



Methods Guides

How to run an interview

Introduction

This guidance is for any staff member interested in holding an interview for the purposes of evaluating Teaching, Learning and the Student Experience. It aims to outline and help you to consider the steps you can take before, during and after to ensure you run a successful interview.

What is an interview?

Interviewing is a commonly used method of collecting information through talking with people. Every interview is an interaction, a relationship and a two-way observation between two or more individuals. Interviews can be formal or informal, face-to-face or virtual, and closed or open-ended.

Why run an interview

- An interview is more appropriate for studying complex situations and sensitive areas.
- It is useful in situations where in-depth information is required.
- It is ideal when you wish to follow-up on information obtained from responses.
- It allows you to explain, clarify and illuminate a question in a format that is understood by the respondent.
- It is adaptable to accommodate the needs or experiences of different participants.

When not to run an interview

- Interviewing is not suitable if you need to collect information from a large group of people or are time limited.
- It usually collects data from small numbers of participants, meaning that the findings cannot be generalised and patterns of views within a population cannot be ascertained.
- Quality of data received will often depend on the ability of the interviewer.
- Anonymity is hard to guarantee with interviews.

Running an interview (before, during and after)

This section outlines some of the key considerations to make at each stage of the process.

Preparation

First consider what are you trying to get out from an interview:

- What is it you want to explore?
- What do you already know?
- What else do you need to know?
- Who should be involved?
- How much will it cost?
- How much time will it take?

Once you have decided to conduct interviews, explore [the Evaluation and Impact Framework](#) and frame interview questions around [the five levels of impact](#) at the outset. First, it allows data collection to focus on needed and meaningful information. Second, it helps check out which questions should take priority in advance of data collection.

It is helpful to bear in mind the following points in the preparation stage.

- **Choose the types of interview to conduct.** Interviewing can be structured, semi-structured and unstructured. The degree of flexibility of structure in the interview depends on the breadth and depth of information required across different contexts and situations.
 - Unstructured interviews flow from the immediate context. There is no predetermination of question topics. It can be extremely useful in situations where little is known about the topic area. However, data obtained from unstructured interviews can be difficult to pull together and analyse.
 - By contrast, structured interviews require fully wording each question before the interview. All interviewees are asked the same questions in the same order. One of the main advantages of the structured interview is that it provides uniform information, which assures the comparability of data. Structured interviewing requires fewer interviewing skills than unstructured interviewing.
 - In a semi-structured interview, the order of questions does not necessarily adhere to the interview guide as the interview develops. This approach offers opportunities for individual experience to emerge whilst maintaining a focus on similar ground. However, you cannot divert too far from questions as you may lose the focus of your interview. Semi-structured interviews do not always allow participants to show their unique perspectives.
- **Decide the medium in which to conduct interviews.** The typical way of interviewing is face-to-face verbal interchange, but it can take the form of instance massaging, email, telephone, computer conferencing/chat, online and virtual world interviews. The latter are appropriate when you have a small budget, little time for travelling and standardisation of the interview situation is not important.
- **Develop an interview guide to set out the process to be followed during the interview.** Interview guides are meant to be used in a flexible way to fit the needs and experiences of the interviewee. [Appendix 1](#) illustrates an example of an interview guide. It should include:
 - information of respondents' name, schools/functions, position in schools/functions, etc. This information is useful for contextualising people's answers.
 - an overview and purpose of the interview.
 - information about how the interview will be recorded.
 - assurance about the confidentiality of the approach.
 - a reminder about informed consent.
 - a primary question set as a flexible guide for the interview.
 - closing comments provide a prompt to thank the participants and to provide contact information.
- Align the **profile and number of participants** to the interview questions and purposes.
- Make sure the **timing, duration, and setting** are carefully planned. Student participants are less willing to be interviewed around examination periods. Generally, an interview lasts for an hour, with a good set of 10-12 semi-structured questions. The location should be quiet so as to avoid affecting the quality of recording.
- When approaching people for interviewing, ensure that your approach is [ethical and professional](#).
 - Your ethical practices should consider consent, transparency, right to withdraw, incentives, harm arising from participation, privacy and data storage, and disclosure.

- Seek ethical approval if the data will be used externally at conferences and in written publications.
- Test your **recording equipment** with contingency plans. When it is not possible to use a recorder because of sensitive situations, interviewee request, or recorder malfunction, notes made must be more thorough and comprehensive.
- You should ensure that the interviewer has the appropriate skills or are prepared to undertake training designed to develop the skills involved in interviewing.

Running the interview

The quality of an interview is largely determined by the preparation for the interview, focusing on rapport establishment, communication and listening skills, approaches to question asking and ways of closing the interview. The following are strategies for managing interviews you can use to maximise the quality of interviewing.

- **Introduce the interview** by explaining the purpose of the interview, indicate how long it usually takes, and address terms of confidentiality. If interviewees' responses are to be used as quotes, get their written permission to do so ([see informed consent form template in Appendix 2](#)). You should also ask for permission to record the interview.
- **Begin the interview** with easy to answer questions about noncontroversial present behaviours, activities and experiences. Once some experience or activity has been described, then using the present as a baseline, asking about opinions or attitude in the past, then raise questions about the future.
- **Categorise interview question topics** such as experience, knowledge, feeling, attitude, behaviour (see sample questions in the footer of the [resources page of the E&I framework](#)), and demographic background. Such distinctions can help you define the focus of your inquiry and organise the questions in some sequence. You should also be prepared to alter the order of questions during the actual interview.
- **Ask follow-up questions and probes**, as appropriate, for greater depth, detail and clarity. Probes can be a combination of verbal and nonverbal cues.
- **Save the socio-demographic questions** (age, socioeconomic status, etc.) for the end or space them strategically throughout the interview. Some background information may be necessary at the beginning to make sense out of the rest of the interview. If not, avoid beginning an interview with a long list of routine demographic questions.
- **Observe and build rapport** by conveying empathy and understanding without judgement. Consider using illustrative examples, role-playing and simulation questions to create rapport and facilitate a deeper response. Be mindful that too much rapport may result in the interview overrunning.
- **Listen actively, show interest and offer encouragement** through giving appropriate feedback to the interviewees, such as head nodding, taking notes, and silent probes. If responses are getting off the track, it is your responsibility to interrupt politely with respect and sensitivity.
- **Make smooth transitions** between sections of the interview or topics. Questions prefaced by transition statements help smooth the flow of an interview, alert the interviewees to the nature of the upcoming question, and give them a few seconds to organise their thoughts before responding.
- **Take notes during an interview** to track questions asked and answer received, and to locate important quotations. If possible, provide nonverbal feedback to the interviewee about what kinds of things are especially noteworthy. However, be mindful that taking notes affects the process of interviewing. You may have a difficult time responding appropriately to interviewee needs and cues.
- **If you find that the person to be interviewed is unwilling to cooperate or needs to leave**, it is helpful to have a single, one-short question in mind to ask before they leave.

- **Providing an opportunity for the interviewee to have the final say** at the end of the interview. It can also be helpful to leave interviewees with a way to contact you in case they want to add something that they forgot to mention or clarify some points.

Afterwards

- **Check the recording** to make sure it worked immediately after a recorded interview.
 - o If for some reason, a malfunction occurred, you should immediately make extensive note of everything that you can remember.
 - o Even if the recorder functioned properly, you should go over the interview notes to ensure that they make sense. This also allows you to uncover areas of ambiguity or uncertainty.
 - o If you find things that do not quite make sense, as soon as possible check back with the interviewee for clarification.
- **Reflect** on the quality of information received, new ideas jumped up, weakness and problems such as poorly worded questions, wrong topics, poor rapport and disruptive settings.
- **Make notes** on the interview process while the experience is still fresh in your mind.
- **Initiate analysis early** and this allows you to become more aware of emerging categories and themes.
- **Prepare the data for analysis** and move data into a format that is easy to manipulate. A good starting point is to make transcripts. You then can read through and re-read the transcripts, make notes and memos, focusing on what participants said.
 - o When transcribing your data, you should anonymise as you go and make sure participants are not identifiable from transcriptions.
 - o If your interview study has not required Research Ethics Committee approval, then you should delete the recordings once transcription is completed.
 - o If your interview study required approval, you need to be aware of Research Ethics Committees specific requirements about data storage and destruction.
- **Analyse the recorded conversations** by coding the interview data, assigning labels to the codes, then grouping codes into themes or categories. You then can look for relationships of identified categories and patterns. Another common approach to analysing interview data is to treat transcripts as case studies. You decide whether a single case or a cross-case analysis is better when using this approach. A single case analysis approach considers each person, group as part of the analysis, whilst a cross-case approach clusters answers from individuals to common questions, focusing on different perspectives on central issues.
 - o Throughout the analysis, you should be reflexive and critically aware of how your own opinions may have influenced your interpretation of participants' comments and try and be as objective as possible.
 - o In addition, there are computer packages such as NVivo, Atlas and MAXQDA that can help with analysis of qualitative data systematically. Training is required if you are new to these packages.
- **Making Changes-** If you would like to make a change as a result of your interview/s, [work in partnership with your students](#) to identify how this could best be achieved. Utilise the [E&I Framework](#) for any changes planned. Whether making changes or not, remember that it is essential to close the feedback loop to the participants. The [Closing the Feedback Loop Guidance](#) can help you consider ways to do this effectively.

Practicalities checklist

Format and wording of questions. Have you considered to	
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ask one question at a time rather than lay out a series of questions. Multiple questions create tension on the person being interviewed. - Avoid questions which invite yes or no answers. These questions can turn an interview into an interrogation or quiz rather than an in-depth conversation. - Use a good mixture of different kinds of questions such as probing, specifying, and direct questions. - Be careful asking “why” questions. This type of question may make respondents feel defensive and thus may inhibit their responses to questions. 	
Overview	
Preparing an interview. Have you thought about	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Who will be interviewed and why? - How many will be interviewed? - How the respondents will be reached? - When, where and for how long each respondent will be interviewed? - How you will close feedback loop with participants? - How you will present yourself, such as how you will be dressed? - How you plan to control your bias? - How you might develop the skills/resources needed to carry out your interviews? - What you will do if your interviewee does not turn up for the interview? - How you will pre-test the questions by appropriate participants? - Quality check of your recording equipment in advance? - Ethical approval (if applicable)? - Consent form for participants (if applicable)? - Incentives - Backup plans if recording is not possible because of interviewee request, or recorder malfunction? 	
During an interview. Have you thought about	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Arriving early for your interview so that you have time to set up, and check any equipment - Making your interviewee feel as comfortable as possible 	
After an interview. Have you thought about	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Checking your recordings immediately (if applicable) - Analysing your data thematically. It may worth considering some level of statistical analysis if you have 30 or more interviews - Identifying and taking forward actions on the basis of your analysis to improve the student experience 	

Next Steps

Some further reading:

Harvey, J. (1998). Evaluation Cookbook. Edinburgh: LTDI. Available at:

<http://www.icbl.hw.ac.uk/ltdi/cookbook/cookbook.pdf>. - An accessible guide which covers focus groups as well as other evaluation methods.

Brinkmann, S. & Kvale, S. (2015). Interviews: Learning The Craft Of Qualitative Research Interviewing (3rd ed). SAGE: London. – This textbook concentrates on the theoretical and practical perspectives of interviewing that lead to successful interviews.

Seidman, I. (2019). Interviewing As Qualitative Research: A Guide For Researchers In Education And The Social Sciences (5th ed). Teachers College Press, New York: NY. – This textbook considers interviewing in

the phenomenological tradition to question the meanings of experience and details on how to construct and conduct interviews and effectively and ethically manage interview data.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Sample interview guide

Interview guide

Project: An investigation of the influence of curriculum framework diversification

Date/time of the interview:

Interviewee:

Interview procedure

You are being asked to participate in a research/evaluation study investigating the influence of curriculum framework diversification on lecturers' approaches to module development. The purpose of this study is to understand the innovative ways to implement the new curriculum framework across Schools and its effects on the design of modules. During the interview, you will be asked questions in terms of your experience and perception of the implementation process. You may choose not to answer any or all of the questions. The procedure will be recorded and transcribed verbatim. Your answers will be confidential, and you will not be identified individually.

Informed consent

Please sign the informed consent form signalling your willingness to participate.

Questions

1. Describe the changes you made to the module when you redesigned it to embed the new curriculum framework
 - How much did you modify the existing module in alignment with the new curriculum framework?
 - How did you modify it?
 - What did you learn from the process?
2. Describe your overall experience of implementing the new curriculum framework.
 - What are the benefits?
 - What are the challenges?
3. What would you recommend others who are about to redesign their modules in the light of the new framework?

Closing

Thank you for participating in this interview. We appreciate you taking the time to do this. We may contact you in the future for the purpose of follow up interviews. Again, let me assure you of the confidentiality of your responses. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me by email.

Appendix 2 – Sample consent form

Consent Form

Title of Research: [Click here to enter text.](#)

Principal investigator: Name:

Email:

1. I have had explained to me the purposes of the project and what will be required of me, and any questions I have had have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to the arrangements described in the Information Sheet in-so far as they relate to my participation.
2. I understand that participation is voluntary. I can change your mind at any time without any repercussions. I can stop completing the activities at any time; however, due to the anonymised nature of the questionnaire and the workshops, it will not be possible to identify and remove my inputs once they have been given.
3. I understand that the data collected from me in this study will be preserved and made available in anonymised form, so that it can be consulted and re-used by others. Any data collected will be held in strict confidence, and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking participants will be included in any sort of report that might be published.
4. Research records will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer and only the research team will have access to the records. Any recordings will be deleted at the completion of any transcription, and with any further data to be destroyed after a period of 5 years.
5. The results of the study may be written up as a report for the University and may also be used presented at national and international conferences, and in written articles.
6. This project has been reviewed by the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct.

Name:

Signed:

Date: