



Postgraduate Admissions Committee Policy

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Postgraduate Admissions Interviews

Aims

1. The postgraduate admissions process aims to admit to the University those students with the strongest academic potential from all backgrounds through procedures and interactions that are accessible, fair and efficient and that convey the University's mission of excellence. This policy aims to ensure that postgraduate admissions interviews help meet this ambition.
2. The policy (a) establishes the University's understanding of the broad purpose of postgraduate admissions interview, (b) defines when they are required, and (c) sets out the core principles under which they should be conducted.
3. These core principles aim to ensure fairness, respectful treatment of interviewees, and compliance with other University policy and relevant legislation. The policy recognises that beyond this minimum common framework, postgraduate admissions interviews are legitimately delivered in different ways. The principles are complemented by [good practice advice](#).
4. The document has been prepared with attention to the policy on undergraduate admissions interviews described in the University of Cambridge [Undergraduate Admissions Handbook](#), the University's postgraduate [widening participation strategy](#) and best practice in other institutions.

Definitions and scope

5. For the purposes of this policy:
 - an *interview* is a formal discussion with an applicant which contributes to the decision to admit that applicant;

- a *competitive interview* is a particular type of interview in which there is a gathered field of applicants (i.e. no decisions to recommend applicants for admission are made until all applications are received) and the interview informs comparative judgements between them; competitive interviews carry some specific requirements, set out in paragraphs 44 and 45.
6. This policy applies to all postgraduate courses (i.e. study leading to a degree described in [Chapter 7](#) of the University Ordinances) for which PAO administers admissions . It does not cover interviews held for the sole purpose of deciding on student funding applications.

The purpose of postgraduate admissions interview

7. A postgraduate admissions interview informs the decision to make an offer to an applicant and, potentially, the academic condition set. The interview can be used to confirm that the applicant has the requisite skills, knowledge, motivation and interests required to complete the course. In this regard, it has particular value in borderline admission decisions and for courses where selection utilises a gathered field. Where the applicant is also applying to the Postgraduate Funding Competition, information obtained through interview can also inform the score given to an applicant (and entered via TOAST).
8. A postgraduate admissions interview is also an opportunity to establish compatible expectations between the potential student and the University. This can include ensuring that the applicant understands the teaching method, or supervision arrangements, for the proposed course. In this regard, an admissions interview has particular value for prospective research students and can be used to ensure that:
- the applicant has an appropriate understanding of the research methods and theoretical frameworks in the relevant discipline;
 - the student understands the interests and expertise of proposed supervisors;
 - the proposed supervisors and potential student understand the scope and intention of the proposed research topic or the steps through which this will be finalised.
9. Admissions interviews can help in the detection of fraudulent applications.

When is a postgraduate admissions interview required?

10. Any applicant for postgraduate study who a department, faculty, institute or partner institution (hereafter 'department') intends to recommend for an offer of admission must be interviewed, unless one of the exemptions described in this section applies. The interview must be conducted in accordance with this policy and before the recommendation is made to the relevant Degree Committee.
11. An interview is not required if an applicant is a current student at the University and the following conditions apply:
- the interview is not a competitive interview;
 - the decision by the department to recommend admission is taken by more than one University staff member.

Register of agreed exemptions to the postgraduate interview requirement

12. An interview is not required if an applicant held an offer for the same course in the preceding year and has reapplied, unless the interview is competitive in which case the requirement stands.
13. An interview is not required if a course is exempt from the interview requirement. Such an exemption cannot be given in the case of doctoral study. For any other postgraduate research course, the exemption must be granted by the Postgraduate Admissions Committee (PAC). For a postgraduate taught (PGT) course, a Degree Committee may exempt a course, unless the course forms the initial component of an integrated doctoral programme. In making this decision the Degree Committee should consider the same issues and evidence as if the decision was made by PAC, as set out in para. 14. In such a case, it should be noted that:
 - the exempted course must be registered as such with PAO by emailing: internal@postgraduate.study.cam.ac.uk;
 - an exemption must be reviewed two years after its first agreement (i.e. ahead of its third year of operation) and every five years thereafter;
 - paras 16 and 17, below, still apply.
14. An exemption request to PAC must cover the following points in relation to a course:
 - how the admissions assessment process ensures the academic quality of students without interview (for example through stretching academic requirements, the use of a gathered field or because of a high offer-to-places ratio) and how borderline cases will be determined (which might be by interview, on an exceptional basis);
 - whether the information provided to applicants to enable them to make an informed decision as to their own suitability for the course;
 - whether the information provided to offer holders ensures students' preparedness for starting the course;
 - how candidates from a widening participation background are given the opportunity to exhibit their strengths without interview;
 - identified risks from the absence of interview (e.g. in relation to fraud or reputation) and mitigations.
15. An exemption request to PAC must also cover how and when the application assessment process will be reviewed, in the light of progress and outcomes data for those students admitted. Where an exemption is agreed, PAC will review it two years after its first agreement (i.e. ahead of its third year of operation) and every five years thereafter.
16. Where an exemption is agreed, a department may still choose to interview some candidates and are recommended to do so where the decision on a recommendation for admission is uncertain.
17. There is a separate requirement to interview all applicants requiring an [academic case](#). In most instances, this is met through an admissions interview. If a course has an admissions interviews exemption, an academic case interview is still, in general, required. There are two exceptions: (i) if an additional academic case interview exemption has been agreed by PAC for the course; (ii) if the need for an academic case

Register of agreed exemptions to the postgraduate interview requirement

arises after an offer has been made and it does not require referral to the PAC sub-committee for specific applicant cases (which is needed if the applicant has no degree or a very low degree, e.g. a UK 3rd or equivalent).

18. Notwithstanding the grant of such an exemption, all applicants requiring an [academic case](#) must be interviewed.
- 19.
20. PAO maintains a [list](#) of exempted courses and of exemptions from the academic case requirement.

Principles

21. The following paragraphs establish a set of principles under which postgraduate admissions interviews in the University should be conducted.

General

22. Applicants should be informed of the place and significance of interview within the selection process for a given course through its Course Directory entry. The purpose and format of a specific interview should be made clear to the interviewee through the invitation to attend.
23. An interview must form part of a full assessment of a candidate's application, alongside their academic record and written submissions. A decision on admission is not made on an interview alone.
24. An interview can be an opportunity to gain additional information about the potential of an applicant from a non-traditional background, for example one identified via a Potential Undermatcher Flag (PUF) (see also para. 37). Departments are encouraged to interview applicants from such backgrounds whose written application material suggests such potential. Interviewers should be mindful that applicants from non-traditional background may have less experience of a formal academic situation or presentation and be flexible in style to allow a candidate to show their strengths.

Administration

25. Interviews may be held in person or online (and choices should be informed by the University's commitment to [climate conscious travel](#)).
26. Applicants should be informed in advance of:
 - the date, time, place or online format of the interview;
 - the names and roles of all interviewers;
 - the broad outline of any task, including a presentation, to be completed at or before the interview;
 - their ability to declare a disability, serious health problem or caring responsibility that may require reasonable adjustments for the interview.

Register of agreed exemptions to the postgraduate interview requirement

27. Wherever possible, applicants should have this information at least three full working days in advance, though an interview may be scheduled at shorter notice with the applicant's explicit agreement. If this is not considered deliverable for a particular course, applicants must be provided with a window within which interviews will be scheduled, along with the information in the last two bullets at para. 26, at the time of application (for example through a Course Directory entry).
28. If an applicant fails to respond to an invitation to attend, or fails to attend on the day, reasonable endeavours should be made to contact them and reschedule the interview. However, if this attempt fails they can be rejected on this basis.
29. If making reasonable adjustments for a disability will require a delay to the interview, the interview must be rescheduled. It is expected that reasonable adjustments should be possible, in particular given the option of online interview formats. However, if this is determined not to be the case, and following consultation with the [Accessibility and Disability Resource Centre](#), the reasons must be explained to the applicant in writing.
30. If an applicant who is under 18 is to be interviewed in person, the department should contact the Postgraduate Admissions Office for additional requirements and advice.

Interviewers

31. All interviewers must be either (a) an academic or research member of University staff or of the staff of an institutions that currently holds a formal [University Partner Institution](#) agreement, (b) recently retired as such (i.e. no more than five years post-retirement), (c) an academic-related member of University staff, or (d) a current or prospective external secondary supervisor, as described in the *Framework for PGR supervision arrangements*. At least one interviewer must be in category (a).
32. If a single interviewer is used, the decision to recommend an applicant for admission must involve at least one other academic member of the department.
33. For prospective postgraduate research students, if a proposed principal supervisor has been identified by the department, this person should be an interviewer wherever possible (this does not apply to centralised panel interviews used for admission to cross-departmental programmes, for example in the case of some Doctoral Training Partnerships). Where a principal supervisor has not been identified, or the identified person is unavailable (for example due to leave) and the interview cannot be delayed (for example due to a funding nominations deadline), the panel should include an interviewer with academic specialisms relevant to the proposed topic.

Interviewer training

34. Before conducting an interview, interviewers must be familiar with this policy. Interviewers must have successfully completed the University's training on [Data Protection](#) and any training identified as mandatory for new staff under the University's [Dignity at Work](#) policy. Where an interviewer is not a University employee, the department must satisfy itself that training of an equivalent standard

has been taken in these areas (where relevant, a University Partner Institution may, and will need to, satisfy itself of such equivalence in relation to its own training).

Conduct

35. Interviews should be conducted in accordance with the University's [Equal Opportunities Policy](#). In as much as an interview addresses applicant selection, interviewers must have regard only to factors relevant to the applicant's academic aptitude and skills, motivation and commitment, and suitability for the course. No applicant will be treated less favourably than another because they belong to a protected group as defined in the Equality Act 2010 (see the [Equal Opportunities Policy](#)).
36. Interviewees must not be asked questions relating to health or disability during an admission interview (except in as much as opening remarks are needed to check physical and/or other access arrangements are acceptable). Discussion about reasonable adjustments, or if there is concern about a potential student's ability to meet competence standards (as defined within the Equality Act) may be discussed in a separate and clearly differentiated conversation afterwards, with input from a disability specialist.
37. Similarly, interviewees should not be asked for personal details relating to other protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 (see the [Equal Opportunities Policy](#)) or information collected from applicants for the purpose of contextualised admissions. Interviewers may legitimately ask an applicant how disadvantage impacted their previous studies, decisions and achievements, as part of a [contextualised admissions](#) approach, or respond if this is raised by an applicant. Similarly, interviewers may legitimately discuss such issues where they have a central relevance to a proposed research topic.
38. References provided during application are confidential and should not be discussed with an interviewee, even if the parties are known to each other.

Fraud Prevention

39. Before the start of an interview, the interviewee should be asked to confirm their identity and, as far as is possible, this should be confirmed against a photographic ID document, such as a passport or driving licence (this task might be conducted by an administrator outside the main interview). If because of this, or any other aspect of the interview, an interviewer or administrator has concerns that an application is fraudulent, these concerns should be raised with the Postgraduate Admissions Office (internal@postgraduate.study.cam.ac.uk).

Interview notes, reports and feedback

40. Interview records must be treated in accordance with the University's [data protection commitments](#). Formal post-interview reports should be securely retained, stored and, when appropriate, destroyed. Informal notes taken during interview should be stored securely and retained only as long as necessary for decision making or creating a

formal report, then destroyed. Under UK GDPR, if an interviewee makes a [subject access request](#), they have a right to see both the relevant formal comments and any informal notes extant when the request is made.

41. Departments should adopt their own position on whether to require post-interview written reports on all interviewees. Such commentary can help consistency, clarity and accountability in decision making, though departments should note the data access implications of written comment outlined at para. 40. Where reports are made (potentially via Panel) departments should adopt their own standards, which might differ between different degrees and courses.
42. Departments should have an explicit policy on feedback to interviewees, which might differ between different degrees and courses and should be publicised via the Course Directory. The policy may be part of a broader statement on applicant feedback and departments may choose not to provide this. In all instances, any feedback given should be in writing.
43. If (and only if) an academic case is required to support admission, an interview report must be uploaded to the applicant's CamSIS record.

Competitive interview

44. In addition to conforming to the principles set out above, competitive interviews for a course (see para. 5) should:
 - use the same format (i.e. in person or online) where practical; where this is not the case, explicit consideration should be given to ensure equality of treatment across formats;
 - be consistent in the number of interviewers.
45. Competitive interviews for PGT courses should be structured, that is based around a set of pre-agreed topics (and where appropriate questions) in a set order. The specific questions selected may vary between candidates, including to mitigate the risk that questions are made public by interviewees, as well as to reflect specific applicant backgrounds. However, consideration should be given to ensure these are of equivalent difficulty. In addition, where the composition of interview panels varies across the set of candidates, there should be a pre-agreed equivalence of approach between different panels and a process of moderation for interview outcomes.
46. Where competitive interviews are used for PGR courses, consideration should be given of how to ensure all applicants are provided equal opportunity to convey their merits.