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Structured interview

Characteristics

The **structured interview** consists of asking a series of standardised closed-ended questions and analysing the answers.

The form of a structured interview depends on the objectives set by the person designing the validation. The choice of topics is set in advance to obtain specific information. The questions are usually identical for all candidates and are asked in the same order.

The level of structuring an interview may vary and include intermediate forms in which there are more open-ended questions. If necessary, individual threads may be developed by asking in-depth or clarifying questions. Usually they are not planned in advance, and their content and form depend on the candidate's answers (or questions). However, both the main questions and the in-depth questions may be prepared in advance.

Depending on the type and manner of information collection, structured interviews can be divided into:

- biographical (semi-structured) interviews,
- competence/behavioural (semi-structured) interviews,
- questionnaire-based (usually fully structured) interviews.

The use of closed-ended questions makes it easier to compare the results of interviews with different candidates. On the one hand, it allows the subjective assessment of the interviewer to be minimised, and on the other hand, it allows the quality of the applied tools to be ensured.

Box 1. Use of the structured interview

In the assessment stage, a structured interview can be used e.g. for the following purposes:

1. case study – the candidate is asked to choose provided examples and counter-examples that fit a specific concept and to justify his/her decision;
2. cause-and-effect analysis – the candidate is asked to predict the outcome of a situation and then to explain or justify their predictions;
3. ordering objects – the candidate is asked to familiarise him/herself with a group of objects and to order them according to specific instructions;
4. problem solving – the candidate is asked to try to solve a problem while explaining out loud what is being done, why it is being done and what the undertaken actions mean.

It should be remembered that when assessing a candidate's statements, any interruptions to the conversation (e.g. changing the topic) may affect the final result. This is particularly harmful when the new thread relates to learning outcomes that are not included in the interview scenario. An assessor who acts in this way is not performing his/her duties properly. However, even in the case of less significant disturbances, the effect of such behaviour can, for example, change the atmosphere of the assessment process. As a result, the candidate may stop responding in detail or honestly. This is also stressful for the person being assessed, who may consequently achieve a worse result.

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One of the factors helping to maintain the neutrality and objectivity of validation is ensuring that all participants observe the standards and guidelines of their roles – the assessor, candidate and any supplementary personnel (required by the given method and technique). The assessor conducting the interview is responsible, among other things, for ensuring freedom of expression and for raising all the topics of discussion.

The validation stages in which the use of the method is recommended

The structured interview is most often used as a complementary method, providing more in-depth information about the knowledge, skills and social competences of the person seeking validation and to assess learning outcomes.

This is confirmed by research conducted by Cedefop (an agency supporting the development and promotion of vocational education and lifelong learning in the European Union). The research indicates that the interview – regardless of its type (structured, [unstructured](#)) – is considered to be the most appropriate method in the stages of the assessment (21 countries) and identification (17 countries) of learning outcomes.

At the same time, Cedefop data shows that interviewing is the most accepted method of identifying learning outcomes achieved outside formal education. A survey of companies in 10 countries shows that interviews are most frequently used to test the knowledge, skills and social competences of employees. This is possible in the case of external recruitment (96.5% of cases) and periodic evaluation (98.5% of cases).

Scope of the learning outcomes that may be confirmed using the method

Information on the scope of the learning outcomes that can be confirmed with the structured interview is for guidance only. It was developed on the basis of analysing the required learning outcomes contained in the Polish Qualifications Framework (second stage descriptors typical of vocational education and training).

It should be remembered that the choice of a given method must always result from the analysis of learning outcomes for a given qualification.

The structured interview can be used to confirm social skills and competences, as well as knowledge (including hidden knowledge) of the individuals being assessed.

Knowledge

The structured interview enables the learning outcomes relating to knowledge at all levels of the Polish Qualifications Framework to be assessed.

Skills

This method is recommended mainly for assessing skills relating to:

- calculating, analysing synthesising and predicting in the information category at PQF levels 4–7;
- organising work in the area of revising activities (at PQF levels 6–7) and information flow (receiving and transmitting information at PQF level 3; working with teams and clients at PQF levels 4–6);
- using materials at PQF level 5;

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- learning and professional development with respect to personal development (at all PQF levels) and supporting the development of others (at PQF levels 5–7).

Social competences

The structured interview (especially the competence interview technique) can be used primarily for learning outcomes relating to:

- following rules at PQF levels 1–3;
- taking responsibility (at PQF levels 3–5) and making decisions (at PQF levels 6–7).

[The suggested learning outcomes that can be confirmed using the Structured interview method](#)

Strengths and weaknesses of the structured interview

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • structured interviews allow a broader scope of cognitive skills to be examined than the theoretical test • depending on the technique used, it allows the validation process to be immediately adapted to a candidate's answers, thus allowing his/her learning outcomes to be more closely examined • it allows the assessor to check on an ongoing basis that the candidate has understood the question correctly, thereby reducing the risk of erroneous replies or skipped questions because of misunderstandings • the method is considered suitable for confirming hidden knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in the case of partially structured interviews, the results may depend on the style of communication, experience, personality and the subjective assessments of assessors (increased susceptibility to the “examiner's effect”), as well as on the personality of the candidate.

Limitations of using the method

The personality and communication skills of the interviewer (validation counsellor, assessor) and the person seeking validation may be factors limiting the use of structured interviews. The impact of subjective factors can be reduced by appropriately formulating the questions.

It takes time to conduct an interview. It can be used to assess only one person at a time, and requires the proper conditions.

Required human, organisational and material

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resources

When using this method, the interviewers' experience and communication skills, as well as their in-depth knowledge of learning outcomes, are crucial so that they can distinguish the information that is significant and pertinent to the learning outcomes being confirmed. In order to reduce the impact of subjective factors on the interview results, interviewers must be appropriately trained, relevant procedures need to be established and an interview scenario prepared in a way that allows the interviewer to ask in-depth questions, make sure that the candidate has understood the questions, etc.

Preparing a structured interview (especially a questionnaire-based interview) may require time and considerable resources (e.g. to develop and standardise questionnaires, hire people to develop tools). The costs of using this method should also take into account the need to prepare a methodologically correct and standardised questionnaire. This requires hiring at least one interview design expert. A pilot study may also be necessary. If the validation procedure is to involve a larger number of candidates, a team of assessors who can use this method is needed to conduct the structured interviews. Work on classifying and interpreting the answers to open-ended questions also requires the use of encoders.

In order to increase the comparability of results, to reduce stress and establish a climate that enables candidates to concentrate on answering questions, especially open-ended ones, it is important to conduct the interview in comfortable surroundings for the persons seeking validation. When preparing the organisational and material resources for a structured interview, one should remember to ensure an appropriate meeting place, the equipment and supplies needed to record the interview (voice recorders, microphones, cameras, one-way mirrors), the software for encoding results and to obtain the candidate's consent to record the interview.

Awarding bodies should take into account the need to involve additional resources in the case of candidates with hearing disabilities. Conducting the interview may require additional skills from both assessors and candidates (e.g. knowledge of sign language).

Possibilities of combining the structured interview with other methods

The structured interview may be used as part of a [skills audit](#) to identify a candidate's learning outcomes.

At the assessment stage, this method can be used to confirm knowledge, supplementing or even replacing the [theoretical test](#) (interview technique). Structured interviews can also be used to confirm practical skills, in particular, together with [observation in real-life conditions](#) and in [simulated conditions](#). This way, the candidate can be asked questions during or after having completed a professional task.

Cedefop's data show that the combination of interview (including structured interview) and [analysis of evidence and statements](#) is often used. This is the basic method of validation in Switzerland, France, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, among other countries.

Example techniques

A technique is a way of doing a particular task in a given method, used to collect and analyse data proving that a person has achieved the learning outcomes.

Biographical interview (narrative interview)

The biographical interview is an analysis of a candidate's life considered within a specific context: professional work, family life, social life, non-formal education. It also serves to indicate a person's successes and failures.

The biographical interview allows detailed information to be obtained on the factors influencing the life and behaviour of a candidate and his or her functioning in various spheres of life. Its aim is to diagnose potential areas that can be a source of knowledge, skills and social competences. Therefore, a biographical interview can be used to identify the learning outcomes achieved by a person.

This type of interview can also be a starting point for obtaining general information about the candidate, the professional duties performed and professional roles fulfilled.

The interviewer's task is to encourage an open, in-depth response about the facts that seem relevant to the candidate about his/her life and career (e.g. educational career, experience outside of his/her profession). The candidate decides which information will be provided and its level of detail.

Box 2. Characteristics of a biographical interview

The following characteristic features of a biographical interview can be distinguished:

- the interview is aimed at obtaining responses from the candidate about his/her entire life or a specific fragment of it,
- the interviewer should obtain a spontaneous and unstructured narrative; at the beginning, the interviewer acts only as a listener,
- the spontaneous narration should result in a story about the candidate's life,
- the principles of data analysis are strictly defined.

The biographical interview usually takes place in five phases:

1. beginning the interview – among other things, this phase allows contact to be established between the candidate and the interviewer, and the appropriate atmosphere to be established for a free-flowing conversation to occur;
2. encouraging the conversation – in this phase, the interviewer explains the purpose of the interview;
3. narrative phase – here the candidate talks about his/her life; the narration should have a specific structure, be logically ordered and in-depth (the candidate talks in detail about a given event from beginning to end); the interviewer should not interfere with the course of the candidate's story;
4. the end of the narrative – the interviewer can ask questions (e.g. to clarify ambiguities, complete threads, obtain additional comments from the candidate);
5. completion of the interview – allows, among other things, a discussion about the presented content.

The biographical interview assumes that the candidate's experiences and the presented narrative correspond, and that the experiences are being presented as a continuity of events.

This is an auxiliary technique that should be used together with other methods of obtaining information about the person seeking validation. It can be used, for example, in the skills audit as the starting point for further activities.

Competence (behavioural) interview

In a standard competence interview, the starting point is to define a set of competences to establish a specific competence profile.

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According to the Glossary of the Integrated Qualifications System, “competence” is defined as the broadly understood ability to take specific actions and perform tasks using learning outcomes and one’s own experiences. Depending on the context, competences may include, for example, the scope of the activity, the scope of decision-making powers, the substantive preparation required to perform a specific task, an individual’s predispositions, aptitudes and previous experiences.

Competences are based to a large degree on specific learning outcomes, but transcend them. For this reason, “competences” and “learning outcomes” do not mean the same thing, although they are sometimes used interchangeably.

The competence interview is conducted with the use of a specific sequence of questions, regardless of the competence profile, according to the model: “from competence to behaviour”. The candidate is asked open-ended questions, based on which the interviewer can then create a profile of the behaviour of the person, showing that he/she has acquired certain competences. The objective is to identify recurrent patterns of behaviour and the level of the development of a specific candidate’s competences.

This method is based on the premise that it is possible to predict a candidate's future behaviour in a similar situation based on his/her past behaviour and achieved results.

Since the role of the candidate is to describe the real events of his/her life and the interviewer is to analyse them, the risk of obtaining false information and the subjectivity of the candidate's self-assessment is reduced. This technique ensures the reliability of the information obtained.

Two models of the competence interview are commonly used:

1. the STAR model (situation, task, action, result),
2. the funnel model (or inverted funnel model).

It is worth emphasising that both models can complement each other, so they can be combined.

Questionnaire-based interview

This technique is based on a questionnaire with a structured set of questions asked in the same order to each candidate. The candidates' responses are often similar.

This type of interview is conducted according to established rules – all elements (including the behaviour of the interviewer, the ways of obtaining relevant answers, the interview site, the technical equipment and supplies used) are defined in advance. The objective of this approach is to obtain the same set of information about individual candidates. It is therefore a highly standardised technique.

Questionnaire-based interviews are usually conducted according to the following model:

1. The interviewer (e.g. a validation counsellor) receives a questionnaire with a set of questions and instructions on how to ask them. The author of the tool prepares variants of answers and a place to record them; he or she also informs the interviewer about the purpose of asking each question.
2. The interviewer usually asks the questions orally, although he/she can also use a response sheet.
3. The person interviewed responds to the question (the answer is not always specific). In this case, it is important to maintain contact (including eye contact) between the person asking the questions and the person answering them. This allows the candidate's reactions to be observed.
4. The interviewer records the answers in the questionnaire according to the coding instructions (containing the rules of assigning the answers to predefined categories and the guidelines for their numerical symbolisation).

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The record is source material that will be further analysed.

The strengths of the questionnaire-based interview include:

- High reliability through standardisation, especially when using closed-ended answers.
- Questionnaires completed during an interview have no disadvantages in comparison with questionnaires completed autonomously by the respondents, e.g. the possibility of omitting questions, a low response rate of completed questionnaires.
- It is a relatively effective technique in terms of the required time and effort.

Questionnaire structure

Structured interview questionnaires should contain certain established elements.

Examples of the use of the structured interview

Examples of the use of the structured interview are contained in the [Database of Good Practices. Validation, ensuring the quality of validation and certification.](#)

The method is used for the following qualifications:

- [administrative assistant](#) in Italy,
- [qualified metalworker](#) in Germany.

Institution name	Associatie KU Leuven www: http://associatie.kuleuven.be/contact
Country of origin	Belgium (Flanders)
Context	Flanders has a system for validating learning outcomes acquired outside formal education. It is defined in the law as "the totality of knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired in the learning process, which have not been previously confirmed by any certificate". <i>KU Leuven Associatie</i> is an association of five universities in Flanders and Brussels with the Catholic University of Leuven (KU Leuven). It was established in 2002. It includes over 100,000 students, representing 43% of those studying in Flemish higher education. Schools belonging to the association validate the learning outcomes achieved outside formal education. It is mainly used to exempt candidates from exams, which allows students to combine study and work.
Name of the qualification	Master's degree in psychology
Brief description of the method	The purpose of validation is usually to exempt a student from having to take examinations or parts of classes. It is also possible to obtain a qualification (licentiate or master's degree). The validation process of the higher education institution association members usually starts with an analysis of a candidate's portfolio enclosed with the validation application. The structured interview method is used both at the stage of identifying learning outcomes (competence interview) and in their assessment (questionnaire-based interview

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	- this technique supports other methods, such as the test and observation).
Possibilities of acquiring information about the method on one's own / with the help of a counsellor	<p>The person seeking validation should independently review the study programmes, the descriptions of individual courses, number of assigned credits, and the scope of the required learning outcomes.</p> <p>Information and advice is available from the validation coordinator at the Student Counselling Centre. The Secretary of the Examination Centre Committee also provides such information.</p>
Factors underlying the choice of the method in given circumstances	A structured interview is a good complement and extension of the information that is included in a candidate's portfolio. Questions about specific examples from a candidate's life showing that the declared learning outcomes are actually achieved enables a relatively reliable assessment to be made of the information provided by the candidate.
The procedure	<p>Before starting validation, the candidate should obtain detailed information about this process (e.g. at the Student Counselling Centre).</p> <p>The procedure starts with an initial interview (the learning outcomes identification stage). At this stage, the validity of the request for validation is confirmed and possible methods for assessing the learning outcomes are proposed (e.g. interview, test, observation, simulation, combination of methods), taking into account the information in the portfolio submitted together with the validation application.</p> <p>If the candidate agrees to use the proposed methods, the assessment phase begins. It will be conducted differently for each candidate, depending on the methods selected.</p>
Result of the validation process	<p>Positive result</p> <p>A person who has successfully completed the assessment process obtains a "Skills Acquisition Certificate" (formal certification of learning outcomes acquired outside formal education) and:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exemption from part of the classes, or • exemption from part of the examinations, or • a licentiate or master's degree if he/she has been validated for the entire curriculum. <p>Negative result</p> <p>If the assessment of the learning outcomes is unsuccessful, the candidate has the right to appeal. Appeals should be submitted within five calendar days to the Dean of Student Affairs.</p>
Organisational and material resources	<p>The validation process (including interviews with candidates) is a fee-based service.</p> <p>The total cost is at least € 105, which includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cost of the initial interview - € 55, • simple test - € 50, • comprehensive and more extensive tests - € 150. <p>It is possible to assess all the learning outcomes of a study programme. In such a case, the validation costs are as follows:</p>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• licentiate degree – maximum € 590,• master's degree (if the candidate already has a licentiate degree) – maximum € 230,• master's degree (if the learning outcomes at the licentiate level are also assessed) – €770. <p>Validation is available all year round. However, if a candidate wants to obtain an exemption for the next academic year, the validation application must be submitted before May 31. Later dates apply only to the level of foreign language proficiency, e.g. Chinese, Japanese, Arabic.</p>
Limitations of use	<p>The validation process is long and fee-based, so it is not advantageous if a candidate only wants to obtain credit for a small part of a course or earn ECTS points. Also, no grades are given for the classes or exams from which one is officially exempted. In some situations, it may be better to take the exams with the other students.</p>

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