

# First Interview Prep Guide

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| APPLIES TO | Associate Professor and Professor candidates |
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| STAGE | First interview with the panel |
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| PREPARED BY | Natalia Rostova, Axe Talent |
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| TIME TO PREPARE | About 20 minutes the night before |
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**A note from Natalia before your first interview.** I put this guide together for my candidates so you could get a second interview after the first one.

## HOW THE PANEL THINKS

You will usually meet Deans, Pro Vice-Chancellors and senior professors. These are busy people with full calendars, and they truly appreciate candidates who help them get to a clear picture of who you are.

They are looking for a future colleague: someone who will supervise PhD students, win grants, lead research and represent the school with pride.

During the conversation they are quietly answering one question for themselves: **"Do I understand who this person is, and would I enjoy working with them?"** The more you help them answer it, the better your interview will go.

**The golden rule: be open and be yourself.** Senior academics have met hundreds of candidates, and what they genuinely want is to see the person behind the CV. Say in plain English who you are, what you have done, and what you want next. A warm, direct answer always makes a stronger impression than a careful, guarded one.

## THE FOUR QUESTIONS THAT DECIDE THE OUTCOME

**1. Why are you considering a move?** • I recommend preparing your answers in writing before the call. This is the question worth preparing most carefully.

- Have one clear, positive, forward-looking reason ready. A lovely example: "I want to supervise PhD students and build my own research group, and I am looking for a university where I can do that."
- **Speak warmly about your current university.** You can be completely honest about wanting something new while still being generous about where you are now. Panels notice this, and they respect it a lot.
- **Be specific.** A clear reason for moving helps the panel picture your future with them, and it is one of the easiest ways to build trust in the room.

**2. What have you led?** · AP and Professor roles are leadership roles, so bring your leadership stories with you.

- Prepare **2–3 concrete examples** where your personal role is clear: grants you won as Principal Investigator, PhD students you guided to completion, a research group or centre you built, programmes or curricula you created.
- **Say "I" where it was genuinely you.** This is one of the rare situations in academia where modesty works against you.
- Think about what you built, created and changed over the years. That is what brings 15 or 20 years of experience to life in a conversation.

**3. What would you like to build in the next 3–5 years?**

- Come with a real plan: your research direction, the grants you would target, the PhD students you would love to supervise, the collaborations you would bring with you.
- **Connect it to this university.** Look up their research strengths and programmes beforehand and mention what excites you about them.
- This is the part of the interview where your passion can really shine. Enjoy it.

**4. Know your numbers**

- Refresh your exact **Scopus h-index** before the call, and quote Scopus rather than Google Scholar. Universities in Malaysia work with Scopus, and it builds confidence when your number matches your profile precisely.
- Have your key figures ready: publications, Q1/Q2 papers over the last 5 years, external grant amounts as PI, PhD students supervised to completion.
- Exact, confident numbers are a quiet signal of a serious academic.

**What sometimes holds strong candidates back** · In my years of placing academics, I have seen wonderful, fully qualified candidates miss out on roles for reasons that had nothing to do with their qualifications. The most common ones:

- **Answers that stayed too general and careful.** The panel never got to know the real person behind the words.
- **Speaking negatively about the current employer.** Even a small casual complaint can colour the whole conversation.
- **A reason for moving that stayed unclear.** It leaves the panel guessing instead of picturing you on their team.
- **Experience without stories.** Many years described in general terms, with no examples of building or driving anything.
- **Hidden energy.** The candidate cared deeply about the role, and the panel simply never got to feel it.
- The good news: **every one of these five is completely in your hands.**

**What works beautifully**

- Answer the question first, then add the story behind it.
- Real numbers and named examples.
- Genuine enthusiasm for the role and the move. Let them see you want this.
- Kind words about your current and past institutions, together with a clear reason for moving forward.
- One or two personal stories that show who you are as a researcher and as a colleague.

## THE NIGHT BEFORE: A 20-MINUTE CHECKLIST

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- Write down your reason for moving in 2–3 sentences. Positive, specific, honest.
  - Write down your key numbers: Scopus h-index, publications, Q1/Q2 papers (last 5 years), grants as PI, PhD completions.
  - Prepare 2–3 leadership stories where your personal role is clear.
  - Sketch your 3–5 year research plan for this university in 3–4 sentences.
  - Prepare 2–3 questions to ask the panel about the school's research direction.
  - Check your camera, microphone and lighting if the interview is online.
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Panels are made up of people, and people connect with people. You do not need a perfect performance. Show up as your real, capable, enthusiastic self from the first minute, and let them get to know you. And if you would like to rehearse your answers or talk anything through before the interview, message me anytime.

Or email me directly at [Natalia@axetalent.com](mailto:Natalia@axetalent.com)

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RECRUITMENT TALENT PARTNER

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Taylor's University Lakeside Campus  
No 1, Jalan Taylor's, Subang Jaya 47500  
Selangor, Malaysia