

Guidance notes: Interviewing Research Students for Research Degree Programmes

Introduction

- 1 The University *Code of Practice on Research Students* suggests (at 2f) that, wherever possible, candidates should be interviewed prior to an offer being made. When a face-to-face interview is not possible, alternative steps should be taken to assess the potential student's suitability for the programme.
- 2 This set of notes is intended to provide guidance on the structure and content of interviews and may also be helpful when designing an alternative such as an email questionnaire. The notes do not include set questions since it is important that questions are couched in the language and style of the questioner and seek information that is really relevant to the particular case.
- 3 At the outset it should be noted that the selection and interview process should be conducted in line with the University's Equality & Diversity Policy. All applicants should feel that they have been treated fairly throughout the process.
- 4 You should remember that interviews are always a two-way process – the candidate will be making a decision about whether or not they want to come to Reading, just as you will be making a decision about the candidate's suitability.
- 5 When considering alternatives to a face to face interview the possibility of conducting an interview electronically, through video conferencing facilities or Skype, or by telephone should be explored. Such real time, interpersonal interaction is preferable to a written questionnaire since it provides evidence of the candidate's own views and knowledge and how they cope with communication demands. If planning to conduct such remote mode interviews, it is important that some means are identified for ensuring that it is the candidate who is responding. If there is a visual element then a ratified photograph could be requested in advance (with the application form perhaps) but it may be necessary with a telephone interview to have it conducted in a reputable venue in which you can ask a responsible person to check on identity documents (another HEI or a consulate, for instance).
- 6 It is assumed that the potential supervisor/s and the School / Department Director of PGRS will provide the lead in formulating the criteria and questions and evaluating the answers, as well as advising on who the interviewers should be.

- 7 It should be remembered that research students are a long-term and heavy investment; their recruitment and selection therefore requires careful consideration and preparation.

General Preparation for Interviews

- 8 The normal expectation is that there will be at least two interviewers who will share the questioning and decision-making between them. Gender balance, and how this relates to the candidate's gender, should be taken into account.
- 9 Like most academic tasks, the effectiveness of interviews is dependent on careful preparation, not just of relevant questions but also of an indication of what a reasonable response would be. The main purpose of the interview is to ascertain whether a candidate will be able to complete a research degree successfully in your School with the facilities and training available. Thus, it is critical to consider in advance:
- What the main and subsidiary criteria are for acceptance (what must the candidate know /be able to do at entry and what would be useful but not essential);
 - What you already know about the candidate (from application forms, references etc) and, of that, what needs to be confirmed or exemplified;
 - How flexible your criteria are (whether, for example, alternative skills/abilities/knowledge could substitute);
 - What mitigating circumstances might be allowed (for instance, would exceptional ability in one area make up for a lack of knowledge elsewhere);
 - What compensatory mechanisms are available (for instance, a short course pre- or post-registration);
 - How you might best assess the candidate's level of interest in the subject area, their motivation for completing a PhD, and their capacity for independent research.
- 10 The information then provides the basis for your questions, the way they are ordered and for your evaluation of the answers. Questions will differ depending on whether candidates are applying to carry out a specified research project (which is often the case in science based disciplines) or to research a topic of their own choice. Interviewers should agree in advance who will cover which areas, and in which order.
- 11 It can be helpful to prepare in advance a list of the agreed criteria, together with some scoring system that can be used easily and discretely during the interview to indicate how well the candidate has met them. This will allow you to weigh up the positives and negatives more objectively after the interview.
- 12 For students who are applying to carry out a specified project, the preparations are relatively simple in that criteria can be more detailed in relation to the research topic and the person specification. For instance, more information is usually available in advance about the skills and abilities required and support available. For lab based research, or other research requiring specific practical skills, there may be reason to include a practical test or to have information available about what pre-

courses or parallel training may be required to bring the entry standard up to the required standard. It may well be worth exploring the ways in which the candidate might make their own specific contribution to the project, tailoring it to their specific interests and skills.

- 13 More preparation may be required for interviews when candidates are applying to carry out their own choice of project since the proposed project area may be one which requires the support of other academic supervisors, who may or may not be willing and able to provide it. It is important to ensure that the necessary supervisory expertise is available, as are the facilities and resources necessary to carry out the project. You also need to be confident that the project is feasible and can be completed within three years of full-time study (or equivalent part-time study).

The Interview Structure

- 14 In order to help the candidate to respond effectively and to try to establish some rapport, the session should begin with some relatively straight forward questions. For example, initial questions could ask about interesting factual information contained in the application form, as this will allow you to explore in more depth, or elicit examples of, claimed experience and knowledge. Thus, the content of previous courses that led to qualifications can be explored for relevance to the proposed project.
- 15 Next to be addressed might be the criteria you have identified in relation to the proposed project: questions that will provide answers that demonstrate **knowledge and skills information** -what you expect the candidate to know about and be able to do (skills already acquired) in relation to the topic and their qualifications to date. You should also explore their professed **interest** in the topic: why they find it interesting, how it links to their experience and ambitions, what they have done to demonstrate that interest previously or as preparation for the application or interview.
- 16 For many academics, there is an expectation that research students have **personal attributes and attitudes** that are less readily evidenced in a contrived interview situation. These frequently relate to a mix of creativity and independence and to stamina and perseverance. It is possible to ask candidates to provide examples from their life experiences in other contexts that illustrate these qualities but young candidates or those with limited opportunities might be disadvantaged by such questions. An alternative might be to invent a scenario requiring particular qualities for a successful outcome that could reasonably happen during the course of a research project and ask the candidate how they would deal with it.
- 17 It is also useful to ascertain what the candidate knows about the process of obtaining a research degree, what their expectations are about how long it takes and what the criteria are for success. If the notion of undertaking such a degree is more than a whim then they should have already undertaken some investigation of the process but their answers may also contain some misunderstandings that you can correct before either party is too committed.

- 18 Finally, the candidate should be asked to consider some practical issues that may not have been evident or fully explored in the application. These may include: the cost of study and living in the area; the availability of accommodation and its suitability/facilities for higher level study; and how the candidate will manage other commitments while studying.
- 19 Before the interview terminates, the candidate should be invited to ask questions themselves, about facilities and support for instance. Such questions can be, but are not necessarily, indicative of how much effort they have put into finding out about the University, School etc.

Professor Dianne Berry
Director of PGR Studies & Researcher Development

21 November 2011.