Careers in Academia: Interviews & Job Talks

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Overview: interviews & job talks

1. What’s going on in an interview?
2. How to prepare
3. Questions to expect
4. Tips for job talks
5. Any questions?
What’s going on in an interview?
Potential

Suitability

Eligibility
Three core questions

1. Can you do this job? - capability
2. Will you do this job? - motivation
3. Are you a good ‘fit’ for us? - suitability

- Are you a good researcher? - if applicable
- Are you a good teacher?
- Are you a good ‘fit’ for us?
The good news

- Academic interviews are, in the main, very predictable
- Interviewing takes time and costs money – so it’s in nobody’s interests to set bizarre traps or try to catch candidates out
- It’s not an exam; there are no ‘right’ answers
- Just like at school, you get credit for ‘showing your workings’ – i.e. think aloud, let them see how you approach things
A Cambridge academic (Newnham):

“Empathise with your interviewers. Don’t think you are being interviewed by experts waiting to pounce on your every mistake. Do think your interviewers want you to succeed and are doing their best to give you opportunities to demonstrate your potential.”
Preparation
Acknowledge your worries

- Where do you feel least confident?
- What are you hoping they won’t notice?
- What are you hoping they won’t ask?
- Have you had any bad interview experiences before? What happened?

Now ask yourself:

- Is it actually true?
- If it is, what could you do differently this time?
Tell stories
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Situation</strong></th>
<th>What was the context?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Task</strong></td>
<td>What was the goal?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Action</strong></td>
<td>What did you do?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Result</strong></td>
<td>Were you successful?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reflections</strong></td>
<td>What did you learn?</td>
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Practise aloud
Record yourself
Real interview questions
General motivation

- Why do you want this job?
- Why do you want to work here?
- Why is this the best place for you to continue your research?
- Tell us a little about yourself
- How does this position fit with your career plans?
- Why is now the right time in your career for [this type of position]?
- What would you like to achieve here?
- What do you think of our [recent paper(s), course(s), etc]? 
- What ideas do you have for this project?
Research (non-specialist questions)

- Tell me about your [PhD, postdoc project, etc]. What is its main contribution to the field?
- In what ways is your work theoretically innovative?
- What’s your best publication, and why?
- Why do we need a study of [your topic]? or Why do [your topic] and not [that topic]?
- What plans for further publications do you have?
- What funding applications do you intend to make?
- If your application to XXX is unsuccessful, what is your plan B?
- Who else out there is doing this sort of research, and what sets your work apart?
- How have you coped with setbacks in your research?
Teaching

- Are you a successful teacher?
- What is your teaching philosophy?
- Which of our courses could you teach?
- Talk us through a new course which you would like to develop here. What would the students get out of it?
- How has your research influenced your teaching? – or vice versa!
- Tell us about a time when you had particular success in your teaching
- When you taught XXX, what did the students find most challenging, and how did you help them?
- How would you teach XXX?
- How do you bring technology into your teaching?
Teaching – cont’d

- How would you persuade a potential Sixth Form applicant to study [your subject] at university?
- How would you persuade a 2nd year student to take your final-year module on XXX?
- How would you attract postgraduate students to this department?
- What do you think are the differences between teaching undergraduate and postgraduate students?
- Are you ready to supervise PhD students?
- Do you have any experience of dealing with students’ pastoral concerns?
Other

- Apart from your research [and teaching], what you contribute to the life of this [department, etc]?
- What is your understanding of the contribution you could make to the administration of this [department, etc]?
- Who, outside this [department, etc], would you like to collaborate with?
- What does collegiality mean to you, and can you give an example of good practice?
- What’s your biggest weakness?
- If we offered you the position, would you accept it?
- Where do you see yourself in ten years’ time?
- Why should we offer this position to you?
Job talks
General principles

- Remember **balance** – don’t harp on about your PhD to the exclusion of your future plans
- Present your research as a **programme**, with an overarching trajectory, not a staccato series – i.e. what’s the through-line or core question?
- **Accuracy vs. accessibility**: you are not there to prove the **quality** of your research – they have already judged you on that at the shortlisting stage
- For lectureships: speak to the job + the department’s needs, not just to your own narrow interests
- For lectureships: you are **always** being assessed as a potential teacher, even if the task is ostensibly a research talk
Top tips

- Don’t start with a ‘fascinating’ vignette
- Don’t start with lots of gumpf about how pleased you are to be there
- Don’t use any of the following words: try, aim, seek, might, may, could, wish, believe, hope...
- Don’t read from a script
- Do have a proper conclusion
- Do be ready for questions
- Do take along a one-page handout
And, lastly, it should go without saying...

Never, ever, ever run over time!
Any questions?
On which note...

What do you think? Should you ask the interviewers any questions at the end?
Coming up with questions

- It’s not a last-minute exercise in gathering some more information about the job
- Don’t sound selfish, e.g. ‘Do you offer assistance with relocation expenses?’ or ‘What are the arrangements for taking sabbatical?’
- Don’t ask things you could find out for yourself
- Your goal is to show: “I’m thinking about the things that you want me to be thinking about.”
- Be honest with yourself: does the answer affect whether you would accept the job, or are you asking just because you think you should?
Any questions?