Interview skills for academia

This Quick Guide is designed to help you with academic interviews for postdoctoral positions, lectureships, and research fellowships. It is aimed primarily at research staff. Postgraduate research students will find the postdocs and fellowships sections most relevant but, if you are aiming for a long term career in academia, the lectureship/PI ones are worth reading too! Similarly, not all of the questions or guidance will be relevant to every discipline, so you will need to be selective according to your own research area.

The information in this guide has been put together using feedback and insights from postdocs who have attended academic interviews across the UK and abroad and academic staff at Cambridge.

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1. General interview tips

Preparing for an interview

1. Review your application material

It is important to be familiar with the job description/fellowship criteria and how you presented yourself and your research in your application, as this will be used as the basis for the interview.

2. Anticipate questions and prepare your own answers

Think about the questions you might be asked and how you would respond, preparing both the content and structure of your answers. This is not to sound ‘rehearsed’, but to cut down the amount of thinking on your feet and therefore help you to relax during the interview. You will almost certainly face something unexpected, but the more you prepare, the less frequently this will occur. There are lots of example questions in this guide – think about different ways the same question might be phrased. It makes a big difference to practise your answers out loud. Also think about the questions that you would like to ask the interviewer(s).

3. Practise presentations with peers and supervisors

Ask your colleagues to critique the academic content of your presentation. Check that you are delivering it at the right level for the audience, and rehearse your timings so that you don’t run over.

4. Use informal contacts

In addition to your online research about the post and department, use your own networks, your Principle Investigator’s (PI’s)/group leader’s networks and fellow postdocs to find out as much as you can about the post. Who will be on the selection panel? What are their interests? What are they looking for in the selection process? Can you find out what kinds of questions have been asked in the past?
5. Arrange to have an interview training session

Research Staff can book an appointment for an interview training session with one of the postdoc careers advisers, who can discuss the interview with you and/or take you through some of the typical questions you might expect. Postgrads can book an interview practice session with one of the student careers advisers. If you wish, the interview can be recorded so that you can see afterwards where you need to improve. If you want to practise answering more technical questions on your subject, ask colleagues or your PI if they could offer you a practice interview.

On the day

- First impressions count – a firm handshake and a smile are important!

- Make eye contact, be enthusiastic and positive, and avoid drawing attention to negatives or using self-sabotaging phrases.

- Structure your answers – don’t ramble.

- Listen carefully to questions and make sure you are answering the one you have been asked.

- Be specific in your responses; focus on your personal achievements.

- Dress appropriately – if in doubt, go smarter.

- Always think about what is unique about you.
2. Postdoc interviews – joining a research group

Some postdocs get their job on the basis of contacts or their own networking efforts, whereas others go through long and intensive selection processes. If you are invited for an interview, styles can be just as variable – from a very informal chat to a full-blown panel interview. Whatever the format, the person ‘interviewing’ you will be most interested in your research, what you have achieved and what you can bring to their group, as well as your motivations for wanting to work there.

Example postdoc interview questions

Why are you interested in joining our research group?

What aspects of our work are you most interested in?

What methods/techniques have you used in the past: can you give an example of a technique that you find particularly powerful?

What experience/skills from your previous position do you think are most useful for this project, or to this group in general?

What do you like doing in the lab – making samples or doing experiments?

At this point, what would you call yourself an expert in?

What methods have you set up yourself in your current/former lab?

What are the limitations of the main techniques you have used, and how can these be overcome/taken into account?

What has been the highlight of your research career to date?

What was the thinking behind your current/previous project; why was it necessary to do it?

Did you contribute ideas of your own? Which ones?

Can you tell me about your paper XXXX? Why is it important?
Which parts of it did you do and which parts did the co-authors do?

What questions follow from this work and how can they be addressed?

What is your favourite result and why?

What are your broader interests in the field?

How does your work/your current lab's work fit into the bigger picture of what is going on in that field?

What do you think will change in this field in the next 5 to 10 years?

How would you explain your research to someone outside of your field/to a member of the public?

What are your longer-term career plans? What would you like to do in the future?

What was the low point of your PhD/previous postdoc and how did you deal with it?

Give an example of when you have trained someone else. Did they learn the method quickly/well from you and manage to generate good quality data after you trained them?

Have you asked a question after a presentation at a conference? What was it?

What additional role could you play in the department?

[If going for second/third postdoc:] Why don't you apply for independent funding at this point rather than doing another postdoc?

What would you say makes a good colleague for a team?
Section 3: Interviews for Lectureship and Principle Investigator (PI) positions

What to expect

Lectureship and PI interviews are often a multi-stage process, and may involve telephone/Skype interviews, panel interviews, research presentations/job talks, teaching presentations/practice lectures/‘chalk talk’, future work, individual meetings with department members, networking sessions and departmental/facility tours. Be aware that you’re being assessed at all times, even during the social activities.

Interview panels will have different members with different agendas. For example the Head of Department may want someone who is willing to teach, whereas the Research Head may be focused on appointing someone with research strength. Think about making a strong case for each of the panel members to appoint you.

In general, when going for a lectureship position, the panel will be looking to assess:

1) Your credibility as a researcher
   - What is your track record to date, e.g. publications, attracting funding?
   - What is your research ‘vision’ and how well does it fit with what the department is already doing? It’s a good idea to research thoroughly what’s going on in the department and have an idea of who you might potentially collaborate with, and whose work you can complement and build on.

2) Your teaching experience
   - Get to know their undergrad courses inside out – what could you easily take on?
   - What innovation could you bring? New courses on your specialism?

3) How well you will fit into the life of the department
What evidence do you have for being the kind of individual who would integrate well into department life and help with departmental responsibilities?

How well you fit as a potential long-term colleague, and what your motivations for wanting to work at the institution are, will also be important.

**TIP:** For UK positions, add to your pre-interview research by reading the department’s most recent REF and TEF outcomes, and looking up the results of the National Student Survey and QAA reports. These are all freely available online.

**Example interview questions**

The following questions have been provided by senior academics with experience of being on an academic interview panel and by Cambridge postdocs who’ve been interviewed for lectureship positions across the world. The list is not exhaustive, and the same questions could be asked in a number of different ways. Nevertheless, the questions will aim to cover the same material, and each will be addressing one or more of the points above.

N.B. The italicised text underneath each question has been added to help explain why a panel might ask this, and some further aspects for you to think about.

**Questions about your research**

**Your track record**
What would you consider has been your best work/best paper and why? What did it change about the way people approach this field?

*Pick a specific example (don’t ramble about generalisations) that has specific outcomes, e.g. the results made an impact in some way on your field, or resulted in a good paper or a conference presentation, etc.*
What is excellence/how do you define excellence? Which of your papers is excellent?

Give us an example of how your particular approach to this problem can reveal something distinctive about it?

Take us through your CV – why did you choose to edit a volume instead of focusing on the monograph?

You have a number of rather diverse middle author papers on your CV. What specifically was your contribution to these papers?

You’ve published a lot of papers. What proportion of them are first author and have you credited your students?

**Your future research**

What will be your major research focus as an independent researcher? In one sentence, what is the most important question you want to address? What are the big technical/theoretical issues in your field? What will you focus on, and what gives you a competitive edge in this area? What is innovative about your research?

What areas of research apart from current research might you be interested in pursuing?

What do you see yourself doing, research-wise, in 10 years’ time? What will you be known for in five/ten years? What will your legacy be in 30 years’ time?

*Do you have a vision for where your field is going, and how your ideas fit in? Is your research big impact stuff? Will it be of use to the university, e.g. generate lots of publications, enhance the institution’s reputation, have a commercial or societal impact etc.?*

How is your future work distinct from that of your supervisor? Who has influenced you the most? What has been your role so far in developing ideas and carrying them forward? Did you write your postdoc fellowship applications yourself? I notice you are still publishing with your supervisor. Intellectually, how independent from him/her are you?
This is testing your potential for independent work.

What are the potential weaknesses in your research, and how would you limit the impact on your progress?

Who are your main competitors? What are they doing? How confident are you that you can compete with them?

**Securing Funding**

What would be the subject matter of your first proposal? What would be the ideal outcome of this work in x years?

Where will you apply for your grants? What experience do you have of attracting funding?

Who are you currently funded by, and why do you think they were interested in funding your project?

The funding you've brought in is only small figures; how can you persuade us that you are going to be able to bring in big amounts?

*Be familiar with the funding schemes for which you would be eligible. If you don’t hold independent grants, think of other evidence you can give for having written proposals that secured independent funding or competitive rewards, e.g. travel grants, college fellowships, non-academic examples.*

How would you convince a funding body that they should fund your research rather than one of the hundreds of other proposals they receive? How does your work align with contemporary trends or funding priorities?

During an extremely limited funding period, which single idea is the most important to you, and why? If you had very little money, how would you use it?
Publication Strategy and Impact
What is your publication strategy and how will you achieve it?

How do you come to an agreement about the authorship in big multi-lab collaborative projects and publications?

If all goes well, sum up your high-impact outcomes. What would the title of your [future] *Nature* paper be?

What outputs would you submit for the coming REF?

What is the impact of your research?

You're in front of a very busy politician to convince them to give you funding for your research, and you have only 1 minute. Go.

How would you go about setting up a consortium?

How would you bridge the gap from your research to industry/companies?

How would you convince people about the importance of interdisciplinarity?

*For animal-based research projects:* How many animals will you need? What are the ethical aspects you need to consider?

Your research within the institution
Your research combines a lot of disciplines. Which department do you think would best fit your project and why? If you were to be a professor in our institution, what would you be a professor of?

What are your needs for equipment/lab space/animal space/ staff in your group? What equipment would you need in order to get started?

How large a group do you expect to have in 3 years’ time? How many people would you like in your lab for it to be optimal?

*Don’t be unrealistic here, but ensure that you are clear in what you will need, even if the answer is that you expect to have to go out*
and raise funding. Think about the timing of building your group: it might be difficult to hire and train several new people at once, so you might choose a staggered approach. The last two questions are related to how ambitious you are in terms of building a group.

How would you deal with the more limited facilities you are likely to have while setting up, compared with what you have been used to?

If we gave you unlimited resources, what would you do with them? If we gave you X amount of money, what would you do with it?

Teaching: lecturing and tutoring

Your past experience
Describe your experience in teaching and what you did to prepare. How do you feel about teaching? What is your teaching philosophy?

Don’t forget to demonstrate an enthusiasm for teaching – lecturing should be considered as a job, not just a convenient entry to a permanent position.

What has been your most challenging teaching experience?

Do you prefer lecturing or tutoring?

How do you approach giving the same lectures each time?

How do you get discussions started in seminar groups? How do you get shy students to participate?

Future teaching
How would you contribute to teaching in the department? What courses would you be comfortable/uncomfortable teaching? What would you add to our course on XXXX? What would you take away to make room for this? How could we improve our introductory undergraduate course on YYYY?

You should find out what the existing courses are, think about which of them you could teach, and also consider what new
courses you might introduce. Consider aspects such as what textbooks you might use and how well prepared you could expect, say, first-year undergraduates to be for your material. Be careful in the interview that you don’t imply any criticism of their current provision or tread on anyone’s toes – a course that you are interested in teaching may already be someone else’s project. Remember to use the local institution’s language, e.g. semesters rather than terms, courses instead of papers.

If you had the possibility to build a course from scratch, any course, what would you like to teach? What would be the entry requirements for the course?

Could you teach a subject outside of your speciality? Would you be prepared to teach anything given enough preparation time? Have you developed any learning materials/lecture courses?

How would you set up a practical to teach students XXXX concept?

What would you contribute to graduate teaching in the department?

How could you make a relatively mundane subject interesting for students? Everyone can teach – what makes you different?

You don’t have experience in classroom/large-group teaching – how would you overcome that? How do you feel about lecturing in front of hundreds of students?

How can we optimise teaching of large classes (more than a hundred students)? How can we make the lessons participatory in such large classes?

How many hours would you commit to teaching?

How might teaching evolve in the future? What do you think of social media? Do you think it could be useful for teaching today (particularly Facebook, Twitter, etc.)?

What would be the reading list of your dreams?
**Teaching Quality**
What is ‘excellence’ in teaching? Do you agree that we should assign numerical rankings to teaching, and tie that to funding?

Do you think that your research can inform your teaching? Do you think that your teaching can inform your research?

Have you had any feedback from your students?

While grading the exams, will you decide based on the final answer or step-by-step evaluation of the answer?

How do you define a good student experience? How do you think you can improve undergraduate students’ satisfaction?

How could you improve the department’s teaching?

If you deliver a bad lecture, what would you do to rectify the situation?

What will you do if a student is not paying attention in the lecture and constantly engaged with a mobile phone?

**Student support**
How will you attend to those students who are below average and require further assistance?

Do you have any experience teaching students who have learning difficulties?

Have you offered pastoral support to students? How would you manage a student in crisis?

How have you engaged with diversity?

**Promoting courses**
Which undergraduate programme do you think we should add to attract more international students?
Can you give me one sentence to attract students to apply to XXXX institution?

How would you encourage more postgraduate students to complete their studies at X?

How will you help us develop the study abroad programme?

**Research supervision**
Can your research benefit from third and fourth-year students’ projects?

Would you let your students pick their own dissertation topic, or would you assign them one?

Can you bring in projects from industry?

How would you go about interviewing a graduate student?

What is the first experiment you would do with a new PhD student?

How would you go about motivating a research student who was going through a low point in their PhD?

Have you supervised graduate students, and how did you find this experience? How much involvement do you have with your graduate students? How do you manage them?

How would you interact with postdocs: would you treat them as your peers?

If your research group came into the office after a night out together and there had been an argument and there was bad feeling, would you do anything about it?

What do you think of current PhD student training, and how would you change this?

How would I deal with a talented PhD student, who got great results, but decides that he/she will quit research after her/his PhD?
How would you deal with two PhD students finishing at the same time?

**Questions about your fit within a department**
Why do you want to come to [name of university to which you have applied]?

*It might seem obvious, or it might just be that this was a job that came up, but you need a convincing argument about why you want to come to this institution. This could be a good time to consider how your research interests fit.*

How would you fit with existing activities in the department, university? Which groups here would you expect to collaborate with? Why do you want to collaborate with them? What can you offer your collaborators?

*To answer this, you will need to know their work and may be asked to give specific details about techniques, papers, etc.*

How would you balance collaborating with other PIs in the department and following your own ideas?

In what ways other than through your research and teaching could you contribute to this department? What committee work have you done and what challenges has it presented?

What would you contribute to the administration of the department?

*Here they may be looking for involvement in committees, running facilities, public outreach work, safety work, etc.*

**General questions**
What would you do on your first day in the job?

If we offered you the job, would you accept?

If we could do anything, within reason, to help you get established in the job, what would it be?
How do you handle so many commitments?

If we gave you the position, what might go wrong?

You have achieved a lot of diverse things, how do you balance your time? If several challenges came up at the same time (grant application deadline, pastoral care for a student, teaching commitments), which one(s) would you prioritise?

Describe a situation in which you’ve been opportunistic?

Where do you think you need the biggest amount of support?

What do you understand by leadership?

Are spin-outs a good idea? [Enterprise activity is becoming ever more prevalent on departmental agendas]

Tell us about a period in your career when you felt least motivated

**Career questions**

What are your professional goals for the next 5 to 10 years?

> *It isn’t unrealistic to aim to be a professor in 10 years, but be prepared to expand on how you would go about achieving this.*

What do you think will be the most difficult thing about being a lecturer?

Why apply for a lectureship and not a fellowship?

Why do you think you are ready for a Principal Investigator (PI) position?

Have you made any fellowship applications, and if so, what stage did you get to?

Why did you choose to go to Cambridge for your postdoc/fellowship?

What has been the most productive period of your research career and why?

Why are you applying for this position at this point in your fellowship?
You will also be invited to ask questions of the panel. It is worth having a question or two to ask.
4. Fellowship interviews

There are a variety of fellowships from different funders available to researchers, depending on the researcher’s discipline and level of experience. What selection panels for all these fellowships have in common is an interest in the details of the research project you have proposed. In relation to this, there are several areas the funders will be particularly interested in exploring, which are covered in this section of this guide:

1. How well thought through is the proposed project?
2. How important and timely is the research you are proposing to do?
3. How achievable is it?
4. Are you the best person to fund to do this piece of research?
5. Why have you chosen the department/university where you plan to work on the project?

In addition to these aspects, you should consider carefully the nature of the fellowship you have applied for, as this could indicate additional areas that the selectors will be interested in. Refamiliarise yourself with the funder’s description of the fellowship, considering issues like length of time, amount of money and scope for using this fellowship to develop a research group. Then think about what this tells you about what the selectors will be looking for. For example, if the fellowship will involve you taking on a PhD student, it is reasonable for the selectors to find out if you will be able to successfully recruit and supervise that student.

For more senior fellowships designed for experienced researchers, funders will also be keen to assess your potential for leadership and your international reputation in the field. In these cases, in addition to using this section of this guide, please refer to Section 3 in your preparation, as many of the questions covered there will be applicable.

Please also note that Section 5 of this guide offers some additional guidance to those being interviewed for Cambridge and Oxford JRFs/college fellowships.
In terms of the interview process itself, this will differ between funding bodies, and you should always check the specific requirements and guidance from the organisation to which you have applied. Typically, you will have to give a short presentation about your research. Check carefully what level of audience you are expected to deliver this for – it is likely there will be non-specialists among the interview panellists. Keep slides to a minimum, and keep strictly to time. This is usually followed by a panel interview or Q&A session. Panels for fellowship interviews can be large – involving up to 15 academics! Some interview panels may ask you to respond to the referees’ comments.

Below is a selection of typical fellowship interview questions. Bear in mind that each of these questions may be designed to probe one or more of the five areas listed earlier which the funder will be interested in. You may also come across other questions or similar questions that are worded differently, and you may find some of the questions listed in Section 3 of this booklet on lectureship interviews useful.

**About the project proposal**

**Technical questions**
You can expect technical questions and detailed questions probing the validity of your hypothesis/feasibility of your proposal as a major part of the interview.

Can you elaborate on how you would do the research/experiments that you want to focus on?

If you could only do one experiment, which one do you think is key?

Why is the technique/methodology you have chosen more likely to succeed than other approaches?

What will you do if your hypothesis is proved wrong? Can you see any of your research proposal failing? Are you confident that your project is going to be successful?
Why haven’t you done XXXX [e.g. a certain quick experiment] to test the feasibility of your project? If you got this fellowship, wouldn’t this experiment be the first thing that you would do?

The second part of your proposal is dependent on the first part of your proposal working. What will you do if the first part fails?

Proposal’s overall importance
What is the overall importance of this project? What is innovative about this research? How do you see this work impacting your field?

What would the ideal outcome of this project be in [years that the fellowship lasts]? What would success look like?

Who are your main competitors? What are they doing? How are you confident that you can compete with them?

How will you differentiate yourself from your past supervisors/mentors?

What has the progress been in this field since you submitted your proposal? [There can be a long gap between submission and interview.]

What will you be known for after this fellowship?

Describe in layman’s terms why this work is interesting and why it should receive public funding. How would you explain your research to a non-specialist in two minutes?

How do you expect companies will use the outcomes of your work?

How do you make sure that companies will not take all your IP and your revenues out of the UK?

Managing the project
How will you manage the budget?

What is your publication strategy? How long will it take to get to a point where you can publish?
Have you discussed with your collaborators who is going to be the senior author on the paper?

What do you imagine will be the day-to-day difference in going from a postdoc in someone else’s group to holding your own fellowship?

How would you deal with difficulties such as timetable slippage/resourcing issues/managing stakeholder expectations?

**About your choice of institution/country**
Why are you staying in department XXXX to do this project? How will you ensure your independence from your PI? Have you discussed with your PI/host institution authorship of papers arising from this project?

Why do you want to work in country YYYYY rather than country ZZZZ?

How will your host institution support you?

**If you are planning to employ a student/postdoc for your project**
How do you plan to manage this project on a day-to-day level?

Have you been responsible for anyone else’s research?

How do you manage students?

What do you do with a weak student?

Why would someone come and work with you [instead of a famous person in your field]?

How many students/postdocs do you intend to have by the end of this project?

**Questions about you and your career**
Why do you think that you are the right person for this?

What do you think is your most significant research achievement?
What updates do you have on your paper XXXX that is in submission/in preparation?

What influences have you been exposed to? Do you think there have been enough different ones?

What are your long-term career plans? How will this fellowship help you to achieve your goal?

What teaching would you expect to do during your fellowship?

What will you do if you don’t get this fellowship?

Being awarded this fellowship means establishing yourself as a leader, what does being a leader mean to you?

Is there anything we should have asked you that we haven’t?
5. Cambridge and Oxford JRFs/College Fellowships

Not all colleges will interview for their college/junior research fellowships (JRFs). However, there are two important additional important points to consider if you are called for interview, in addition to using the questions from Section 4 of this guide to prepare:

- The panels are often a mixture of specialists and experts from various disciplines, often covering a wide cross-section from the arts/humanities through to the sciences
- As well as being interested in your research, they may be interested in what you can contribute to the college

To address the first point, it is important to be able to talk about your research in a way that is accessible to people outside your own discipline, as well as being convincing to an expert. You may have to answer the question: Why is your project the must-do project in X [broad discipline], and why are you the right person to do it? A good strategy is to practise soundbites – i.e. describing your research for variously one minute, five minutes, and ten minutes. Use these to practise explaining your research to non-specialists whom you know, asking them to repeat back to you what they understood.

Try to find out who will be on your selection panel, read their research profiles and the profiles of other researchers in college. Think about how you would fit it and how to present your work to them. In talking about your research, it is also important to show independence from your PI/PhD supervisor.

To address the second point, it is important to research thoroughly the college and to talk to current JRFs at different colleges if possible. Think about different ways that you could contribute to college life and what it is about being part of that particular college that is attractive to you. You will find some example questions below.

Teaching may or may not come up in discussion, but it is a topic worth preparing. Find out what you can about teaching in the college and think about the range of topics/level of students that you would be able
to teach. Reflect on your past teaching experience and how this would translate to teaching Cambridge students. You may want to consider asking for teaching opportunities in the college, e.g. lecturing, teaching Masters students. However, be aware of the time commitment involved with teaching, which can be significant, before you offer to take it on.

Questions about college contribution

Why do you wish to be a member of a college/this College? How will it bring value to you?

Are there specific aspects/activities of college life, such as sports, that you wish to be part of? Will you have time to do them?

What teaching experience do you have?

We see you have done some supervisions here at Cambridge, would you be able to teach across all 4 years?

Why has it taken you so long to be involved in a college?

What, for you, is the difference between a JRF and a fellowship from a funding body such as the MRC, if any?

Have you any applications at other colleges and what is their status at the moment?