriate waiting area with refreshments should be available for interviewees.
- Appropriate facilities or arrangements, including support arrangements, should be provided for visitors accompanying applicants on the day.
- All efforts should be made to ensure the interview can be conducted without interruption.

- A notice should be placed on the door of the room stating that an interview is in progress.
- Any telephone or other electronic equipment in the room, including mobile phones, should be diverted, switched to silent or switched off. Interviewers should ask the applicant to do the same with their mobile phone before the interview begins.

The interviewers' preparation for an interview will determine its success. The interview may be fully 'structured' with all interviewees being asked the same questions, or follow a 'semi-structured' format where interviewers follow up the interviewees' answers. *The Schwartz Report on Fair Admissions* recommended that interviews are structured as these are more likely to predict undergraduate success.

Interviewers should carefully consider the questions they will ask, ensuring they can be asked consistently of all applicants and that there is a reasonable expectation all would have the same opportunity to express a meaningful answer. Interviewers should have seen examples of questions in advance and agreed which of them will ask which questions.

#### **The role of the interviewer:**

- Interviews should start with a basic question or questions designed to put interviewees at ease, for example a subject about which the applicant expressed an interest in their application.
- Interviewers should ensure they are interested in interviewees and do not appear bored or rude.
- Interviewers should ensure that questions cannot be construed as discriminatory. Any humorous remarks should be appropriate. Examples of inappropriate interview questions are included as [Appendix A](#).
- Interviewers should be courteous, respectful and culturally aware and should avoid stereotyping interviewees or making assumptions or presumptions.
- Interviewers should make good eye contact, smile and encourage interviewees to be themselves.
- If an interviewer thinks an interviewee has had a poor interview, this should not be communicated, either verbally or otherwise. Interviewees should feel they have had the opportunity to do themselves justice.
- Interview questions may be scripted and prepared in advance. They should not be closed but open-ended questions which are relevant to the interview purpose.
- Questions should not be lengthy and should be phrased to give interviewees scope to provide a wide-ranging answer in terms of their skills and abilities.
- Different types of questions may be used such as probing, reflective and/or hypothetical questions but all questions should be consistent between interviews to ensure fairness.
- While supplementary questions may be asked to draw out the interviewee if necessary, the interview should not lose its focus.

- Questions should flow well, be business-like, well-organised, logical, thorough and probing and should reflect the overall purpose of the interview. If an interviewee is in obvious difficulties all interviewers should be aware that they should move on.
- Good closing questions are a way to conclude the interview and wrap up any loose ends. They give both interviewers and interviewee a chance to ask or mention anything not already covered, or to expand on important points which may have been missed. Handled correctly, closing questions are an effective way to ensure the interviewee leaves with a positive feeling about the course and the institution.
- Examples of types of interview questions are included in [Appendix B](#).

It is good practice to nominate a chairperson prior to the interview. The chairperson should be aware of his/her role during the interview.

#### **The role of the chairperson:**

- Welcome interviewees.
- Try to ensure interviews keep to time throughout the day so as not to cause unnecessary anxiety to waiting interviewees.
- Be aware of the HE provider's emergency procedures, for example fire exits and drills, and make interviewees aware of them.
- Explain the structure of the interview, including the number of questions and how long the interview will last, and state that the applicant will have an opportunity at the end to ask any questions.
- Ensure that at least one of the interviewers will be able to answer general questions about the HE provider and its facilities and specific questions about the course, for example the recent pattern of graduate employment, likely opportunities on completion of postgraduate study. If questions are asked which cannot be answered, interviewees should be referred to the relevant person (or to a question and answer session if these are available on the day).
- Explain that interviewers may make notes while the interview is in progress.
- Explain to interviewees what will happen after the interview, how long it will be before they know the outcome and how this will be communicated to them.

#### **Scoring and assessment**

Interviewers may or may not have sight of the interviewee's full application. Some HE providers give interviewers relevant extracts from the application, others give copies in full. What is provided may depend largely on the interview purpose and structure and whether the questioning seeks to probe anything interesting or puzzling from the application. Some HE providers argue that as the academic selection has already taken place in identifying those eligible for interview, interviewers do not need sight of the full application. In these cases it would be good practice for HE providers to merge their interview report form (see example in [Appendix C](#)) with the applicant's name and/or the personal statement, reference, details of work and/or voluntary experience. Interviewers should ensure they read the relevant material beforehand and clarify anything which is unclear.

If a written test forms part of the interview process, HE providers should consider having the marking carried out by staff other than those conducting the interviews. If the test score is included in the overall interview score the percentage weighting should be made clear to applicants.

Details about how interviewees' responses will be recorded and scored should be agreed in advance of the interviews and should be available to staff and applicants. Any specific criteria that will be used to score against, including any essential or desirable criteria and how a final score will be arrived at, should be made transparent to applicants. Interviewers should be given examples of appropriate responses in each of the grading areas and should have an opportunity to seek clarification on these criteria before the interviews commence.

SPA recommends using a standard score and/or interview report form, examples of which are included as [Appendix C](#). SPA recognises that not all interviews are conducted on this formal basis and for some interviews course leaders will make decisions based on their experience of previous admissions cycles and knowledge of the course requirements. In such cases, the rationale for decision-making must still be recorded, to ensure evidence can be produced to justify interview outcomes.

Policies on scoring will vary from one HE provider to another and at some, interviewers may not always have to agree precise scores as individual scores may be aggregated. As general guidance, no interviewer should be coerced by other interviewers into a decision they are unhappy about. The chairperson should adjudicate if agreement cannot be reached and he or she should be sufficiently experienced to make the final decision. Interviewers should make notes as soon as possible after the interview and before the next interview if possible.

### **Decisions and feedback**

HE providers should consider how the decision from an interview is documented, so that unsuccessful applicants may be provided with effective feedback and so that there is a clear record in the case of further query or complaint. Please refer to SPA's [good practice on providing feedback to unsuccessful applicants](#). Interviewers should also be made aware that applicants may occasionally request feedback on their interview performance even if they are successful, for their future development, and this should be dealt with in line with the HE provider's applicant feedback policy. Interviewers and admissions staff should ensure they are clear about the policy in this area. In the case of some FE colleges offering HE, this may be covered by their partner HE provider's admissions policy. All those involved in interviewing applicants should be aware of the HE provider's [complaints handling process](#) in order to direct applicants appropriately, if necessary.

If interviewees identify any extenuating circumstances which they perceive have affected their performance on the day, the chairperson should ensure these are noted.

### **Current students and interviews**

HE providers should consider having current students as ushers or ambassadors/helpers to carry out meet and greet activities, give tours, offer support to interviewees and answer questions on student life and experience. Students could also be used to sit in on interviews as observers and to time activities where appropriate, for example in MMIs, and/or to join in with workshops. If a student observer is present this must be explained to interviewees and they must agree to being observed.

A number of HE providers have students as part of the interview team, including training senior medical students to be MMI assessors. Using students for these purposes has the advantage of giving current students interview experience, contributing to their skills development and student experience, and may also help those being interviewed to feel more comfortable.

HE providers should identify the skills and qualities required for both of these types of roles and choose appropriate students, by interview. It is also then vital that the selected students are fully trained, including on the HE provider's equality and diversity and safeguarding policies, and know what is expected of them during the process.

### **After the interview**

Interviewers should be clear about what they should do with all interview materials, in particular any information that has been recorded about applicants, following the interview. Interviewers should identify themselves on score or report forms and should be advised about the requirement under the Data Protection Act which allows individuals access to any written material pertaining to them. Interviewers should be advised to note comments based on the evidence presented to them and not any personal prejudices. They should be advised not to discuss the performance of interviewees until after their scoring and report forms have been collected from them.

An audit trail from the start to the end of the process should be kept for all interviewees, documenting clearly all steps that were taken.

All paperwork and other material including audio recordings of interviews and interview report forms and scoring sheets should be securely stored for the appropriate length of time in accordance with the HE provider's policy on retaining and storing records.

### **Applicants requiring additional support**

Applicants should be given the opportunity to highlight any requirements for additional support in advance, provided with details of who to contact, and given clear instructions as to their interview arrangements. Invitations to interview and pre-interview information should ask applicants if they require any additional support, have any accessibility requirements for the interview, or need adjustments to equipment or other materials that will enable them to demonstrate their suitability for selection.

Specific adjustments may need to be made to ensure that the interview complies with the HE provider's equal opportunities and disability guidelines for applicants. For example extra time, changes to interview style or set up, large print information, accessible venues or enabling equipment may need to be arranged for certain activities. Some of these applicants may need a carer present and/or someone to speak for them at the interview. It may be appropriate to appoint a member of staff from the HE provider's own Disability Support Service or equivalent, but flexibility should be considered where a specialist or familiar carer would be in the best interests of the applicant.

All applicants should be judged on their academic suitability for the course, based on the entry criteria, competencies and any other relevant factors. Consideration relating to additional support requirements for undertaking the course should remain separate. It is not the responsibility of interviewers to make assessments for possible reasonable adjustments. Please refer to [SPA's good](#)

practice in the consideration of disability support needs within the admissions process for further information.

All aspects of the interview process should comply with the HE provider's policies on equal opportunities and safeguarding children and vulnerable adults.

Interviews for applicants requiring additional support:

- Applicants should be advised in advance of who to contact at the HE provider if any reasonable adjustments will be required for the day, either for them or for anyone accompanying them.
- Admissions staff should then liaise with specialist advisers, such as staff in the HE provider's Disability Office, to decide on the most appropriate adjustments to be made. In advance of the interview applicants should be informed of any adjustments which have been organised.
- Applicants should also be advised that they can arrange to see the Disability Officer should they wish to discuss their particular requirements.
- If questions regarding support arise from interviewees on the interview day, these should be referred to a relevant member of staff for example the Disability or Admissions Officer, and should be kept separate from the interview.

### Interviewing minors

Many applicants may still be minors at the point at which they are interviewed. Interviewers should be aware of the potential sensitivities of interviewing minors and should be trained accordingly. HE providers have responsibilities under UK legislation to ensure a duty of care to prospective students and they (and their parents or guardians) should be informed of the level of care given by the HE provider. A minimum of two trained interviewers should always be used and the interview should be in an appropriate location. If an HE provider considers an interviewer to be involved in regulated, regular or unsupervised activity under the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act then it should refer to its own criminal convictions disclosure requirements for staff. Interviewees should be asked to provide emergency contact details and should be accompanied to the interview by a chaperone (although this person does not have to be present in the interview).

If an applicant will not be 18 by the December of their first year of study, some HE providers will invite the applicant and his/her parent or guardian to visit and will provide a tour of the institution including accommodation and social areas. This provides the applicant and their parent or guardian with a clear picture of the adult environment into which the applicant is seeking to be admitted. The visit may also give the HE provider an opportunity to understand more about the applicant for example their expectations of student life, of managing money and living away from home.

Some HE providers, as part of their admissions policy, require parents or guardians to sign a consent form which confirms the HE provider will not be acting in *loco parentis*, while others appoint a member of staff at the institution to take specific responsibility for the student. All aspects of the interview process should comply with the HE provider's policies on child protection and/or safeguarding children.



All applicants should be judged on their academic suitability for the course, based on the entry criteria, competencies and any other relevant factors. Please refer to SPA's [briefing on age considerations in admissions](#) for further information.

### **Training of interviewers**

HE providers are required to carry out the interview process fairly, effectively and without discrimination. All applicants for interview should be assessed individually, without partiality or bias, in line with the published entry criteria and in accordance with the HE provider's policies on equality and diversity.

Training for interviewers could be carried out through the HE provider's Human Resources department, Staff Development department or by other professionals. Interview training should be compulsory for all those who are new to interviewing applicants and experienced interviewers should be encouraged to attend regular continuing professional development sessions or 'refresher' sessions. In FE colleges offering HE, in-house training may be focussed on FE interviews rather than specifically designed for interviewing HE applicants. Interviewers should understand the different requirements and ensure they are appropriately prepared to conduct interviews in this specific context.

Some professions such as medicine, dentistry, veterinary science, social work and teaching will require interviewers to be trained to meet the specific needs of the profession as well as being able to identify applicants who meet the entry criteria for the course.

*The Schwartz Report* recommended that where professional staff (for example NHS staff or teachers) are involved in interviewing they should receive appropriate training from the HE provider and should also receive support and recognition within their own organisations to enable them to carry out this role properly. In cases where an HE provider considers their training or that which has been carried out by the relevant professional body adequately covers the requirements, more than one session may not be required.

Training should be designed to enable staff to make complex judgements about applicants presenting with a wide range of skills, abilities, knowledge and experience from a diverse range of backgrounds. Interviewers should be aware of the differences in educational experience that applicants may have and should not assume that an applicant has progressed via a particular educational route or pathway. Interviewers must be trained to identify effective communication skills and to understand that hesitating or being shy does not necessarily indicate the applicant has poor communication skills.

Interviewers must be trained to ensure direct and indirect discrimination is prevented, to recognise linguistic and cultural differences, and to be mindful of making assumptions regarding accent and vocabulary. All involved in the interview process should be astute to the risks of unconscious bias influencing their perceptions or those of interviewees. Please refer to SPA's resources on [unconscious and implicit bias in admissions](#) for further information.

Academic staff from other courses could observe interviews to share good practice and to increase the shared understanding of different interview requirements at the HE provider (although it should be made clear to interviewees why they are present).

Examples of types of interview questions and of inappropriate interview questions are included as [Appendix A and B](#).

Interview training should include guidance about:

- equal opportunities within a HE provider and/or a professional setting, for example the National Health Service
- child protection and safeguarding
- criminal convictions
- fairness, data protection and freedom of information requirements
- interviewing disabled applicants or applicants with additional support requirements in line with HE provider's policies
- interview techniques, cultural awareness and the use of language, verbal and non-verbal signals, body language
- unconscious bias.

Interview workshops for those undertaking interviews could include:

- a review of the purpose of the interview, at the HE provider or course level
- a guided discussion of ways in which interviews may be made more consistent and effective
- planning mock interviews
- using actual score and report forms
- practising interviewing skills for example on volunteer first year students
- observed role-play with a feedback session. (If observation occurs during actual interviews, this must be explained to interviewees and they must agree to it.)

SPA good practice statements are kept under review and updated as appropriate. Your comments are invited and appreciated, please contact [enquiries@spa.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@spa.ac.uk).

SPA  
August 2016

## **Appendix A: Examples of inappropriate interview questions/subjects**

HE providers must ensure they meet legislative requirements regarding equality of opportunity and provide environments within which unfair discrimination does not occur. Interview questions should fit within this environment and interviewers must ensure that no question asked at an interview could be construed as being discriminatory on grounds of gender, race, nationality, ethnic identity, social or economic background, religious or political beliefs, disability, age, family circumstances or sexual orientation. All involved in the interview process should be astute to the risks of unconscious bias influencing their perceptions or those of interviewees.

In addition, no question should be contrary to the principles and requirements of the admissions process itself and HE providers should ensure that all questions reflect a high level of knowledge and skill on the part of interviewers.

The following are examples of questions which are generally viewed as being unacceptable or inappropriate to ask at interview:

- 1. Questions about the other institutions or subject choices the applicant has applied to**  
This information will not be known to interviewers for full-time undergraduate applicants as the UCAS principle of invisibility applies until applicants have replied to all offers they have received. To ask the question would compromise this principle and could cause anxiety to applicants.
- 2. Questions or discussion about the equivalence of qualifications**  
Unfamiliar qualifications should be researched by interviewers or by central admissions staff, preferably in advance of the interview. The applicant should not be asked about this.
- 3. Disabled applicants or those with support needs should not be asked questions about the nature of their disability or support required**  
However, interviewers should be aware of any special needs the applicant has which may affect their interview performance.
- 4. Questions that are, or could be, interpreted by the applicant as having a sexual, racial, social, political, gender, age or religious bias**  
For example, questions about marital, financial and/or parental status, ethnic origin, domicile, social status including parental occupation, childcare or other caring arrangements for applicants who have dependants.
- 5. Questions about family connections with particular professions**  
Interviewers should keep in mind that the applicant is the subject of the interview. Contextualised factors may form part of an overall assessment for admission, but it should not be for the applicant to justify, defend, express advantage or otherwise answer to.
- 6. Closed questions where there is only one obvious answer**  
If closed questions with a yes or no answer are asked, they may be used to confirm a specific fact such as 'did you take a gap year after your A levels?' However interviewers should be aware they may need to seek further information by probing, open questions.

**7. Questions where the meaning could be unclear to the applicant**

Consider how ambiguous a question may be, particularly if using language that may have a specific meaning within HE academic circles, but different meanings elsewhere (especially across different cultural or education groups). Where necessary, clarify any terms that may be ambiguous to help ensure answers are relevant.

**8. Lengthy, multi-part questions which could lead to the applicant becoming confused**

Break these down into separate layers and ask each part in turn to help ensure the applicant considers and responds to all of it. This will also help interviewers consistently assess and mark each part and that talking a lot on one part does not obscure a weak answer (or no answer) to another part.

**9. Questions in which the interviewer includes what they regard as asides or witty remarks which could be misinterpreted**

Such comments or questions could be interpreted by some applicants as discriminatory. Any remarks used as part of a question should be relevant and appropriate.

**10. Interviewers should avoid careless comments which may give false expectations**

For example, "We look forward to seeing you in September".

**11. Interviewers should not refer to the personal appearance of applicants**

If a specific dress code is expected then it should be made clear to applicants prior to interview and be mindful of social, cultural, economic, religious, professional (including military) or other considerations. Referring to an applicant's personal appearance during interview may appear overly confrontational and could be interpreted by some applicants as discriminatory.

**12. Interviewers should ensure questions about time management are appropriately worded**

For example, "Do you think your sporting activities might interfere with your studies?" or, "Can you manage the course with your family commitments?" may not be the best way to ask about time management as these questions could not be asked of all applicants, and they could be construed by the applicant as being discriminatory and/or irrelevant.

**13. Interviewers should not be influenced by any prior supposition, hearsay or other unsubstantiated information concerning an applicant**

This may be most likely where the applicant has some prior relationship with the HE provider (for example current FE student applying for an HE programme; current undergraduate student applying for a postgraduate programme). Interviewers should not make reference to any anecdotal information about that candidate that has been disclosed informally by their current teaching team. The applicant should be judged on the merit of their application, reference and performance at interview.

Applicants should not be given any indication at the end of the interview about what the outcome is likely to be. The chairperson should end the interview in a formal but pleasant manner, whatever the performance of the applicant, and should explain how and when the decision will be communicated.

## **Appendix B: Examples of different types of interview questions**

### **1. Opening questions**

- a) What preparations have you made in readiness for your interview today?
- b) You say in your personal statement that you are interested in [*subject area*] – can you tell me how this has influenced your work?
- c) In preparation for the interview you were asked to find out something about [*subject area*] and what people working in this area do. Can you tell us what you found out?

### **2. Open questions**

- a) Give an example of a piece of literature you found interesting and explain why it interested you.
- b) How do you manage your workload?
- c) How do you define good communication?

### **3. Closed questions**

- a) Have you ever used spreadsheets in your studies?
- b) Can you plan your own work?
- c) Do you like working in a team?

### **4. Basic questions**

- a) In your application you mentioned that you enjoy visiting the theatre. What was the most recent production that you saw?
- b) I see from your application that one of your hobbies is []. What do you particularly enjoy about it?

### **5. Probing questions**

- a) What personal qualities and life skills have you acquired which will help you with a career in [ ]?
- b) How can you demonstrate the ability to succeed at postgraduate level?
- c) If we were to ask someone who knows you well, what would they tell us were your personal qualities?
- d) Tell us about something that has really affected you emotionally. Describe the feelings you experienced and how you coped.
- e) How do you start your research process?

### **6. Reflective questions**

- a) Give me an example of a time when you dealt with a problem and what the outcome was.
- b) When you have felt under pressure, how did you deal with it?
- c) What skills and abilities have you developed during your studies and/or career?

### **7. Hypothetical questions**

- a) How do you think you will benefit from a university education?
- b) How would you resolve conflict in a group situation?
- c) If you have a deadline and are running out of time, what would you do?

### **8. Closing questions/comments**

- a) Is there anything you would like to ask us?
- b) Is there anything else you would like to know about the course?
- c) Is there any other information you need about the course or the University?
- d) You can always contact us later if you find you've forgotten to ask something.

## **Appendix C: Sample interview report form/score sheets**

All interview records are subject to the Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts and any written notes of the interview can be requested by applicants following an interview. Note factual rather than subjective comments on any interview report form and/or score sheet and use standard terminology that is recommended within the HE provider's or course interview policy. Some institutions provide interviewers with comments which are helpful in describing certain attributes, for example 'applicant was positive and able to consider different sides of an argument'; 'applicant's responses were very brief and needed drawing out'; 'applicant was friendly and very responsive'.

The chairperson should explain that information may be recorded by interviewers during the interview.

Interviewers should complete the interview report form as soon as possible after the interview and before the next interview if time allows (this may be a brief note which is expanded upon later if the interview schedule is tight). Initial assessments should be made by each interviewer without consultation with the other interviewers. The scoring system and criteria should be applied equally for all applicants and the form should be used to record detailed comments about each applicant's performance in relation to the selection criteria.

The chairperson should be clear about what happens to the written materials at the end of the interviews and should ensure these are securely stored or passed to the relevant member of staff in the admissions team for storage.

Interview report forms/scoring sheets will vary between HE providers and courses but SPA offers the following example which HE providers may wish to modify for their own use.

## Interview scoring form for [course name]

Page 1

**Applicant name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Interviewer:** \_\_\_\_\_

### Instructions to interviewers

Please make your assessment as soon as possible after the interview and before the next interview if time allows (this may be a brief note which is expanded upon later if the interview schedule is tight). Without consultation with other interviewers score the applicant against each selection criterion provided on the form. Each applicant should be scored using the 3 (high) to 0 (low) scales, taking into account the specific examples provided for each of the scoring categories.

#### Communication skills

The applicant should be scored based on evidence of personal attributes and an ability to relate well to others. Evidence of attributes may include initiative, enthusiasm, flexibility, attitudes towards others (including towards children for courses in teaching and a caring attitude and ethos for courses in medicine, dentistry, health and other caring professions).

- 3 very good and interesting communicator; engaged with interviewers; responded well to questions; very articulate; ability to argue a point
- 2 good communicator; responded satisfactorily to questions; reasonably articulate
- 1 limited communicator; poor engagement with interviewers; limited responses to questions; limited vocabulary
- 0 poor communicator; little or no engagement with interviewers; very limited vocabulary; significant difficulties

#### Career exploration\*

The applicant should be scored based on evidence of suitability for the profession. Evidence of suitability will depend upon the particular profession but the following examples may be relevant for some courses..

- 3 demonstrates understanding of profession in its broadest sense; evidence of directly relevant work experience; evidence of enthusiasm and passion for profession
- 2 evidence of some research into profession; enthusiastic in a general sense; some related work experience
- 1 little evidence of understanding of profession; uninformed enthusiasm; very little relevant work experience
- 0 no understanding of profession; no enthusiasm for profession; no relevant work experience

#### Motivation to study at HE level

The applicant should be scored based on evidence of motivation to study at HE level and engage with their studies.

- 3 demonstrates understanding of the demands of HE study; clearly articulates reasons for going into HE; demonstrates evidence of self-motivation and completing work to deadlines
- 2 some understanding of demands of HE study; fairly clear about reasons for going into HE; some evidence of self-motivation and completing work to deadlines
- 1 little understanding of demands of HE study; lack of clarity about reasons for going into HE; little evidence of self-motivation and completing work to deadlines
- 0 no understanding of demands of HE study; cannot explain reasons for going into HE; no evidence of motivation or completing work to deadlines

*\*This area of questioning may be more relevant for some interviews than others i.e. those for which there is a particular professional body requirement such as dentistry, medicine, nursing, social work, teaching.*

**Interview scoring form for [course name]**

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**Additional comments**

Please record any comments which will be of value in providing feedback to the applicant.

**Please follow the chairperson's instructions at the end of the interviews in relation to the collection and storage of all interview forms and score sheets.**

**Decisions**

Please tick the relevant box and supply additional information where relevant

**Unsuccessful**

**Reason for decision including any relevant code(s)**

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**Unconditional offer**

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**Conditional offer**

**Conditions including any relevant code(s)**

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