



All about Interviews



What is an interview?

An interview is at the most fundamental level, *a meeting between strangers*. It is worth bearing this in mind at all times when you are preparing for an interview. You have a very limited amount of time to make a good impression, so preparation is key.

An interview *should* be a two way process, but in reality, particularly early on in your career, it can often feel that all the power is in the hands of the

interviewer. It can feel like you, as the candidate, are being judged and weighed in the balance, whereas an interview really should be a *two way process*. You need to be sure the job and the organisation is right for you too. Thinking about an interview like this may help reduce the fear factor. It is true to say that most people get nervous at interviews and find them pretty stressful, however many you have attended, but, by finding out a little more and being better prepared, it is possible to improve your confidence levels and interview performance markedly.

S What is the purpose of an interview?

The interviewer will certainly be looking to find out whether you have the potential to do the job effectively and make a useful contribution to the department and the organisation. At its simplest level, this means they will be asking:

- Can you do the job? (Skills, attributes, knowledge, experience, understanding)
- Will you do the job? (Enthusiasm, commitment, loyalty)
- Will you fit in? (Personality, attitude, approach, good fit with company ethos, values and the existing team)

You should be asking yourself similar questions. Is the job at the right level for you? Is it too challenging or not challenging enough? No one expects you to be able to do the job expertly from day one, by the way, but you need to be confident that with a proper induction and some training, you will be able to make a valuable contribution.

You need to ask yourself if you are excited and pleased at the prospect of working for this organisation, in this job. You must also ask yourself if you identify with the mission statement of the organisation, its values and the way it goes about its business. Finally, what's in it for you? Would this be a good next step in your career?

In asking yourself such questions while preparing for an interview and in the interview itself, you will effectively change the power balance, and the interview will no longer feel so one sided. You need to feel it is right for you, just as much as they need to feel you are right for them.

Different types of interview formats

Interviews may be structured in different ways. At some point, though, whatever has gone before, you will in most cases find yourself being formally interviewed face to face by one, two, or in some cases, several interviewers at the same time.

Below are some possible interview formats. You should be told exactly what to expect, but if you are in any doubt, contact the organisation and find out.

• **Group interviews** - You will be interviewed at the same time as a number of other candidates. Each candidate will be asked a question in turn and you may be encouraged to enter into discussion with the other candidates. Selected candidates may then go on to an individual interview.

- A series of interviews with different people each person will hopefully ask questions with a different focus, though you may find you have to repeat yourself. If you are asked similar questions, be sure to answer just as completely each time.
- Informal 'chats' with different people followed by a formal interview you could be taken on a tour and will be given the opportunity to ask lots of questions. Treat these informal chats as seriously as the formal interview! You can be pretty sure that everyone you speak to will be asked for their opinion about your suitability.
- Formal face-to-face interviews could be one to one in smaller organisations, but frequently more than one interviewer. Questions will be focused on the evidence you have provided in your application/CV and letter that you meet the requirements of the job.
- **Panel interview** you may be interviewed by several people and the Chairperson will co-ordinate the questions. Often each member of the panel will have their own set of questions agreed beforehand and will ask the same set of questions to each candidate. Be sure that when you answer a question from one panel member, you direct the answer to everyone, not just that one person. The panel interview is common in the public sector.
- Assessment centres one or two days or more, typically including information sessions, tasks, exercises and social events. Be careful that you do not behave too casually or talk carelessly during any social events, coffee breaks or lunch/dinner. You need to maintain a professional attitude throughout. For detailed information, see www.aber.ac.uk/careers/assesscentre.
- **Telephone interviews** these are being used increasingly by employers as a way of screening candidates to see if it is worth while asking them for a face to face interview or to attend an assessment centre. Telephone interviews are quite challenging because all the visual cues are absent, so it is probably worth looking at them in detail. There is more information about telephone interviews in the Research and Preparation section.

Research and Preparation

The biggest mistake people make when they are called for interview is to do nothing. Thorough pre interview preparation is absolutely essential. Whatever type of interview you have, your preparation should be the same:

RESEARCH

PREPARE

PRACTISE

Do your research

- Find out as much as you can about the organisation its various 'arms' and locations, its future plans, its financial situation, its mission statement, its ethos. Look at its website and download and read any recent reports and publicity/marketing material you find.
- Read any external reports see Nexis (an on-line news service) at www.aber.ac.uk/en/is/elecinfo/eiaz/ #N - so you can demonstrate the **breadth** of your knowledge about them.
- Get informed about any current issues in the news that may be related to the organisation's business. The Today programme is a good source of up to date information www.bbc.co.uk/today.

- Try to read between the lines and find out how they treat their staff, management styles, conditions etc. If you know anyone who works for the organisation, talk to them.
- Find out as much as possible about the **job role**. See the Prospects website www.prospects.ac.uk/ types_of_jobs.htm.
- Plan some suitable questions to ask them.

Prepare yourself

- If an informal chat or visit has been suggested, take them up on it.
- Check the **match** between what they want and what you can offer. **Make notes** to remind yourself of your best evidence for each criterion or competency.
- Anticipate the questions. They will be focused on the essential criteria/competencies and your CV/ application.
- Decide on your **interview outfit** and the best advice is probably to dress up rather than down, though the dress code must be appropriate for the job sector. You should aim to look smart, professional and business like. Bear in mind, though, that new clothes can play tricks on you buttons can come undone, collars chafe and shoes pinch it is a good idea to give them a test run beforehand. You need to feel as comfortable and relaxed as possible.
- Make sure you know what to take with you, eg degree certificates, passport, other documentation, portfolio etc and get them ready.
- Buy yourself a smart business folder or portfolio in which you can place your application, information about the organisation and the job, your notes and questions, any personal evidence of relevant achievement etc. Remember to take it with you and read it before you go in.
- Check the location and plan your journey allowing yourself plenty of time to get there.

Prepare for any tasks

Within the interview process, whatever 'shape' it might take, you may be asked to perform specific tasks; for example:

- Give a short presentation usually before/in the formal interview
- Deliver a lesson/lecture (education/training)
- Defend/explain an artistic portfolio
- Take part in a group exercise/discussion
- **Demonstrate proficiency** in a skill
- Solve a technical problem (computing, engineering)

Make sure you know exactly what is required so you can prepare thoroughly.

Practise answers to possible questions

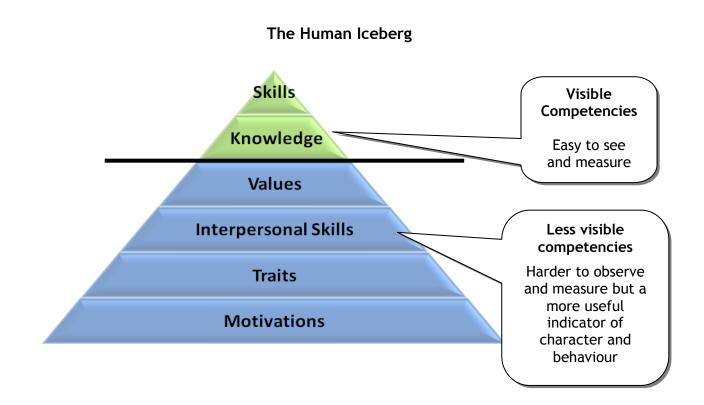
a. Traditional questions

• Tell us about yourself	They don't want your life story from birth! This simple sounding question needs careful preparation. Keep it brief and mention the key things about you that are relevant to the job. You can, as with all questions, ask them to clarify exactly what they
• Why did you apply for this job?	would like to know. That gives you some thinking time. This is your chance to demonstrate your breadth of understanding and knowledge of the job role and the organisation itself. They want to be certain that you are really enthusiastic about their organisation and their organisation alone. You must not give the impression that you simply applied to them because you need a job, any job!
• What can you offer us?	Do not dwell on what a good opportunity it would be for you personally. It should be all about what you can bring to the job and the organisation. You are selling yourself as a 'best buy'.
 Where do you see yourself in five years? 	Do not say 'in <i>your</i> chair' or working for another (more important) competitor or running your own business etc. You could say something like you hope by then you will be in a more challenging role with more responsibility. Depending on the sector this could be team leader, regional manager, project manager, head of department, etc. Find out beforehand what the next step up would be for the particular role.
• What is your greatest weakness?	Do not say that you are a perfectionist or a workaholic - they have been done to death. Try to identify something that perhaps you have found a challenge in the past, but show how you have devised strategies to overcome any difficulties. They will be looking at your level of self awareness and on your ability to reflect on yourself honestly and be willing to improve.
• Strengths?	You need to have thought carefully about this and be ready to 'blow your own trumpet'. Prepare your list of key strengths beforehand and don't be afraid to speak about them confidently.
• Have you any questions for us?	Always have one or two questions for them. Do not ask about money or benefits etc. You could ask about opportunities for continuing professional development for example, or go back to a point someone made earlier and ask them to expand, or perhaps you could ask them about expansion plans or new initiatives you have heard about.

b. Behavioural or competency based questions

Competencies are thought to improve the process of finding the right person for the job and also for assessing a person's performance in a job. This approach is considered to be fairer and to have more successful outcomes.

In contrast to a job description, which typically lists the tasks or functions and responsibilities for a particular role, a set of competencies lists the abilities needed to conduct those tasks or functions.



Competency based questions aim to find out what really makes you tick and how you behave and react in different situations. Keep your answers **specific, not general**. Choose your best example. Do not be alarmed if the interviewer asks supplementary questions. This is intended to help you paint a fuller picture of the experience.

If you have a good work based example, use that; if not, use an example based on your university experience or extracurricular experience.

How to answer behavioural or competency based questions

- Use 'I' wherever you can, even if it was a team effort, and tell the story from your point of view but remember to give credit to other people where it's due
- Use the mnemonic STAR to provide a framework for your answers:
 - Describe the situation or problem clearly
 - Describe the task in relation to the situation
 - Describe the actions you took
 - Describe the result and reflect on the experience honestly

Example 1

• Tell us about a time when you worked as a member of a team. What part did you play? What difficulties did you encounter? What did you do about this? What would you do differently next time?

Poor answer

'I have worked in a number of different teams and I always find that I can throw myself into any task with enthusiasm. I find that I get on well with most people and most of my experiences of working in teams have been really interesting. I often find myself in a leadership role which I thoroughly enjoy.'

Good answer

'Some friends and I decided to try to raise money for a local animal shelter - 'Paws for Thought' - which was in financial trouble. We decided to go for a public appeal. We each approached different local businesses and we managed to get sponsorship to pay for the publicity campaign materials. Many local businesses were very supportive, but we did encounter some hostility.

My particular responsibility was the design and production of the information leaflets and publicity posters and I asked another member of the team, who was doing a TV and Film degree, to take some photographs for these. We all helped with handing the leaflets out, putting up posters and collecting donations, both on campus and in the town. We also set up a stall in the Union, for three days during freshers' week, which we took turns in manning.

Including public and business donations, we raised about £5,000 over the course of two weeks. This was a reasonable result, but not quite as much as we had hoped.

On reflection, I think that perhaps a range of different fundraising events would have been more successful. Not everyone was comfortable with the idea of approaching businesses or members of the public asking for money, so, although we tried to allocate tasks amongst the team appropriately, a range of different activities would probably have made more of people's skills and talents and ultimately raised more money. Also, the planning and preparation time took much longer than we thought, and in the light of experience, if we did anything like this again we would have to find ways of working more efficiently as a team in order to speed things up.'

Example 2

• Tell us about a time when you solved a problem? What was the problem? How did you go about solving it? What would you do differently next time?

Poor answer

'There are of course lots of problems in day to day life. When I am confronted with a problem I try to analyse all different aspects of it, weigh up all the pros and cons and make a clear decision as to the best way forward. I am able to 'think outside the box' so I find it easy to solve most problems I am confronted with'.

Good answer

'One problem I had recently was with a piece of software. I acquired a new computer and with it the most recent version of Adobe Audition (version 3) which is a recording package. I was a reasonably competent user of the previous version, so I did not anticipate any problems. This time I found that when I was working in multi track, there was a fraction of a second delay on each succeeding track, making it impossible to record effectively using multiple tracks, which is what the software was designed to do.

I systematically checked all the hardware connections, checked the sound card drivers and then tried it again - with the same result. I then asked three different computer experts for their opinions and followed up each of their suggestions. When I was still unsuccessful, I researched the problem on the internet and took part in various discussion groups. I discovered that I was not alone in experiencing these difficulties and eventually came upon something called 'latency' which sounded like my problem. I discovered what it was caused by and the steps needed to fix it.

An ASIO (Audio stream input/output) driver was apparently what I needed and I downloaded a free version with great hope. Annoyingly, it still did not make any difference and I was on the verge of giving up completely and digging out my old computer with the old software.

After some reflection, however, I returned to the problem and after patiently experimenting, I finally managed to set up the ASIO driver correctly - the last step was in fact quite simple and obvious.

Whilst I think I approached the problem in the right way by logically checking the connections, asking for help and advice and researching it as deeply as I could, I could perhaps have 'slept on it' a little earlier as I believe that putting some distance between me and the problem gave me a greater perspective when I came back to it.

c. Scenario type questions

Scenario type questions are similar to behavioural or competency based questions in that they are designed to find out about the essential you - the submerged part of the iceberg - your beliefs, values and motivations, but there is a key difference. Behavioural or competency based questions are usually answered with reference to what you really did in the past. Scenario type questions will be based on what you think you might do in a particular situation in the future.

Scenario type questions are 'What would you do if...' questions. They are likely to be about possible situations you might find in a particular job role, so will also test your understanding of what the job role is likely to entail.

You need to use the first person, as previously.

Example

• What would you do as a team leader if a member of your team was not pulling his/her weight in a task?

Good Answer

'If the issue had been raised by other members of the team, I would firstly find out from them what the situation was and would then assure them that I would take steps to sort the matter out. I would then arrange a meeting with the underperforming individual. I would talk to this person and try to find out what the problem was - whether it concerned personal problems, mental or physical health problems, lack of motivation, boredom, lack of skills to do the job, sheer laziness or something else.

In the case of personal or health problems, I might suggest referral to a specialist external agency. If it was lack of motivation or boredom, I would discuss with the individual possible ways of making the task more interesting, changing their role perhaps or giving them special responsibilities. If lack of skills was the problem, I would suggest appropriate training.

In all cases, an agreement would be drawn up jointly for an action plan, which would include performance targets within a specified time frame. I would make sure I gave the rest of the team general feedback on decisions made, with due respect for confidentiality and review the situation at a specified point.

Other examples could include:

- What would you do if a member of the public became abusive and aggressive towards you?
- What would you do about a child who was constantly disruptive in your class?
- What would you do if you found yourself falling behind on a project which was your sole responsibility?

d. Creative questions

• If you had absolute power in the whole world tomorrow, what would be the first thing you would do?	These questions may be used to see how you react under pressure and how quick thinking you are.
 What is your favourite quotation and why? 	You can't really prepare for these, but it is useful to know that you might get thrown a 'curved ball'.
 If you had to get rid of one country in 	It's okay to show a little wit and humour in your answers.
 If you were an animal/piece of fruit/ vehicle, what would you be and why? 	Remember that your replies to these sorts of questions will also send out significant messages about your 'submerged self' - but that, with a little thought, you can still demonstrate your suitability.
 How would you weigh an aeroplane without scales? 	Sometimes, especially for IT/technical type jobs you may get asked a logic/creative thinking problem. See www.careerknowhow.com/interviewtips/mtfuji.htm for ide- as.

e. Strength-based interviews

Some graduate recruiters, such as EY and Aviva, have started to move away from competencies and towards strength-based interviews.

Competencies are what you *can* do and how you have acted in certain situations, whereas strengths are about those things which really get you fired up with excitement; things you really enjoy. These could be anything from Sudoku, to singing, to playing rugby. Strengths are those things you are good at, things you like doing so much, you throw yourself into with gusto and lose track of time.

There was a growing feeling that candidates had become overly used to competency type questions so that the answers were starting to sound formulaic and very similar.

With strength-based interviewing, it is thought that the real person is revealed, by uncovering a candidate's natural aptitudes, enthusiasms and authenticity, thereby making it easier to judge whether he or she would be a good match for a particular role.

The theory is that if people play (or rather work) to their strengths, they are more enthusiastic, energised and effective, work harder and are more fulfilled. If they are happy in work they will contribute more and stay longer. A win win situation for both the organisation and the employee.

The kinds of questions in a strength-based interview will tend to be more broad ranging and will be driven by an individual candidate's responses. Feedback so far indicates both candidates and interviewers find this type of interview 'a refreshing change', allowing the interviewers to gain more insight into what makes a candidate really tick.

Here are some examples of strength-based questions from EY;

- What do you do well?
- What activities energise you?
- When do you feel that you are most like 'yourself'?
- When are you at your best?
- How can you capitalise on your strengths more?

For a useful introduction to strength-based interviews, see the University of Kent Careers Advisory Service website at www.kent.ac.uk/careers/interviews/strength-based-interviews.htm.

General tips on answering questions

- If a question really floors you, you could employ some delaying tactics, such as repeating the question, asking them for clarification or saying you would need a little time to think about that one. In fact, asking a questioner to explain exactly what they mean can subtly alter the power balance in your favour.
- It is okay to pause for thought, but not too long.
- Don't go on and on at great length. Watch out for signs of boredom in the interviewers and be responsive. You can always use a phrase like 'Have I answered your question? Or would you like me to elaborate?'
- Prepare some statements about yourself beforehand. Crucial things that you want to get over about yourself. Act like a politician and get them into your answers at some point.

O Prepare for your telephone interview

Telephone interviews are often used to see if you are genuinely interested in the job or whether you have just been applying randomly for anything and everything. The focus will be on why you want to work for their particular company and what you have got that they want and whether it is worth asking you for a face to face interview.

Remember that it is not just *what* you are saying but *how* you sound. There will be no visual cues, unless it is a video conferencing event. Your voice alone will have to convey it all. You should **prepare in exactly the same way** as for any other kind of interview.

Tips

- Make sure you are alone in a quiet room and sit at a table with your notes in front of you and a pen to take further notes.
- Be professional and take care not to be over familiar and chatty or to be slapdash and slangy in your speech.
- Make sure you know the person's name. Refer to them as Mr/Mrs/Ms/Dr etc and do not use their first names unless invited to do so.
- Breathe deeply and take it slowly. Try not to gabble. Sitting up straight with shoulders back will improve the sound of your voice.
- It is essential to sound enthusiastic and smile!
- To get you in the right frame of mind, imagine that the interviewer can see you that is, don't conduct a telephone interview in your pyjamas!

Creating an excellent first impression

Interviewing is an inexact science. It has been shown that the complex business of candidate evaluation is rarely free from bias, despite the best efforts of HR specialists. Research evidence indicates that an interviewer can make up his or her mind about a candidate in the first 30 seconds. Understanding something about how this works should help you make a really positive start to your interview.

The halo effect

Interviewers have been shown to have an immediate 'gut reaction' to candidates, who are then judged as all good or all bad right from the start. This is known as the Halo Effect. It is particularly likely to occur where a candidate has a single outstanding characteristic. Typically, interviewers then tend to minimise or ignore any evidence that contradicts their first impression.

It is crucial that you create the best possible first impression that you can, as it can be difficult to recover from a bad start. The following advice should help.

Achieving the halo

Experts estimate that between 70 - 80% of all communication is non verbal. You are giving out all kinds of messages even before you start to speak. The most important things to remember are:

- 1. Walk tall and stretch up through your spine making yourself as tall and straight as possible.
- 2. Walk confidently without shuffling and keep your chin up and straight on your shoulders.
- 3. Do not cover your body with your arms, a folder, a bag or anything, whether sitting or standing.
- 4. Be careful if you sit with your legs crossed that your raised foot doesn't start moving about of its own accord! This sends an anxious message and can be distracting.
- 5. Make calm and direct eye contact without staring aggressively. When one person asks you a question, reply to all interviewers and make eye contact with each of them too.
- 6. Beware of physical habits and tics.
- 7. Do not keep touching your face (or any other bits of you!).
- 8. Subtly mirroring a person can enhance positive feelings in them, eg nodding, leaning forward to listen.
- 9. Do use gestures to demonstrate energy and enthusiasm, but don't get carried away! Be subtle.
- 10. Smile this is such a powerful and important human expression it can be recognised from a considerable distance. But obviously, don't grin like a fool all the time or giggle nervously.

By following this advice you will not only be perceived in a really positive way, but you yourself will feel more confident and in control.

Dealing with Nerves

Nerves can be a problem for many people before an interview. Being well prepared can really help, and learning some relaxation and stress busting techniques can prove very beneficial too. Standing or sitting tall and keeping your chest and neck area open so you can breathe deeply can induce feelings of calm. A good posture will also improve how your voice sounds. Visualising a calm, happy picture in your mind's eye can also be a helpful meditative technique. For more ideas see www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN_TCS.htm and www.wildmind.org/applied/stress/meditation-for-the-very-very-busy.

Choose a method that suits you and practise.

The handshake and introductions

The handshake is a very significant and powerful physical contact. You need to get it right. It should be accompanied by a **smile** and an appropriate **greeting** and introduction. It may well be followed by some general **small talk**, possibly about your journey or the weather, before you all get down to business. Both the handshake and the 'social glue' of informal conversation are very important. You need to practise both.

Dos and Don'ts of the handshake

- Do sit with palms up while you are waiting to go in. If you are prone to very sweaty palms, take some wet wipes with you.
- Don't think you have to shake hands with everyone on the panel; just the Chair is usually enough. If they don't offer their hand, you can initiate it.
- Don't bend your arm too much at the elbow it brings you too close.
- Don't crush the other person's fingers by too strong a grip.
- Do offer your whole hand, not just the end of your fingers.
- Don't be feeble and limp wristed.
- Don't keep pumping their hand up and down for ages. Three to four shakes is enough.
- Don't use your other hand eg to touch the other person's elbow or cover their hand. This represents a desire to dominate.
- Leave the interview with a handshake too.
- Don't wipe your hand on your trousers or skirt afterwards.
- Do smile!

Note: In some countries a handshake may not be considered appropriate.

Tip.

It is a good idea to get yourself filmed entering a room, greeting someone and sitting down, to get an idea of the impression that comes across and to help you to correct any bad habits.

www.ehow.com/how_2032750_shake-hands-job.html

Lasting Impressions

Just as the first few seconds of an interview are vital, the last few moments are also extremely important. Shake hands again, thank them for interviewing you and (if it is true) take the opportunity to tell them how keen you are on the job and how good you would be if appointed to the role. Take your leave walking tall, and make sure you don't try to go out via a cupboard door!

Aftermath

Successful?

If you are successful, now is the time to negotiate on salary, terms and conditions. Make sure you are happy before you sign the contract. If you are lucky enough to be juggling more than one job offer, or are awaiting the result of another interview, make sure you know what the timescale for formal acceptance is. Delaying too long could leave you without anything. Some jobs, particularly in teaching, may be offered to you on the day. In cases like this, do not accept with the idea you can change your mind later. A verbal agreement is considered binding.

Unsuccessful?

You are statistically likely to be unsuccessful rather more often than you are successful at an interview. That is, you may possibly have to go through the process a number of times until you get a job. There can be many reasons why you are not successful, many of which have nothing to do with you. Try to treat each one as a learning experience.

Try to keep positive and do ask for a debriefing/feedback quite soon afterwards. Most places will be happy to do this. It can help you in your next interview providing you act on the feedback and, more importantly, it can help you feel better about yourself.

Withdrawing from an interview

You can withdraw from the interview process at any time, if you feel the job is really not for you. Do this professionally and explain your thinking. Do not just slope off. It is probably not a good idea to do this too often, however, in case word gets round. But, if you are really sure you do not want the job, it is much fairer not to waste people's time and to say so.

Further help?

You can arrange a mock interview with a careers adviser by calling in to our office in the Students' Union or by telephoning 01970 622378.

There are also regular interview workshops delivered through the Employability Events Programme - www.aber.ac.uk/careers/events and the Postgraduate Skills Training Programme (PGSTP) - www.aber.ac.uk/en/grad-school/res-develop/pg-skills-training/.

You may also find that special interview skills lectures are run in your own department.

Useful Resources

- www.jobsite.co.uk/bemyinterviewer/ excellent video/interactive
- http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/7436404.stm Five job interview bear traps
- www.aber.ac.uk/careers/interviews
- Read about behavioural competencies in the British Council Behavioural Competency Dictionary www.britishcouncil.org/sites/britishcouncil.uk2/files/bc_behaviours.pdf
- www.businessballs.com/interviews.htm job interviews questions and answers
- Applications, CVs and interviews www.prospects.ac.uk/links/appsinterviews
- AGCAS DVD 'Making an impact: the graduate job interview'
- See Interview tips on the Prospects website—www.prospects.ac.uk/interview_tips.htm

Location and Contact Details

Careers Service

Students' Union (next to the Union Shop) Open Monday -Thursday 9am - 5pm and Friday 9am - 4pm Closed until 10am and between 1pm - 2pm during vacations Tel: 01970 622378 E-mail: careers@aber.ac.uk

Careers Adviser Sessions

Experienced careers consultants are available - you can 'drop in' for quick queries or you can book, or be referred on to, longer careers discussions to discuss things in more depth.

Drop in sessions (c.15 mins) are available on a first come, first served basis:

• For details of drop in times, phone the number below or see our website at www.aber.ac.uk/careers/book

To book a longer appointment, come and see our friendly receptionists or 'phone them on 01970 622378.

www.aber.ac.uk/careers/

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