Interview Questions Chapters 1-14: Guidance

The information below gives some guidance as to what employers will be looking for in good answers to these questions.

# Chapter 1: Understanding life at University

1. ***Why did you choose the university and the course you have been studying?***

Trying to find out: Analytical/decision-making processes.

Good Answer: Good clear decision-making that shows skills of information gathering and systematic judgement.

Poor Answer: No real reason or systematic thought. Reasons given are either weak (e.g. ‘My sister went there’) and shows a lack of independence or are non-existent.

1. ***How successful have you been at achieving the goals you set out to achieve by studying at the university?***

Trying to find out: Ability to reflect and evaluate progress; ability to set goals.

Good Answer: Good clear evidence of ability to set goals and to take action with a goal in mind. Evidence of an ability to evaluate progress on a regular basis (and make changes to actions where needed).

Poor Answer: No evidence of deliberate intent or systematic evaluation. Evidence is either weak (e.g. ‘I think I’ve done OK’) and/or shows a lack of systematic thought.

# Chapter 2: Personal development and learning

1. ***How have you changed or tried to develop yourself while at university?***

Trying to find out: Ability to reflect on personal strengths and weaknesses.

Good Answer: Good clear answer, with proactive actions given.

Poor Answer: No real answer or thought.

1. ***What have been the most useful and least useful parts of your studies at the university?***

Trying to find out: Evaluative processes; willingness to be tactful.

Good Answer: Good clear evidence of reflection about the university experience, perhaps on an on-going basis.

Poor Answer: No idea or answer. The way the answer is given shows a lack of previous thought and reflection.

1. ***What are your personal strengths and weaknesses in relation to this role?***

Trying to find out: Ability to understand yourself/self-awareness; honesty; ability to reflect.

Good Answer: Quick answer, showing good reflection, clear thinking based on evidence previously gathered, and a realistic awareness of the job they have applied for.

Poor Answer: An unconvincing answer which shows the opposite of the qualities present in a good answer. The information may not relate to the job or may be presented without any kind of evidence or example.

# Chapter 3: Time management

1. ***Can you give an example of a time when you have had to balance conflicting priorities? How did you do so? How successful were you?***

Trying to find out: Time management and organisational abilities; ability to set goals and evaluate progress; maybe problem-solving abilities.

Good Answer: Good clear answering, explaining the situation, the actions taken and some evaluation of those actions. Answer shows how the candidate is motivated by various priorities in different ways, and how creative and resourceful they can be in resolving such dilemmas. Remember the STAR principle.

Poor Answer: The university experience will – by its nature – give students conflicting priorities (e.g. work vs study, or different assignments due at the same time), so a candidate who cannot think of one is either going to be a candidate who has not prepared well for the interview, is nervous or who hasn’t thought about their experiences well.

A weak answer might also give an example of a situation where the conflicting priorities are not really conflicting in a way which causes a serious dilemma for the candidate.

1. ***How have you gone about establishing goals and objectives for your studies?***

Trying to find out: Ability to set goals; ability to think and plan ahead in relation to those goals.

Good Answer: Good clear evidence of ability to set goals and to take action with a goal in mind.

Poor Answer: No evidence of deliberate intent.

# Chapter 4: Critical thinking

1. ***Imagine that you are in control of a government department. The employees in that department want you to achieve one thing, the public want you to achieve something else, and you personally believe that the right thing to do is one that neither group have thought about. What would you do?***

Trying to find out: Ability to communicate tactfully; creative and possess problem-solving abilities; ability to think on your feet.

Good Answer: There is no right and wrong answer here, so the issues are as follows: (1) How does the candidate think through a complex ethical dilemma and balance competing interests? (2) How well (and quickly) does the candidate understand the complexity of the situation? (3) How definitively does the candidate give an answer without a change of mind?

Poor Answer: The candidate never actually gives an answer, or gives an answer but changes their mind as they think it through.

1. ***What do you think are the most challenging problems facing society today? Do you think there are any ways to solve them?***

Trying to find out: World-awareness; cultural understanding; creativity and problem solving – and within that, perhaps the ability to work with others to develop solutions.

Again, there are no right and wrong answers here: if problems could be easily solved, then they would be no longer problems.

Good Answer: Good clear evidence of general societal awareness and the ability to think clearly about current social issues. Evidence of the ability to quickly make a persuasive case, perhaps based on limited factual information, rather than rumour and speculation

Poor Answer: No evidence of societal awareness or of any creative thinking to solve such problems.

# Chapter 5: Understanding how to learn at University

1. ***Thinking about your learning at the university, which parts of your course (lectures, tutorials, presentations, assignments, etc.) taught you the most?***

Trying to find out: Ability to learn/reflect; ability to think clearly; Ability to communicate tactfully without degrading your academic experience too much.

Good Answer: Good clear evidence of ability to reflect and evaluate previous experience.

Poor Answer: No evidence of thought or evaluation. The candidate may take some time to give an answer.

1. ***How easy did you find it to adjust to studies at university after school or college?***

Trying to find out: Analytical and evaluative processes; understanding of their own abilities and experiences; ease of adapting to new and unfamiliar situations or a propensity to stick with what is ‘safe’.

Good Answer: Good clear evidence of ability to reflect and evaluate previous experience, and probably examples of one or two areas identified as ‘easy’ and one or two areas identified as ‘difficult’. The areas identified might give some insight into the personal strengths and weaknesses of the candidate: areas identified as ‘easy’ will likely relate to personal strengths.

Poor Answer: No convincing evidence of thought or evaluation. A lack of any examples to support the answer.

# Chapter 6: General principles of assessment at University

1. ***What has been the most stressful experience you have had while completing your studies?***

Trying to find out: Ability to handle stress; ability to reflect on/learn from experience.

The speed with which a candidate might give an answer might be indicative of how stressful that particular experience was.

Good Answer: Good clear evidence of ability to reflect and evaluate previous experience. Since stress is usually the result of demands from external forces (e.g. job) that the individual does not feel able to meet, then the answer given may show where that individual’s strengths and weaknesses lie.

Poor Answer: No evidence of thought or evaluation. The candidate may take some time to give an answer.

1. ***How have you used the feedback from your assignments to improve your performance?***

Trying to find out: Ability to reflect on/learn from experience; willingness to confront difficult information.

Good Answer: Candidate presents good clear evidence of ability to reflect and evaluate information given to them. In some situations, the candidate might have proactively sought out information which was not otherwise going to be made available to them. The candidate can present specific information about how information was used, and how it improved performance.

Poor Answer: The answer gives no evidence of seeking or using any feedback.

1. ***To what extent do you think the marks you have received on your modules are an accurate reflection of your potential?***

Trying to find out: Ability to reflect on/learn from experience; propensity to argue or get emotional.

The answer here could be used to determine the extent to which some might be cooperative in a workplace, or less cooperative, but there are a large number of roles and organisations where an ability to be persistent and to fight for what is needed or expected is seen as a strength. The speed and passion in an answer may be an indication of the way in which a candidate would be likely to persuade others in authority and receive what they are expecting.

Good Answer: Good clear evidence of ability to reflect and evaluate information in detail in a calm and rational manner.

Poor Answer: Candidate gives the impression that everything is unfair and that the ways that they seek to change things will be unconstructive to their relationships with others.

# Chapter 7: Writing assignments, reports and dissertations

1. ***What has been the most challenging academic assignment you have worked on during your studies? And why? How did you go about ensuring it was a good piece of work?***

Trying to find out: Willingness to overcome difficulties/resilience; planning in difficult/pressured/unpredictable circumstances

This question – and the qualities expected in a good answer – is similar to Q1 in chapter 6.

Good Answer: Good clear evidence of ability to reflect upon and evaluate previous academic experience. Since stress is usually the result of demands from external forces (e.g. job) that the individual does not feel able to meet, then the answer given may show where that individual’s strengths and weaknesses lie. The answer to the third sub-question might indicate an awareness at the time that it was difficult, and recognition that more attention and therefore more planning was needed for this piece of work than for others. Remember the STAR principle.

Poor Answer: No evidence of thought or evaluation, and parts of the question remain unanswered.

1. ***Tell me about your experience during your studies with writing reports. Can you briefly tell me about a report you have written?***

Trying to find out: Ability to plan; systematic approach to tasks; maybe problem solving

This is a simpler question than most and is designed to simply identify whether the candidate has had experience of something that the employer considers important.

Good Answer: Specific example given of when the candidate has had to write a report. The candidate is clear about the differences between a report and an essay or a case study.

Poor Answer: No evidence or examples are given, or the candidate incorrectly discusses some other form of written assessment.

# Chapter 8: Examinations at University

1. ***How successful have you been at planning your revision?***

Trying to find out: Ability to plan ahead; ability to focus on one thing at a time.

Good Answer: Good clear evidence of the ability to make a plan, to then have the discipline to keep to the plan and evaluate your own performance in the subsequent evaluations.

Poor Answer: No evidence of thought or evaluation, and parts of the question remain unanswered.

1. ***How have you used the feedback from your examinations to improve your performance?***

Trying to find out: Willingness to seek feedback; ability to reflect on own experience; openness to confront difficult situations.

Good Answer: Evidence of having been proactive in seeking the feedback (and maybe persistent enough to get it as well) and then an ability and willingness to apply that feedback to change something about what you have been used to doing.

Poor Answer: No evidence of having sought feedback, or even realising that it could help you improve performance on your other examinations.

# Chapter 9: Communicating effectively

1. ***Tell me about a time when you tried to communicate an important message, but the message was misunderstood. What went wrong and what did you do afterwards?***

Trying to find out: Ability to reflect on/learn from previous experience; ability to communicate; ability to plan for difficult conversations; willingness to take corrective action;

Good Answer: A good answer will follow the STAR principle and will discuss in depth what the particular problem was, as well as give reasons for the subsequent corrective action.

Poor Answer: A poor answer will not give the above and maybe the candidate would struggle to find a clear example.

1. ***What have you learnt by watching others around you communicate with each other?***

Trying to find out: Ability to learn from/reflect on observations; ability to learn; ability to understand non-verbal communication.

Good Answer: A good answer might provide a specific observation, but it is more likely that the candidate would give a range of scenarios in order to recall understanding communication. Of course, all learning would be based on assumptions and interpretations of how others communicate, which may not be accurate.

Poor Answer: A poor answer would be brief and either give a lot of scenarios or very few. There might be a larger number of assumptions around what someone has seen.

1. ***Which communication skills do you think are the most important? Why?***

Trying to find out: How much a candidate understands about communication skills; reasoning skills; understanding of the importance of communication skills;

Good Answer: A good answer will demonstrate insight and understanding of different communication skills. There is probably no correct answer, but the candidate should demonstrate an understanding of the kind of scenarios faced at work alongside an understanding of the importance of different communication skills as relevant to those/that scenario.

Poor Answer: A poor answer will either be vague or demonstrate a misunderstanding of what would take place in the workplace.

1. ***Imagine that you needed to communicate a complex idea to an intelligent audience. How would you go about it? What issues would you need to take into account?***

Trying to find out: Ability to plan a communication strategy/activities; ability to understand the needs of different audiences; ability to understand the strengths and weaknesses of different communication methods.

Good Answer: A good answer would follow the STAR principle and give a clear example of when a candidate needed to do this, although a hypothetical example might be good enough. The answer should show awareness of differences in methods of communication – email, face to face, written, oral – though could be about communicating such ideas in a presentation alone, in which case the answer should include reference to slides, oral communication and written handouts/diagrams. The answer would also refer to the difference between presenting to an ‘intelligent audience’ and others.

Poor Answer: A poor answer would assume that this is solely about doing a presentation and would talk about presentation preparation, notes and slides.

1. ***From your own experiences, can you give some examples of poor communication?***

Trying to find out: Ability to reflect on/learn from their own experience; ability to communicate; ability to learn from others’ behaviours.

Good Answer: A good answer would follow the STAR process, but would give some explicit understanding of what is meant by ‘poor’ communication.

Poor Answer: A poor answer will almost certainly give an example from someone else’s poor communication and will be critical, rather than objective.

1. ***Tell me about a time when a relationship with a fellow classmate, team member or someone you had to work with at work went wrong. How did you resolve the issue?***

Trying to find out: Ability to deal with difficult situations; ability to recognise own weaknesses; ability to plan communication; emotional intelligence

Good Answer: A good answer will be structured around the STAR principles and will give detail on how the candidate went about trying to rebuild a relationship. The answer will not necessarily need to resolve the issue but rather will show thought and care around the communication that was put into place to help assist to do so.

Poor Answer: A poor answer will show a lack of persistence, determination and/or resilience, or will suggest that it was not right to do so for reasons that are perceived as weak.

# Chapter 10: Presentation skills

1. ***Have you been asked to do many presentations during your degree studies?***

Trying to find out: Ability to present publicly; recognition of activities undertaken during the degree.

Good Answer: Good clear description of where and how often you have been asked to do presentations – and maybe something about the different types of presentations you have been asked to do. Be prepared for follow-up questions about your role in group presentations and/or evaluative questions about how well you did and how you might have improved.

Poor Answer: An answer which shows little awareness or memory of doing presentations, or little interest in doing oral presentations.

1. ***Do you find presentations easy or difficult? What do you think are the most difficult issues with preparing and giving a presentation?***

Trying to find out: Ability to present publicly; willingness to overcome difficulty/resilience; ability to handling pressure.

Good Answer: A good answer will show awareness of different types of presentations – maybe you find some types easy and some types difficult? – and which shows self-awareness around what makes them easy and difficult.

The areas which you find easy and difficult will show something about your own personal strengths and weaknesses – for example, if you find preparation difficult, then maybe you could struggle with time management, self-discipline, creativity, being motivated to do the appropriate research, and so on – so be aware of the impact your answer could have, and be prepared for follow-up questions on why you find those aspects difficult.

Poor Answer: No evidence of any prior thought or evaluation, and parts of the question remain unanswered.

If you find presentations relatively easy, then be sure to say so – but be sure to say what you enjoy about presentations.

# Chapter 11: Working in groups

1. ***What do you think makes a good team worker?***

Trying to find out: Insight from experience; knowledge and understanding of what makes people work.

Good Answer: A good answer will give details and because you will be expected to produce a fairly instantaneous answer, it is likely that you will draw on your own experiences and memories of working in teams. The follow-up question will likely ask ‘why?’ Or ‘How have you demonstrated those qualities yourself?’

Poor Answer: No evidence of much prior thought. The longer you take to answer the question, the more the interviewer will doubt that you have had much recent experience in teams.

1. ***Tell me about a time when you needed to work with others to accomplish a difficult task. What did you do and how successful was your group?***

Trying to find out: Ability to work with/help others to solve problems; experience of working in a team; experience of working with others in a pressured environment or situation; ability to measure success in a project; leadership abilities.

Good Answer: You will be expected to find a relatively tough task to talk about – an easy task won’t sound so convincing because the interviewer is trying to find out about how YOU approach tough tasks. You will need to talk about YOUR role in helping out the group, so talk about ‘I did…’ rather than what you (as a group) did. Remember the STAR principle covered in the chapter.

Poor Answer: No evidence of any prior thought. Answer talks about what the group did, not what interviewee did. Little evidence of thought or evaluation, and parts of the question remain unanswered.

1. ***Can you tell me about a time when you have had to work with others to complete a challenging task with limited resources? What did you do? What was the impact of your actions?***

Trying to find out: Ability to work with/help others to solve problems; experience of working in a team; experience of working with others in a pressured environment or situation; ability to measure success in a project; leadership abilities; ability to reflect and evaluate own actions.

Good Answer: As mentioned above, you will be expected to find a relatively challenging task to talk about – an easy task won’t sound so convincing because the interviewer is trying to find out about how YOU approach tough tasks. You will need to talk about YOUR role in helping out the group, so talk about ‘I did…’ rather than what you (as a group) did. Remember the STAR principle.

Poor Answer: No evidence of any prior thought. Answer talks about what the group did, not what the interviewee did. Little evidence of thought or evaluation, and parts of the question remain unanswered.

# Chapter 12: Understanding leadership

The number of questions here is somewhat indicative of the kind of importance attached to leadership in selecting the graduates organisations identify.

1. ***Can you tell me about a time when you felt that you needed to take the initiative to achieve a goal? What did you do, and how successful were you in achieving your goal?***

Trying to find out: Ability to set goals; ability to take the initiative/be proactive; ability to measure success; ability to recognise the need for action; ability to reflect on experience and performance.

Good Answer: As mentioned above, you will be expected to think of an example to give – find a relatively challenging task to talk about if you can. If you have demonstrated leadership, then you should not find this a difficult question to answer. The more unusual the answer, the better. Remember the STAR principle.

Poor Answer: No example given or example is very weak (i.e. something that would be very common among applicants and the general population). If you don’t have an example, then you may have given yourself an exit from the selection process. Taking the initiative is a key aspect of leadership – and no organisation will expect you to sit around and wait to be asked to do something.

1. ***Tell me about a time when you needed to persuade someone to change their mind.***

Trying to find out: Communication/persuasion skills; ability to frame and deliver a point of view; ability to manage others.

Good Answer: As mentioned above, you will be expected to think of an example to give – find a relatively challenging situation to talk about if you can (have you ever persuaded someone who was in power over you to do something? Or persuaded somebody to give you extra money?). If you have demonstrated leadership, then you should not find this a difficult question to answer. The more unusual the answer, the better. Remember the STAR principle.

Poor Answer: No example given or example is very weak (i.e. something that would be very common among applicants and the general population: for example, ‘I had to persuade my team members to…’ ). If you don’t have an example, then you may have given yourself an exit from the selection process. Being able to persuade is a key aspect of leadership – and no organisation will expect you to have to use your authority to impose solutions on people all the time.

1. ***Tell me about a leader that you admire. Why do you admire them?***

Trying to find out: Identification/recognition of personal values.

This is an unusual question, perhaps, but one which says something about your values and where your inspiration comes from.

Good Answer: A good answer might give a leader that the interview may not have heard of – or a friend or relative, but your reasons for admiring them need to be genuine and clear. They might deduce that the things you see in them are things they would expect you to do in your leadership role, so a follow-up question might be ‘How have you demonstrated those values in your own leadership.

Poor Answer: No example given or example is very weak (e.g. friend or relative). When answering the second part of the question, a weak answer would be little more than ‘He is my father so I admire him’. You’d be expected to give a good, strong answer.

1. ***How would you describe your personal leadership approach?***

Trying to find out: How you relate to others; how you communicate, delegate, manage others; How someone goes about communicating a vision to others; How consultative or autocratic someone is.

There are a number of ways of answering this question, and the adjectives that you choose to use need to show a balanced but flexible approach. The question will expect you to have reflected on your leadership abilities and to be reasonably self aware.

Good Answer: Clear, succinct and back up with examples to show what you mean.

Poor Answer: Vague, meandering and somewhat indecisive. It is better to have an inappropriate style than not have one at all. Lack of examples will also be considered weak.

1. ***How would you go about leading a team member who seemed not to be producing the work they needed to? Can you give an example of a time when you have had to do so?***

Trying to find out: Ability to communicate difficult information; ability to think strategically about communicating with others;

Good Answer: A good answer will follow the STAR process and will discuss exactly what you did and how. If you have not faced this situation, then it would be acceptable to discuss something hypothetically, but talking about a real situation would give a stronger answer.

Poor Answer: No example given or example of unwillingness to get involved is very temporary and/or not a great deal of persuasion was needed. An answer which does not give the ‘end of the story’ (i.e. ignores the impact of what you did) would weaken the answer considerably.

1. ***What has been the most pioneering activity that you have undertaken?***

Trying to find out: Sense of initiative; risk taking; leadership.

Good Answer: A good answer would follow the STAR process and would discuss something challenging that you had done, but that no one else had thought about. Small activities are OK, but the higher the profile and impact, the better.

Poor Answer: A weak answer would give no example, or an example of something which had no or very limited impact on others. Talking about doing something that everyone else has thought of, but just being the first is also not going to be seen as a strong answer.

1. ***Can you describe how you have gone about setting goals for a team you have worked with?***

Trying to find out: Strategic goal setting; working with others; project management

Good Answer: As mentioned above, you will be expected to think of an example to give – find a relatively challenging situation where deadlines were regular or were likely hard to meet. The more unusual the answer, the better. Remember the STAR principle.

Poor Answer: No example given or example is very weak (i.e. where there was only one goal, or where the goal was not challenging). An answer that does not describe all four aspects of the STAR process might also be seen as unhelpful.

# Chapter 13: Developing cross-cultural awareness

1. ***What do you think are the biggest issues currently being faced by international organisations?***

Trying to find out: Understanding and knowledge around geopolitical and global economic issues for international trade/multinational organisations; ability to provide a reasoned argument.

Good Answer: A good answer will be well-reasoned and will provide examples to support the points being made. It is unlikely that there would be a ‘correct’ answer, but a strong answer will show a good awareness of key issues and will show an understanding of their impact.

Poor Answer: A poor answer will be weak in reasoning and will probably not show a strong understanding of the key issues affecting international organisations.

1. ***What difficulties would you expect to face if you were offered a role in another country?***

Trying to find out: Understanding of what it means to work overseas; an awareness of personal strengths and particularly weaknesses in this area.

Good Answer: A good answer will discuss the implications of being offered a role in two or maybe three specific countries, demonstrating an awareness of the issues which are affecting each country. A very strong answer will show an understanding of how a company might go about offering support to those working in those countries and would show a willingness to do so.

Poor Answer: A poor answer would be vague and would not show application to any one country in particular. It would probably assume an ability to cope, whatever be the country.

1. ***Imagine a situation where you – as a departmental manager – needed to quickly resolve a conflict between two individuals of different cultural backgrounds about an issue where both held very strong and opposing views. How would you handle such a situation?***

Trying to find out: Awareness of how communication skills are applied cross-culturally; an ability to handle conflict between others; ability to be creative/to solve problems; awareness of cultural frameworks; ability to develop a complex solution under pressure in an interview situation; (perhaps a willingness to involve others in such conversations to discuss solutions); willingness to respect all, regardless of their values.

Good Answer: A very strong answer will use the STAR framework to give a specific example of when this had been done. Alternatively, a good answer would give a hypothetical answer which would discuss two different cultures reasonably accurately and which would discuss the challenges in resolving a conflict when individuals have different world views. There is no perfect answer to this – indeed, international governments have struggled with such issues for years – but the ability to understand the impact of different values is an important part of working in diverse organisations.

Poor Answer: A poor answer will probably give a definitive answer without giving any thought to different world views and the challenges in doing what the question asks.

# Chapter 14: Problem-solving and creativity

1. ***Tell me about a time when you needed to solve a challenging problem quickly. What did you do? How successful were you?***

Trying to find out: Ability to solve problems; ability to work with others to solve a problem; ability to manage time and priorities; ability to evaluate actions against goals.

Good Answer: A good answer will follow the STAR framework, giving a clear example and describing actions and reasons for those actions, but will explicitly mention the need to work with others quickly. Working with others is a key part of developing creative solutions to problems. The answer will probably talk about setting goals, though this is a secondary aspect to this question. The more successful the candidate was in solving the challenging problem and the more challenging it was, the better – but the question does not require that the problem was solved completely and a good answer can also show an ability to reflect on failure.

Poor Answer: A poor answer gives a hypothetical answer with no details on the situation. In some questions a hypothetical answer can be OK, but this question asks for a real-life example.

1. ***Imagine a situation where you were dealing with a customer who had a reasonable complaint but one that was new to you and to the organisation. What would you do to assist?***

Trying to find out: Ability to communicate tactfully; ability to feel comfortable about approaching new, unstructured problems; customer service orientation; perhaps an ability to lead others.

Good Answer: A good answer will give a relevant example via the STAR framework and will show a clear process of gathering information, evaluating ideas and using creative methods (e.g. analogies) to try and solve the issue. The answer will also show a candidate’s ability to think on their feet and a readiness to engage in tactful communication to keep the customer informed/engaged even when there is no answer, and to expend effort in order to provide a good customer service.

Poor Answer: A poor answer will show a lack of the abilities noted above, and will struggle to find a good answer.

1. ***What new commercially product or service has inspired you the most? Why?***

Trying to find out: Awareness of current commercial innovation and developments; ability to provide a reasoned argument; candidate-organisation fit.

Good Answer: A good answer will give a specific current example and will provide a clear reason for why it inspires: the closer the reason given to the values of the company (e.g. encourages sustainability for a sustainability-based organisation that is conducting the interviews), the more likely it is for the candidate to progress in the organisation. It is arguably easier to provide a product-based answer, but identifying a new form of service might be impressive.

Poor Answer: A poor answer may give an older example, or may give something new with very little or poor reasoning.