Guidance notes: Interviewing Research Students for Research Degree Programmes

Introduction

1   The University Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Students suggests that wherever possible candidates should be interviewed prior to an offer being made. When a face-to-face

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

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