

Guidelines for Members of Selection Boards in the Recruitment of Resident Academic Staff

Scope

The Council of the University of Malta has a procedure to determine the composition of Selection Boards which are authorised to conduct a process of evaluation of the merits and suitability of candidates seeking to be recruited as Resident Academics. The Selection Boards are to present recommendations for employment for Council's final approval.

This document is intended to describe the selection process and to provide guidelines on how members of such Selection Boards shall conduct themselves. Similar documents exist which regulate the selection process of academic staff at the Junior College, and administrative, technical, and support staff respectively

Background

When a vacancy arises, the respective Head of Department, or where applicable, the Head of Division liaises with the Office for Human Resources Management and Development and a Call for Applications ("the Call") is drafted. Once the issuance of the Call is authorised by the Rector it is advertised in the local papers and on the University web-site.

At the close of the period allowed for receipt of applications, the Head of Department concerned is asked to preview the career profiles (*curriculum vitae*) of the applicants to determine if there are any candidates who do not meet the objective criteria specified in the Call, or if there is any other objective and valid reason on the basis of which a short-list for interviews can be drawn.

The composition of Selection Boards for Resident Academics for vacancies arising in Faculties, Centres and Institutes is as follows:

1. Rector or his delegate (in the Chair);
2. The Dean or Chairperson of Centre or Institute involved;
3. The Head of Department or Director of Centre or Institute involved;
4. If 2 and 3 are the same person, then another member of the Department is selected;
5. A Head of a Department from outside the Faculty, Centre or Institute concerned;
6. A member of Council who is not employed with the University;
7. Any other technical expert/s appointed by the Rector at his discretion when such expertise is deemed beneficial to the selection process.

Once the Rector confirms the composition of a Selection Board in accordance with the above, and once a list of applicants eligible for interview is drawn by the respective Head of Department as described, all members of the Selection Board are notified in advance about the date for interviews and every effort is made to ensure that all members of the Selection Board are present.

Should any member of a Selection Board be unable to attend due to unavoidable circumstances, the Chairperson of the Selection Board may decide to proceed with the interviews provided that he feels that the members present collectively have sufficient technical and administrative competence to conduct the interviews, and provided that no Selection Board conducting interviews is composed of less than four people. If the Chairperson chooses to proceed with the interviews, any member of a Selection Board who is absent for all or some of the interviews, automatically forfeits his participation in the selection process. In such a case, only the members of the Selection Board who were actually present for the interviews of all interviewed applicants are *de facto* the Selection Board for the post(s) in question.

Conflict of Interest

Any member of the Selection Board, who at any stage in the selection process feels that his ability to conduct his duty fairly has been compromised, or when a perceived conflict of interest may arise, should inform the Chairperson immediately. A conflict of interest may arise if a member of the Selection Board:

- is the spouse, or is in or has been in an intimate relationship with, or is a close relative of an applicant;

- is a business associate, has conducted business with, or has been an employer or employee of an applicant;

- is currently in any litigation with, has had any serious dispute or conflict with, or is a rival of an applicant; or

- has been coerced, solicited, or intimidated by any applicant or others acting on behalf of an applicant.

Conversely, the Chairperson has the prerogative to request a member of the Selection Board to withdraw from a selection process if in his/her judgement the person's behaviour can compromise the fair conduct of a selection process or if this constitutes a conflict of interest. In such cases, the Chairperson may request the Rector to appoint a suitable replacement to serve on the Selection Board.

If the Chairperson feels that he has a conflict of interest the Rector should be informed.

Interviewing Process

Endorsing short-list for interviews

When the Selection Board first meets to conduct interviews, the Chairperson should request the Head of Department concerned to declare whether all applicants have been called for interview, and if not, the Head of Department is expected to table a report clearly stating why applicants were not shortlisted, and this report must be unanimously accepted and endorsed by the Selection Board before interviews of short-listed candidates can proceed.

Candidates should be shortlisted for interviews, or otherwise, purely on objective grounds and in accordance with the Call. This said, the compilation of a short-list may also be guided by practical considerations. For example, when a Call attracts a significant number of applicants, though the call may have allowed candidates with a Masters, or candidates reading a research-based doctorate to apply, the board may shortlist for interview only those who have already obtained a Ph.D. or equivalent research-based doctorate.

If any member of the Selection Board disagrees with the shortlist drawn by the Head of Department, then he may request that all applicants are interviewed, or for the criteria for the drawing up of the shortlist to be changed. If the Selection Board does not reach consensus on the shortlist, then all applicants must be interviewed as a matter of prudence.

Establishing the Selection Criteria

The selection process should be conducted in conformance with the conditions set out in the Call and in accordance with a set of agreed Selection Criteria. Prior to the commencement of interviews, the Selection Board shall establish the Selection Criteria and shall allocate a marking scheme on the lines described hereafter.

Typically, the following Selection Criteria may be used, namely:

- i. Relevant Academic Qualifications
- ii. Relevant Academic/Work Experience
- iii. Aptitude and Suitability; and
- iv. Performance in Interview.

The University of Malta acknowledges that there is an element of objectivity and subjectivity in each of these criteria and therefore any marking scheme adopted should not be algorithmic and can never be reduced to an absolute and deterministic measure of a person's ability, suitability, and performance. Indeed, any attempt to rationalise the marking scheme to the point of radically reducing the subjective element in this judgement obviates

the underlying rationale of such a selection process; it is precisely the subjective but informed judgement of upright peers drawing from their experience and expertise which constitutes the very essence of such a selection process.

In the spirit of transparency, it is important to expand further on what one is looking for when marking applicants during interviews.

i. Relevant Academic Qualifications

This seemingly objective criterion is actually fairly subject to value judgement and is thus laced with subjectivity¹.

When marking Relevant Academic Qualifications ideally one considers:

- the relevance of the qualifications concerned to the field targeted by the Call;
- the calibre and prestige of the awarding institution/s particularly in the field in question;

¹ One may be tempted to assign mechanistically the following measure: so many marks for a first degree; more marks if a person has a Masters; and even more marks if one has a Doctorate. Prima face this sounds perfectly fair and equitable, but then an applicant with a first-class Bachelor's degree from the University of Cambridge which was followed immediately by a Ph.D. from Harvard may score, less with this "yard-stick" than a person who scratches through a first-degree from University X followed by a taught Master's degree from University Y followed by a Ph.D. from University Z where universities X, Y, and Z are nowhere nearly as prestigious as Cambridge and Harvard.

Clearly, the measure suggested above is too simplistic because the prestige of the awarding university does matter, as do the reputation and rigour of the awarding university and research supervisors in the relevant field, and the grades obtained, even though one needs to keep in mind that the criteria for obtaining grades varies widely from country to country and from tertiary institution to another. One must also keep in mind that the quality of the research produced in the case of research-based qualifications matters a lot and this aspect may only be appreciated by domain experts on the selection board.

To illustrate further the vexatious nature of the process, a Ph.D. from the most acclaimed institution may not be as relevant to the Call nor as brilliant as a Ph.D. from a lesser-ranked University; there may be a brilliant applicant who only had access to the lesser-ranked University merely because of family or financial circumstances. Moreover, should a person who has completed a somewhat mediocre Ph.D. in a field which is marginally related to the Call be marked higher than a person who is in the final year of a brilliant Ph.D. which is a perfect match for the Call in question?

Given the complexity of the cases that one has to consider one can only suggest guidelines that should be kept in mind by members of the Selection Board whilst acknowledging that not all members of the Board are domain experts in the field targeted by the Call and acknowledging also that Board members are likely to mark the same cases differently even on such a seemingly completely objective criterion.

- the various qualifications obtained at undergraduate; post-graduate and doctoral level; and
- the performance and where relevant degree-classification of each qualification.

ii. *Relevant Academic/Work Experience*

Once again, a seemingly objective criterion has a strong undertone of subjectivity, particularly when it comes to determining the extent of relevance of the experience to the Call, but before delving into that, it is worth outlining how one measures academic experience.

At the University of Malta, academic experience is considered to have three ingredients:

Lecturing Portfolio: duration and extent of lecturing experience at tertiary education level; training in pedagogy and evaluation; course material developed; experience with educational technologies.

Research Portfolio: including the list and quality of publications, patents, research grants secured; research projects managed.

Outreach Portfolio: international contacts and cooperation; participation/membership of international peer-groups; collaboration with industry and civil society; knowledge and technology transfer; professional consultancy.

There are some Calls which require a Selection Board to give due recognition also to the technical/practical work experience of a candidate – e.g. when choosing to recruit a Resident Academic in Engineering or the Performing Arts the “hands-on” skills of a candidate manifest in years of technical/practical experience in the respective industry ought to be valorised alongside the classical academic achievements of the individual concerned.

Having broadly described the ingredients one seeks when measuring the extent of a person’s academic/work experience, it is important that this is also done in the context of the scope of the Call – ultimately this is what determines relevance. There may be a very experienced candidate who despite his notable achievement does not score very highly on this criterion because that experience is deemed by the Selection Board as having been achieved in a field that is not particularly relevant to the one in the Call. The subjective dilemmas arise, for example, when one has to choose between an accomplished academic whose publications and experience don’t quite match the specificities of the Call and a more junior candidate who hasn’t achieved anywhere as much as the first, but, demonstrates tremendous promise and a track record to date that fits the Call to a T.

To summarise, when marking Relevant Academic/ Work Experience ideally one considers:

- the Lecturing, Research and Outreach Portfolios, and when relevant to the nature of the post, the technical/practical work experience of candidates in relation to the field targeted by the Call;
- overall career development, including any positions of responsibility held;
- any experience in academic administration, general administration, or management.

iii. Aptitude and Suitability

This criterion is intrinsically subjective, but this does not mean that it is totally arbitrary.

When determining a candidate's Aptitude and Suitability for a resident academic post, a Selection Board ought to consider the following, amongst others:

Mastery of field of interest: how confident, well-versed and authoritative a candidate is in the field of interest stipulated by the Call;

Intellectual calibre: how insightful, robust, and informed a candidate is with regards to scholarly argumentation or when expressing an opinion even beyond the scope of the Call;

Commitment to academia: how well a candidate understands what it means to be an academic and how committed a candidate is to such life-style;

Aptitude towards teaching: determined by a positive disposition towards teaching (are students likely to be inspired by this candidate's delivery in class?);

Aptitude towards research: demonstrated by an appetite for scholarship and an innate inquisitiveness (are the candidate's future research objectives stated clearly during the interview?);

Aptitude towards outreach: disposition and capacity to apply knowhow for the betterment of society and the economy and to conduct international cooperation;

Team-work: how well disposed a candidate is to working with others or in a group;

Communication skills: how well a candidate interacts with others – how well a candidate listens and conveys his opinion, knowledge, and beliefs.

The considerations above must be made in the light of the curriculum vitae and any other written statements submitted by the candidates; the references received on behalf of each candidate; and the information conveyed and opinions expressed by the candidates during the interview.

iv. Performance in Interview

This criterion goes beyond the substance of what is said in the Interview, but should concentrate mostly on the verbal and nonverbal communication of each candidate during the interview. Proficiency in language(s) and particularly in English is essential, but, nonverbal communication is equally crucial, including body language, posture, and eye contact amongst others. A candidate is expected to convey confidence, but, not arrogance; to convey clarity of thought without being patronising or pedantic; to project a presence and to do so naturally; to be truthful; respectful; prepared to listen but also to defend his views with vigour and conviction.

A Selection Board may decide to adopt additional selection criteria beyond those described in i-iv above, should they feel that the nature of the discipline is such that it warrants special treatment. For example, in the case of the Performing Arts an audition may be deemed necessary; in the case of Fine Art and Design a portfolio of works may need to be presented. Moreover, a Selection Board may decide to ask interviewees to prepare a technical presentation on some theme or to submit some technical paper to facilitate short-listing or final selection.

A Selection Board also has the prerogative to call candidates more than once for interview in the quest to making its final recommendation to Council.

Marking Scheme and Marking Procedure

On establishing the criteria for selection and before the interviewing process commences, the Selection Board ought to agree on a marking scheme. Typically the marking scheme adopted is as follows:

- 30% for Relevant Academic Qualifications;
- 30% for Relevant Academic/Work Experience;
- 30% for Aptitude and Suitability; and
- 10% for Performance in Interview.

Sometimes, Selection Boards prefer a variation allocating 20% for Aptitude and Suitability and 20% for Performance in Interview. Feedback received from a number of past candidates suggests that Selection Boards should consider allocating more marks towards the first two criteria mentioned above as these are deemed to be more objective and thus the selection process would ostensibly be rendered more transparent. This said, as highlighted earlier, though the first two criteria seem more objective, they are by no means deterministic measures and are also prone to subjectivity.

Ultimately, the credibility of the selection process depends intrinsically on the skills and competence of the people making up the Selection Board and on their combined range of expertise, acknowledging that some are better equipped to judge certain criteria than others, and relying on the collective experience to arrive to a fair and correct conclusion.

Once the criteria and respective marking scheme have been established, the interviewing process can begin; each member of the Selection Board is given the opportunity to ask questions during each interview and each is expected to mark each candidate after each interview. The Chairperson, as the moderator of the interviewing process, must ensure that the questions asked are fair and are intended to assist the Selection Board to evaluate the respective candidates in accordance with the set criteria.

At the end of the interviewing process, when all members of the Selection Board are satisfied that they are in possession of the information necessary to facilitate their judgement, each member is expected to rank the interviewed candidates in order of merit – this is referred to hereafter as the *initial marking* of the candidates.

At this stage, the Chairperson allows each member of the Selection Board respectively to present to the other members the candidates they feel deserve further consideration based on their initial marking. Traditionally, the representative of Council who is not employed by the University is asked to present his findings first, followed by the representative from another faculty, followed by the Head of the Department concerned, followed by the Dean of the Faculty concerned; and finally the Chairperson. Whilst doing so each member of the Selection Board is invited to motivate why they feel certain candidates deserve further consideration and why others do not.

The opinion expressed by each Selection Board member and the discussion that ensues, are intended to allow each member to refine and adjust their respective marks based on the perspectives and opinions of the fellow members of the Selection Board in case that there was something one may have overlooked during initial marking. At the end of this stage, the Board is expected to have agreed on which candidates are the most deserving/suitable for the post and if a natural consensus does not emerge on the ranking order² of the most deserving/suitable candidates, then the Chairman may invite further discussion to try and reach consensus amongst Board Members. Each member of the Selection Board should

² One needs to keep in mind that in a selection process the University is seeking to identify the most deserving candidate to fill a vacancy. In the case that more than one vacancy needs to be filled by the Call, the University need only identify as many candidates as there are vacancies at the time of the interviews. In other words, strictly speaking, there is no need for any ranking order of candidates to be established by the Selection Board and indeed many unsuccessful candidates are more aggrieved by a relatively lower ranking than by the fact they did not rank first. On the other hand, experience has shown that there are several occasions when a selected candidate/s end up not taking up the post when this is offered, this resulting in the loss of precious time if there isn't a "reserve" list to draw upon should this, or further vacancies, arise soon after the selection process. Thus, when consensus is reached on the ranking order of the most deserving/suitable candidates, Selection Boards may opt to issue this as a final formal ranking which determines the order in which these candidates will be offered a job subject to vacancies that may arise within the scope of the Call within a year.

continue to update and refine their marks during this process to reflect their position at the final outcome of the discussion.

If consensus is not reached on the ranking of the most deserving/suitable candidates, and further information is required to assist with the decision, the Board may decide to call the most deserving/suitable candidates for further interviews. If consensus is still not reached and the process of discussion has been exhausted, the most deserving candidate is drawn by simple majority of Selection Board members. Any member of the Selection Board is free to write a minority report addressed to the President of Council should they feel that any matter of substance or procedure should be brought to the attention of Council when it is considering the Selection Board's recommendation.

The marks allotted to each candidate by individual members of the Selection Board during the course of the selection process are intended solely to guide each member of the Selection Board personally when expressing an opinion in the collective quest to determine the most deserving candidate(s). As described earlier, when the ranking of the most deserving/suitable candidates³ is deemed possible and is desired, the ranking order allotted by individual members of the Selection Board contributes⁴ to the final formal ranking determined by the Selection Board as a whole, ideally reached through consensus. Each member of the Selection Board is free to retain or to discard the marks he allots to candidates in the selection process as these marks are not official and only serve as personal notes as described.

Guidelines for Selection Board members

The interviewing process is expected to appraise the competence and suitability of candidates. While any member of the Selection Board can ask any question or request any information which is intended to assess a candidate in terms of the predetermined criteria as described, members of the Selection Board should ensure that:

³ The marks allocated by individual members of the Selection Board are not intended to give an exhaustive ranking of all applicants as, for example, it may prove challenging for a Selection Committee to agree on who deserves to be ranked 8th rather than 9th in the ranking order when in either case such ranking is futile particularly in situations when there are many more applicants than there are posts available or envisaged to become vacant within a year, or when the applicants in question have been deemed unsuitable.

⁴ The marks allocated by individual members of the Selection Board are not intended to be mechanically aggregated or averaged out to determine a final ranking as, not all members of the Selection Board are equally in a position to assess all the criteria described, and it is precisely the blend of experience, perspectives, and technical knowhow of the Selection Board as a whole which brings forth the final recommendation of ranking of the most deserving/suitable candidates.

- candidates and other Board members are treated in a cordial and respectful manner;
- no questions are asked that are sexist; ageist; racist; or are unlawfully discriminatory in nature;
- no information on the outcome or proceedings of the selection process is divulged to third parties other than Council, as authorised by Council, or as required at law;
- no candidate is given an unfair advantage over others or is treated unfairly; and
- they report to the Chairperson any cases of solicitation, intimidation or any other cause that may hinder them from conducting their duty equitably, or which may be perceived to be a conflict of interest as described earlier.

Council Approval

Recommendations of Selection Boards are presented to Council for approval, and if Council agrees, the selected candidate, or candidates when applicable, will be offered employment in accordance to the ranking order, when applicable, and subject to the number of vacancies at the time, or as may arise within a period of 12 months from the date of approval by Council.

Clarification Process

After being approved by Council the list of selected candidates for the post(s) available at the time, will be posted in alphabetic order on the University website. An applicant who may wish to receive any clarification or to lodge a complaint about the outcome of his/her application is invited to write to the address indicated on the website clearly stating his/her query or basis for complaint within 10 working days from the date the results are posted. The University will reconvene the respective Selection Board as soon as possible to compile answers to any such queries and complaints received and will strive to reply within 30 working days from the date of posting of the results on the web-site.

Should such candidates not be satisfied with the University's answers, they are invited to lodge a complaint with the University Ombudsman.