

Academic Job Interviews

Resource for Doctoral Students

General preparation Interviews are a crucial step in the selection processes for faculty and post-doctoral positions and fellowships. The interview process can be long and involved and often takes place in phases.

This document includes descriptions of some common elements of the interview process, which may include some or all of the following:

- First round interviews with the screening committee
- Campus interviews (potentially comprised of):
 - Meetings with a selection panel
 - A job talk and / or a teaching talk where faculty and staff can join, but also students
 - Informal discussions with your potential future colleagues about what you plan to focus on in your new role
 - Informal networking perhaps including lunch or dinner

It's very important to have as clear a sense as possible of what the process will be. Ideally, you will gather this information by speaking with people about their own experiences throughout the course of your doctoral studies.

Most recently, due to travel-restrictions caused by the pandemic, online interviewing has become more of a standard in academic recruitment processes, although virtual "screening" interviews have long been common, especially in the case of candidates based in a distant location. While the preparation is similar for remote interviews and for those conducted at conferences and on campus, make sure you think ahead about technical aspects, connection, lighting, background and so on (a link to a video with advice is included in the *Resources* section below).

Once you're invited to any sort of interview, it's important to brainstorm questions that might arise and think about how to answer them. It's also useful to practice with a career advisor, faculty member, and/or other mentor. When preparing your list of possible questions, be sure to include the questions you hope they don't ask, for example about a gap in your professional background or challenges regarding the specific theoretical approach you employed for a project, because these are likely to come up. Remember, if they have invited you to interview, they will likely be asking these questions from a place of

interest, not hostility, and it's easier to be strategic in your answers and avoid sounding defensive if you think ahead about how you would approach even touchy topics. It's also a good practice to prepare a list of questions you would ask them. This document includes a concluding section with many different types of sample questions.

Interview Components

The first-round interviews can take many forms, such as: phone interview, Zoom or Skype call, or discussion with a small group of institutional representatives during a conference. This is also known as "screening" and is usually a brief interview lasting 15 to 45 minutes and conducted with the goal of identifying the top few candidates to be invited for the next round.

Campus interviews Everything that happens during this day/s – meetings, interviews, job talks or teaching demonstrations, meals, and social interactions – potentially counts toward your being hired or not.

A **panel interview** is very common; a group of faculty members and HR professionals from the hiring institution will review your achievements and credentials and seek to understand whether you are a good match for the role. Usually, you demonstrate this by showing you understand the institution and department and are familiar with and curious about faculty members and recent work, activities, etc. Increasingly, panel interviews include topics like mentoring and understanding of the importance of diversity in higher ed, as well as more standard interview questions geared towards understanding whether your work style would make you a good fit for the team you would be joining if hired.

During the interview, you can also ask questions to gather information you will need in case the institution makes an offer and you engage in negotiations. Prepare questions you would want to discuss with the committee that demonstrate that you are already imagining yourself in this workplace. Topics could include the projects you would be involved in, the results they envisage, and how your performance would be evaluated. It is sometimes advised to save questions about topics such as assistance with your eventual relocation, or in finding a job for your spouse, or working hours until you get an offer or are pretty certain you will, (asked prematurely, such questions can actually work against you). However, you should at the same time be prepared to discuss these topics if they are raised during the campus visit. Of course, if any questions strike you as complicated or inappropriate, you can ask the interviewer to explain the purpose of the question, which can help you understand how (or whether) to answer it.

During the day, you will probably be expected to engage in a range of ways in addition to the interview. Interviewees are often invited to give **a job talk** during which they deliver an academic presentation about their prior and current research and are evaluated on how well they handle the room and questions from the audience. Sometimes, in addition to a

formal talk, candidates for roles involving a significant teaching component are also asked to **teach a sample class** with students in the audience. It is likely that you would be expected to prepare slides for each talk and/or sample class you are asked to deliver. In some cases, you may be asked to submit a recorded presentation in case it is not possible to meet the audience (this happened sometimes during Covid lockdowns, for example).

For research positions in particular, you might be invited to deliver a “**chalk talk**” – an informal and less public talk usually involving faculty, your potential colleagues, about your ideas for forward-looking research once you join the institution. During an in-person chalk talk, you might use a board and chalk or markers to guide the faculty through your research plans. If the talk is conducted online, you would likely be allowed to prepare a brief presentation with one or two simple slides and you might also be able to use a virtual whiteboard to create visual aids on the spot. This meeting, usually lasting up to an hour, is a chance for you to get to know the department and for them to get to know how you would work together around shared research topics.

If you are invited to join a **social component**, like a departmental lunch or dinner, a networking tea meeting, or even a campus tour, take it seriously, and treat it as part of the proceedings, just like the interviews and talks, as you will also be subject to evaluation based on your behavior and the way you engage during this portion of the day. The hiring department will be trying to evaluate your fit on their team as a person and as a colleague. Sometimes, these are group events, involving multiple candidates for the same position. If possible, you can of course relax a bit during this portion of the proceedings, but stay professional, with particular caution towards how you deploy humor and how you manage potentially sensitive issues such as what kind of personal information you share during small talk and how you handle offers of alcoholic beverages.

Above all, in addition to thinking ahead to how to deal with each separate component of the interview, do as much research as you can on both the institution and on the particular academic department for which you are interviewing. The more prepared you are, the easier it will be to navigate the recruitment steps toward your dream role.

Sample screening questions:

- Tell us about yourself.
- Walk us briefly through your CV
- What convinced you to apply?
- What is your plan related to research for the next five years?
- What are you prepared to teach? How do you go about developing a new course?
- Has anything changed in the status of the grant application and / or “under review” or “pending” publications you listed in your CV?
 - Have you had experience working with students with disabilities or from under-privileged groups?
 - When would you be available to start?

Sample interview questions:

- Tell us about yourself.
- Walk us briefly through your CV
- Why did you choose our institution? What department are you particularly interested in?
 - Why are you excited about this position?
 - Why do you think you are a good candidate for us?
 - Who do you see yourself working with?
 - How will this job help you achieve your long-term career plans?
 - What do you enjoy most /least about research? Why do you want to be a researcher?
 - Who are the most prominent researchers in your area?
 - What do you enjoy most /least about teaching?
 - What do you consider your biggest achievement as a researcher so far?
 - What is innovative about your research?
 - If you could only do one part of your research and not all, what do you choose and why?
 - What experience do you have of attracting funding?
 - Do you have any funding source in mind from where you could get the money for this research?
 - What do you consider to be your best paper and why?
 - What opportunities for multi-disciplinary work does your research offer?
 - Have you been in the role of a mentor? What is your approach to mentoring?
 - How do you plan to manage the teaching load with publishing?
 - Describe your teaching philosophy
 - Do you have any experience in curriculum development?
 - Have you had experience working with students with disabilities or from under-privileged groups?
 - What technology have you used in the classroom?
 - How do you deal with disruptions in the classroom?
 - What was your most remarkable experience while teaching?

- What would you teach if you were free to choose? Why?
- What would you see as the main challenge to teaching our student body?
- Describe the situation when you had a hard time getting along with your supervisor.
 - How do you manage multiple projects and deadlines?
 - Tell us about a time when you really struggled with a research project you were involved in / in charge of. How did you handle it?
 - What do you consider your strength / weakness?
 - In what ways could you contribute to this department other than with your expertise in research and teaching?
 - How do you relax?
 - How have you dealt with increased stress during the pandemic?
 - When would you be available to start?
 - Do you have questions for us?

Sample questions you might ask the interviewers:

- What are the priorities of the department in terms of research areas and projects for the next few years?
 - What are the challenges currently facing the department?
 - Can you introduce to me the type and amount of teaching and other administrative responsibilities expected from the post-docs / new hires / junior faculty joining now?
 - To what extent is the institutional administration supportive of the academic department(s)?
 - What are the relationships like among the various departments?
 - How are departmental decisions that affect the faculty made?
 - Do you have a mentorship program for junior faculty or early career researchers?
 - What are the policies regarding tenure, career advancement and salaries?
 - What resources are available, such as research / teaching assistants, technology, and administrative assistance?
 - What can you tell me about your student body? What is the average time to graduate? Where do they go to work/study after graduation? What type of career/professional programs are available for them, to complement the academic preparation?
 - How did the members of this community support each other during the pandemic?

Resources:

Nature: The all-important job talk

"How to Give an Effective Job Talk," video - NIH's Office of Intramural Training & Education

The 8 mistakes you shouldn't make in a job interview - Tress Academic

Commonly asked questions in academic interviews - Vitae

Tips for Virtual Interviews - Higher Education Recruitment Consortium