

Zoology Postdoc Interviews Workshop

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Panel: Prof Michael Akam, Prof Howard Bayliss, Prof Helen Skaer, Prof Tim Weil, Anne Forde

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Organised by Postdoc Committee / Alecia Carter

The Zoology postdocs gathered to ask a panel of academics in the Department what interviews are all about and what to expect in them, including interviews for postdoc positions, fellowships and lectureships. Below is a summary of the **questions** that were asked by the postdocs, and some notes of the responses (bulleted) and some *general comments* from the panel as the discussions continued. Important, reiterated points are underlined and the most helpful are in [blue](#).

Please note these documents are a product of an informal discussion and represent personal opinions that do not reflect the position of the University and the Department of Zoology on these matters. They are rough transcripts of the conversations that have not been edited for content.

What's the worst/best thing you could do in an interview?

- You will never make a complete fool of yourself, the panel will usually look for your best side
- Don't mumble
- Don't speak for too long
- They'll expect you to be nervous, so don't worry about that part, just try to manage it as best you can

When to stop talking?

- Difficult to know—usually one knows if one has been rambling. And whether you've answered the question!
- Get to the point quickly

Phone interviews? No feedback... Strategies for knowing when to shut up

- Answer the question! Then stop.

Most interview questions are predictable

- Have three points as an answer to questions, prepare notes for the answers

Preparation is key; if you're prepared, you won't ramble!

- Believe in the questions you've prepared, but think on your feet in the interview.
- Short pause before you start speaking won't do you any harm—more impressive than rushing to answer without knowing what to say

If you can predict the questions: What are they?

- **Postdoc:** Are you the person the right person to come to the lab?
- **If a specific project:** Has the candidate bothered to find out about the project?
- Spread out and ask more generally: not too narrow
- First questions will usually be about what the postdoc has done before to relax you
- **Presentations for fellowship interviews:** with or without slides: it's your opportunity to feed the panel with things you want them to ask questions about. Will skew the questions to things you're comfortable about!

Starting questions will be different for fellowship VS lectureship

- Lectureship: how well you fit the department?
- Fellowship: how well you will do the science?
- Lectureship: why did you apply for the job? Do you have good reasons for doing this? Expect that they will know something about the Dept. What the Dept has to offer that will help with the candidate's vision.

What if you're asked about other things you've applied for?

- Just because you're applying for every job, won't hold it against you, but they will ask what you think is relevant about the context of working in Cambridge. Might be for family reasons, which is ok, but must highlight the fit between the Dept and your work.

Two sides to an lectureship and postdoc interview: are you a good fit to the place and is the place right for you?

Three questions:

- **Why you?**
- **Why now: ready to take on what you propose?**
- **Why here: why are you the right person for the place and the place is right for the person?**
- In response to why you: "I'm a great opportunity for this department to develop this area..."
- But then the easy response to that is: Why *should* we have this skill?

Question: Are you applying for other things?

- Be honest: "Of course, it's uncertain world and I'm applying for other things, but this is the post I would really like"
- Honesty is a good idea, but be positive!

What are your weaknesses: Don't have to appear to be arrogant, how do you ameliorate that weakness

- e.g. focus on too many things at once is a good weakness, shows you've thought about it more
- or: I'm still on a learning curve and I need to know more about XYZ...
- Have positive weaknesses! It's an unfair question though

How important is it to know in advance who is on the panel?

- You can ask who will be on the panel; it's useful to know
- Don't over-research the panel, it can be off-putting
- Fellowship panels may bring in specialists who don't cover your area, be prepared for anything

When you invite people, do you tell them the structure of the interview; if not, can you ask?

- Doesn't do any harm to ask. Normal practice to say how long the interview will be
- At the end, you will always be invited to ask questions
- Interactions with others will be important
- Group leader interviews: you will know in advance what is expected of you. Good to ask.

More and more, candidates have to sit in on each other's talks: How to deal with it?

- Be a mouse; you don't have to be the one that jumps up and asks a question
- The applicants find it difficult
- BUT you have to go along with what the place is doing.

REMEMBER! You are also interviewing the Department: it's a two-way street. Take the opportunity to talk to people in the lab. Be wary if you're not given an opportunity to find out about the 'boss'

If you are asked whether you have any questions for the panel?

- No obligation to say anything: they won't judge you for not having any questions!
- Ok to say "I think all my questions have been answered". Most of them are mundane.
- *Just be honest!*

How much information you can ask for beforehand: How should you dress up, is it ok to ask?

- Don't ask! Be comfortable, but come in smart casual, not yesterday's field clothes
- Suit unnecessary, unless you feel comfortable in it
- You don't want to stand out "that one that wore the three-piece", but you want to make an effort
- Don't overthink it.
- What you wear and how you look says something about you, but be honest!
- For jobs in academic institutions it won't really make a difference, but looking smart within your bounds.

Subconscious: How you present yourself in the first few minutes is really important: don't look like a victim, be reasonably confident, firm handshake, look them in the eye.

- Appear engaged. Don't overdo it but it's a matter of overcoming the nerves
- Interviews make people nervous, but you must think, "I love doing this work, I really enjoy it"

To answer: What makes this work interesting?

- Don't just say, "I love marmots!"
- Your ability to engage the audience in front of you: convey precise information with enthusiasm will be invaluable for a lectureship job

Senior Fellowship interviews: get across your vision of the where the larger field is going!

- Completely embedded in their research or broader perspective?
- What are the important questions in the field, and how do you think your work is making a difference!

One way to ask it: Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

- "I want to be a lecturer" is only a part of the answer

It's to do with the fit! What opportunities will the fellowship give you?

Think about you interviewing the Department, too: It will give you confidence and will make you engaged. It will help level the playing field.

In a fellowship interview: if there's a specialist and more general, do you make the answer general or for the specialist?

- Two lead panel members, they will give you specialist questions. Best to engage with the specialist and answer the question *at the level* that the question was asked.
- Could be quite technical questions, will also test whether you know the literature, know the broader questions.
- Sometimes bring in the generalist audience, if there is a controversy in the field: you can admit that there is an issue in the field
- The more you can engage with the members of the panel, the better the recollection of you at the end of the day!

Fellowship panels might be a bit abrupt, but don't take it personally.

- They're a bit different, very intense!
- Bring a bit of lightness to it: Engagement and enthusiasm. Just need to overcome your nerves

How to overcome nerves: called the 5/10 people he was most afraid of to do a mock interview... Destructive, awful, horrible, but had already had that interview.

- **Preparation is key!** Get your peers in, especially if they've had interview experience: get practice of a 'bad' interview.
- Make your worst interview your practice interview!
- Ask for feedback on how you can improve. To better build your arguments etc.
- Problem with interviews: becomes a more personal failure if you don't succeed. Grow through it. Think about what are the reasons that you haven't been successful. You might not have been the best fit.

Asking the panel for advice about what went wrong?

- No point. Not usually profitable to ask for feedback because in fellowship interviews there are too many candidates that useful feedback is difficult to give.
- Don't take a rejection too seriously
- For lectureships, it is possible to ask for feedback, but it is quite difficult to do so. Usually it won't be helpful because you can't be given negative feedback
- Usually you won't get the first job you apply for, do your best for every interview, but practice will help.
- Remember: it's really good to get to the interview stage!

Should you try to get experience at interviews?

- You won't get shortlisted if you're not ready.
- If there are a number of good reasons to apply, do it.

Take the initiative to get feedback! Use appraisals!

Any reason your productivity may have been affected:

- it's a real mistake not to get the information across. Career breaks in applications that are not explained are worse than explaining it. Make clear that you did part time work...

Fellowship: balance between reviews and interview?

- Analogous to the editor (panellist) making final say on the comments by reviewers on a manuscript (proposal reviewers). Usually it is the reviewers' comments that get the person to interview stage, so beyond that it might not count too much. The interview is all important. (The panellists often don't have much say in who the reviewers are, and there can be discordance between the reviews)
- The interview is all-important
- Interviews are to Editors, reviewers are mostly invited by administrative people. You can rescue your project in the interview = panel will take reviewers comments critically. The interview will give you a chance to respond
- If you fail your interview, a good review can't rescue you
- Different for applications with broad panel, if no one with specific expertise then review will be valued higher

What is a complete "NO" in interview performance?

- Do not show off by trying to mention specialist topics—risk cos the interviewer might take that in a direction you don't want
- Don't mumble
- Combative approach
- If you feel you're challenged, don't buckle. Bullies do better if they're stood up to.
- Be well-prepared, know why you want to do what you've said, and then *fight for it*.
- Don't give negative reasons, give positive reasons for wanting to be somewhere/do something
- Be respectful, other panel members may be on your side!
- Someone may make a suggestion for something you haven't thought of: Don't be defensive, take it on board. But if it's a stupid idea, then explain why.
- If they know you're lying, it will drive them crazy: don't bullshit!
- If you don't know, it's ok! "It's not an area that I've looked at..."
- Over-preparation/Lack of preparation... Younger individuals do this more!