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This is an extract from the Higher-Education Advisers' Handbook: practical steps for one-to-one guidance available from Prospects Education Resources. As a Careers Adviser you may want to use other ways to structure your interviews, such as Motivational Interviewing; Miller and Rollnick. Nevertheless, Penny offers tips on interview structure which are timeless and useful for many types of client, not just those considering higher education.

Interview Structure

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Introduction: the importance of structure:

The structure of an interview helps to keep the focus on the client and their issues, identify what they need and want, not what you may assume they need and want from you. A structure will help to guide the process forward to a conclusion and a plan for action. Having a framework will make it less likely that you will miss those crucial pieces of information that will tell you about the person you are working with and their needs and wants, and more likely that they will go away with what they came for.

“Without this firm base, the interview will resemble a cosy chat,-----Without a structure, both the client and the adviser will feel lost and flounder without direction, with a consequent raising of levels of stress and dissatisfaction for both.” (Ali and Graham, 1996, p. 44)

Structure: A 3 stage framework.

HE advice like all other aspects of advice and guidance is a process which emerges in the dialogue between the adviser and the advisee. Using a simple 3 stage model of helping based on that of Gerard Egan (2002) will provide a framework or structure to enable this process to come to a satisfactory conclusion for both parties i.e. **Exploration, New Understanding, Action.**

Exploration – Building a picture of current thinking and situation

New understanding – Finding solutions, deciding goals

Action – What to do to achieve goals

Some authors e.g. Ali and Graham (1996), Kidd (2006) discuss a 4 stage model, in which Exploration is preceded by an initial clarifying or introductory stage - Introduction and contracting and setting the agenda for the process.

Content – Bedford’s FIRST

The model was developed by Tol Bedford (1982 in Kidd, 2006) as a tool for assessing the client’s career thinking at the start of a guidance interview and for reviewing how far the client had moved on by the end. The model provides a useful framework for the questions you will need to ask the student.

The model has 5 dimensions:

- **Focus:** to what extent has the student *narrowed down* their options?
- **Information:** how *well informed* are they about their choices and the options available?
- **Realism:** are they being realistic about their *capabilities*?
- **Scope:** are they aware of the *range of options* available?
- **Tactics:** do they know how to put their plans *into action*?

These 5 dimensions can be mapped onto the 3 stage framework to provide you with ideas for questions appropriate to each stage. Examples are given as part of the discussion below.

A word about skills

Egan suggests that each of the three stages has its associated skills:

Exploration: Attention giving – Giving the student your attention, use some eye contact, smile appropriately – this will help to build and maintain trust.

Questioning – use clear open questions to help the student tell you what you need to know and to tell their story.

Listening – questioning is pointless unless you are actively listening to the answers.

Listening actively means listening with both your ears and your eyes, responding to their body language as well as the words that are spoken. To ensure that both you and the student understand what is being said take time to reflect back to them what you have heard, ask clarifying questions where what is said seems unclear, and summarise from time to time to check that you have heard what has been said accurately. Summarising can also be a breathing space when you’re not sure where to go next and an opportunity for your student to add or correct the information they have given you.

TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR GOOD LISTENING

1. STOP TALKING

You cannot listen if you are talking.

2. PUT THE TALKER AT EASE

Help them feel they are free to talk. A friendly facial expression and an attentive but relaxed attitude are important, as well as the occasional grunt.

3. SHOW THEM YOU WANT TO LISTEN

Look and act interested. Don’t read your mail or doodle. Use some eye contact.

4. REMOVE DISTRACTIONS

Don’t shuffle papers or fiddle with paper clips or pens. Divert your calls through to someone else, turn off your mobile, put a “Do Not Disturb” notice on the door.

5. EMPATHISE WITH THEM

Try to put yourself in their place so that you can see their point of view, but remain impartial and non – judgemental.

6. BE PATIENT

Allow adequate time. Don't interrupt, or jump in to fill a silence – this may be valuable thinking time for the interviewee.

7. HOLD YOUR TEMPER

Emotional involvement will only make it more difficult to find out what is really being said however much you disagree or feel challenged.

8. DON'T ARGUE OR CRITICISE

Even if you win, you lose.

9. ASK QUESTIONS AND SUMMARISE FROM TIME TO TIME

This encourages and shows you are listening. It also helps to develop points further and gives a chance to restate facts and ideas if they feel you haven't quite grasped the point.

10. STOP TALKING

This is the first and the last because all other commandments depend on it.

New Understanding - all the skills of stage one, plus

Challenging - don't be afraid to challenge if what you have heard seems inconsistent, inaccurate or contradictory. The student may be experiencing some confusion and by challenging you will be able to help them think more clearly.

Information Giving – you should be prepared to share information at this stage. If you have identified what they already know (the 'I' of the FIRST model) you can be more selective about what you need to tell them during the discussion. Information should be accurate, up to date, unbiased and timely. If you don't know the information, be honest and say so, and signpost to where the information may be found – don't bluff, you do neither the student nor yourself any favours.

Decision Making – you should be helping the student to start making decisions about what they want to do, where they want to go, through questioning, brainstorming and information giving and helping them to clarify their goals.

Action – all the skills above plus

Action Planning – The skill is in giving ownership of the plan to the student, ensuring actions are clear, concrete and timely.

Process

Introduction: The importance of contracting:

You may know the student sitting in front of you and they may well know you – but do they know the role you have as an adviser about HE? This needs to be clear as do the issues of confidentiality (and its limits), and impartiality, crucial to helping the student make the best decisions for them – and not necessarily for you or your institution; negotiating an agenda for the discussion without making assumptions – and not giving the information then and there, without the facts and issues that lie behind that presented.

What will the contract look/sound like? You might try writing it down and trying it out on a colleague. You should aim to cover the following:

- Introduce yourself and your role in this context e.g. my role today is to help with any questions you may have about applying to university
- Purpose of the interview e.g. to clarify any ideas you may have already or perhaps suggest some you hadn't thought of and to help you find any information you may need. I'm not here to tell you what to do.
- Confidentiality and its limits – don't forget that there are always limitations. For example school or college policies on sharing student information, record keeping etc. as well as any issues of child protection or illegal activities that might be revealed – and don't assume this won't come up.
- Impartiality – you may have your own ideas but your role here is to be an unbiased listener and guide. You may advise but you must never impose your ideas.

- Any boundaries – there may well be questions and issues that arise that are beyond your field of expertise or experience, so the possibility that you may need to refer to someone else could be mentioned here.
- Possible outcomes – a plan of action, further discussion
- Time allocated for the interview
- Check this has all been understood

Now you are ready to find out what the student wants and/or needs from you. In taking a couple of minutes at the start in ensuring that the student is clear about the purposes and boundaries of the interview you are helping to build up trust, a vital ingredient if the outcome is to be successful for the student.

The Agenda

This is the start of your exploration of the student's current ideas and circumstances and will set the tone for what is to come. It is all too easy to ASSUME you know what is wanted, particularly when you know the student well – or think you do. You may think they are of course going to look only at Oxbridge/Russell Group universities – they're too good for anything else – but maybe, just maybe they have other, to you, more surprising ideas. Your job is to **listen** to and **explore** these ideas briefly and identify what the student's wants and needs are from the rest of the interview. You may suggest other avenues to explore but it's up to the student to agree. Summarise all these ideas and suggest that these may form the basis of discussion for the time remaining. Show that you are listening! Don't fire off information – it may turn out to be inappropriate in the light of your subsequent discussion, which may uncover some sound reasons why your choices for them are not the right or appropriate ones. Show that you are listening! It is not unusual to be confronted with a long list of wants at this stage, too long to cover in the time you have to offer them. Get the student to prioritise what is most important to them and focus on these in the subsequent discussion.

Based on Bedford's FIRST model, **Focus and Information** questions will help your understanding of the student's thinking and what will be the most useful topics for discussion in the time available:

- How long have you had the idea(s)?
- What gave you the idea(s)?
- How definite are the ideas/plans?
- What do you know already?
- How much research have you done to date – really important to find this out, as what they 'know' may not be correct, or they may know everything, or nothing. Please note, however, this is not the time to give the information – you can do this later on in the interview, once you have a greater sense of what information is needed and wanted.
- What would they like to take away from the session that will be most helpful to them?

What about the student who comes with no definite ideas or plans of their own? This is still no reason to tell them what to do based on your own preconceived ideas about them. You can start by asking questions such as

- Do they have any vague ideas, or ones that they have dismissed as being unrealistic for them e.g. they would like to apply for medicine but don't think they stand a chance
- What makes them think that?
- Are they aware of what the possible options might be?
- Have they any particular career goals in mind?
- But whatever you do, don't start giving them information or lists of possible alternatives – just **LISTEN**, summarise and negotiate with them as to what will be

most useful for them to go away with at the end of the session e.g. a plan for researching the options available, information about entry routes to a particular career.

Why do you need to explore, what in the HE advice context? Bedford's Focus, Information, Realism

The Exploration Stage is about gathering information about the present – where is the student at the moment. In Bedford's terms you are finding out about their current Focus, Information and Realism

Having agreed a focus (agenda), before giving lots of information, there are a few things you will find it helpful to find out first, however well you think you know the student sitting in front of you. You will be trying to ascertain Realism through gathering this information.

- Check what subjects they are doing
- How well do they think they are doing ; strengths and weaknesses
- If the subject in mind is a current course, how well are they doing, what is their interest in taking it further? Do they have any doubts about it?
- Any areas of weakness – any reasons for this - are they struggling, just not what they hoped etc.
- Any grades already achieved, including GCSEs – really important for competitive courses at competitive institutions. Do they have both maths and English at C or above?
- Predicted grades – how realistic do they think these are
- Any particular interests that might have a bearing on subject choices and that could be included in a personal statement or open up avenues they had not considered
- Any relevant work experience, again this will be useful for their personal statement and may be essential for some courses
- Are there any constraints to any choices they may make, be it subject or location, for instance family circumstances, personal choices, financial issues

If you ask good open questions and listen to the answers you should gather a lot of useful information. Make sure you summarise from time to time to ensure that you have got the picture right and summarise clearly the key information you have before moving in to the second stage. Remember the 10 Commandments for Good Listening.

Stage 2 – using the exploration, exploring new ideas/options, information giving. Focus on future goals and decisions. (Bedford's Information, Realism and Scope)

The aim of this stage is to help your student reach some decisions and clarify their goals. At this stage you will want to help them to think realistically about the choices they may have already made, based on the information you have from stage 1, help them broaden their ideas or even narrow them down where the student has lots of disparate ideas but doesn't know how to choose between them. The issues may vary from "I don't know which subject to choose from these 3", to "I don't know which is the best university for the subject I want to study?" You may find that you need to gently challenge preconceptions about the courses they are considering, the institutions that are offering them and even about themselves and their abilities and interests, using the information they have given you already. For instance in discussing architecture, have they expressed any interest in buildings or in design? Do they have the required GCSE subjects/grades? Are they likely to achieve the grades required for the courses they are interested in? This is where your initial Stage 1 exploration is so important – you will need to draw on this to help keep focus on what is important for the student to know, not just what they want to know but also what they need to know.

- Have they thought about the issues they might consider in choosing a suitable course at a university that will meet their needs for 3 years in terms of location, facilities, assessment methods etc?
- Are they aware of the variety of courses on offer in their chosen area of interest?
- Do they have any long term career goals which might mean some courses are more suitable than others?
- Do they know the resources available to help them in making decisions?
- What might be realistic alternatives or options? What if they don't achieve the required grades?
- Might there be any financial issues that need explanation?

Please note – you do not need to know all the answers but it is important to know where to get the answers from and be able to signpost accurately.

You need to keep asking questions but also here is your opportunity to fill in the gaps in information, signposting to the resources available, sharing information gathered from your experiences of past students, visits you have made, information you have read. You may need to help the student to consider the best options for them, but without telling them what to do or completely destroying their dreams. You should be able to help them come up with more realistic alternatives if what they are proposing is likely to prove unrealistic based on the evidence gathered so far. In the end they will make the decisions about their future goals – you can only try to help them make the best ones in the light of the information and feedback you give them. It is VITAL that the information you give them is accurate, up to date and unbiased. Your skills in this stage are questioning, challenging when necessary, and information giving. And of course you need to keep **LISTENING**. By the end of this part of the interview the student's goals, be they short, medium and longer term should be becoming clearer and some decisions about how to proceed now need to be made – in other words, moving into stage 3 - Action

Stage 3: Moving on to action – short, medium and long term (Bedford's Scope and Tactics).

It is all too easy for you to tell the student what they should be doing next – DON'T, because you can be sure that they won't. The student has to see the relevance of what needs to be done in a way that allows them to take ownership. A useful strategy is to ask the student to summarise what they think are the decisions made in the discussion so far. A useful technique at this stage is "prompt and fade" (Egan 2002). You can prompt if you think they have omitted something they or you felt important for them to research further e.g.

- What about the need for sports facilities, or access to good transport links that you mentioned,
- Have you thought about contacting the admissions tutor with your query? but then withdraw and leave the student to think about their response to this prompting.
- What do you think you need to do next? This will help them sort out their priorities e.g. they may decide the most important action is to seek additional help with a subject they need to do better in to ensure they get to the course at the institution of their choice, then to do some more research into courses and go to open days.

Having established their priorities and actions needed, help them to formulate a SMART action plan, preferably written. This will act both as a reminder and a useful tool for reviewing progress should any follow up be required. Timing is crucial in HE planning and applying and you should be able to help them get it right by ensuring that their actions are timely and realistic – what needs to be done in the short or medium or longer term?

- The key question is” WHEN are you going to do this by?”
- BUT you also need to make sure that they know HOW to do it, and WHO and/or WHAT may be involved and how to access that resource.
- What are the pros and cons of the various approaches or actions that they may be considering
- Do they know how to make contact with an admissions tutor,
- Are they aware of how to access the resources that will help them choose between different courses etc.

Finally, what if they need more help? A useful way to end is to remind them of when and where further help is available – your availability, external sources of help if appropriate. You will have covered a lot of ground and it may need further discussion before decisions can be finally made and actioned.

The action plan will only be as useful as the information written on it – your job is to ensure that the student can go away feeling that they want to act, and that they can act with confidence. That confidence will come from taking the time to use the structure, work through the stages of the interview, asking questions, listening to the answers, helping to generate ideas and options with sound information and ensuring the student can go away and act on the decisions made.

References

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