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Unstructured interview

Characteristics

The unstructured interview is an exchange of questions and answers in a free-flowing conversation between an interviewer and the person seeking validation.

The unstructured interview may be more or less focused. Its objectives are defined in advance, but the process is not structured and depends on the responses and attitude of the person seeking validation. The interviewer only knows the general agenda of issues that should be raised during the interview with the candidate.

The questions are open-ended and encourage longer, multi-faceted replies. They are spontaneously formulated during the interview – there is no pre-arranged list of questions nor an imposed order of asking them. If necessary, individual threads may be developed by the interviewer by asking in-depth or clarifying questions.

An unstructured interview may be conducted e.g. by a counsellor or assessor. The results of using this method depend to a large extent on the skills of the person conducting the interview (e.g. obtaining relevant information by asking in-depth questions, directing the conversation appropriately).

The unstructured interview is recommended mainly as an auxiliary method, complementary to other methods. It can also be used to pre-identify a candidate's learning outcomes. For this reason, it is particularly useful at the stage of identifying knowledge, skills and social competences (e.g. in combination with the analysis of evidence and statements).

Depending on the degree of standardisation, unstructured interviews can be divided into:

- unfocused – a conversation with no predefined scenario, but with a set objective and topic;
- focused;
- having a standardised list of sought-after information.

An interview with no standardised questions makes it impossible to directly compare the interview results of different candidates and makes it difficult to assess them objectively. On the other hand, the informality of the method makes it easier for the interviewer to adapt the scope, type and level of difficulty of the issues being discussed to the needs and abilities of the person seeking validation.

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.

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.

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

The unstructured interview is most commonly used in the stages of identifying and assessing 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). Research indicates that the interview, regardless of its type ([unstructured](#), [structured](#)) – is considered to be the most appropriate method at the stages of assessment (21 countries) and identification (17 countries).

Due to its high flexibility, unstructured interviews are particularly useful for identifying learning outcomes achieved outside formal education.

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

Information on the scope of the learning outcomes that can be confirmed by the theoretical test 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 of a given qualification.

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

Knowledge

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

Skills

The unstructured interview method is recommended for assessing skills relating to:

- calculating, analysing synthesising and predicting in the information category at PQF levels 4–7 (especially monitoring the development of a given field; analysing or diagnosing the performed profession and predicting future developments);
- 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;
- learning and professional development with respect to personal development (at all PQF levels) and supporting the development of others (in relation to assessing their needs and directing development at PQF levels 5–7; acting as a mentor at PQF levels 5–6; transferring professional knowledge at PQF level 7).

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Social competences

The unstructured interview can be used primarily to assess learning outcomes relating to:

- following rules at PQF levels 1–3 and 5–8;
- cooperating in the scope of communication (at PQF levels 2–4) and establishing and developing professional relations (at all levels of the PQF, where at PQF levels 5–8, the unstructured interview can be combined with other methods);
- taking responsibility at PQF levels 2–7 (with the exception of reliably performing assigned tasks and controlling the quality of one’s own work and that of a team).

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

Strengths and weaknesses of the unstructured interview

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unstructured interviews are relatively easy and inexpensive to prepare and conduct • it is possible to examine cognitive skills and social competences to a broader extent than with theoretical tests • it is possible to adapt the assessment process to the candidate's answers on an ongoing basis by asking in-depth questions, so that the learning outcomes of the candidate can be examined more accurately than, for example, with theoretical tests or structured interviews (especially questionnaire-based interviews) • it allows interpretation problems with the questions to be avoided because the interviewer can check the extent to which the candidate has understood a question (and, if necessary, to paraphrase or clarify it appropriately), which increases the accuracy of the method • the method is considered suitable for confirming hidden knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • low repeatability of results – the course of the interview largely depends on the candidate's answers and there is no fixed list of questions • time consuming – an unstructured interview should take about 30-90 minutes to complete; moreover, depending on the nature of the interview and the quality of the questions and answers, the analysis and interpretation of the results may take much time • the results may depend on the communication style, experience and personality of the assessors, as well as on the personality of the candidate • this method is particularly susceptible to the “examiner’s effect” – assessors’ subjective assessments can negatively impact the assessment result • the reliability of the method in the assessment stage may be low, as the unstructured interview has no imposed structure and different results are obtained each time

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 unstructured interviews. When using this method, one should remember that the information obtained from the candidate is subjective – depending on their level of honesty, openness and ability to transmit knowledge; the information is based on statements and the subjective perception of various issues. These subjective factors may be reduced by formulating the questions appropriately.

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

Required human, organisational and material resources

When using this method, the interviewers' experience and communication skills, as well as their in-depth knowledge of the 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 and relevant procedures need to be established.

If the unstructured interview will be the only method used in validation, the hiring of encoders and/or specialists to interpret the results may be required. Since the answers of individual candidates may vary greatly, preparing the interview and subsequently interpreting the results require more work on classifying the questions and interpreting the answers than in the case of a structured interview. If a large number of candidates is expected to seek validation, a sufficient number of counsellors or assessors should be provided.

In order to ensure a fair assessment, reduce stress and establish a climate that enables candidates to concentrate on answering questions, it is important to conduct the interview in comfortable surroundings for the persons seeking validation. When preparing the organisational and material resources for an unstructured 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 unstructured interview with other methods

The unstructured interview is most often used as a complementary method, providing more in-depth information about a candidate's knowledge, skills and social competences than that obtained through other methods.

Just like the [structured](#) interview at the assessment stage, this method can be used to confirm knowledge and can supplement or even replace the [theoretical test](#). It also has an important supporting function for [observations in simulated conditions](#) (practical tasks), [observations in real-life conditions](#), [presentation](#) (question and answer session) and [analysis of evidence and statements](#). In addition, the interview technique can be used as part of [the skills audit](#).

Cedefop's data show that the interview (including unstructured interview) is often used with the analysis of evidence and statements. This is a basic method of validation in Switzerland, France, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, among others.

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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.

Unfocused unstructured interview (interview without a fixed scenario, but with a fixed objective and topic)

In this technique, the questions asked of persons seeking validation are not planned or classified in advance. The interviewer uses “interview instructions”, i.e. an established interview objective and loosely formulated topics that can be discussed with the candidate in any way.

The advantage of this technique is the ability to adapt the interview to the candidate's needs. The task of the interviewer is to create an atmosphere conducive to open expression and to skilfully ask guiding questions to encourage the candidate to speak frankly and extensively.

An interview without a fixed scenario, but with a fixed objective and topic, focuses to a large extent on the personality of the candidate. Compared to other methods and techniques, it gives the candidate the most freedom of expression. The candidate decides what he or she will say about the topic. This is particularly advantageous for candidates, as they can choose the area where they are an expert and have the greatest knowledge.

Since the interviewer has only a general plan of the issues to be addressed during the interview, and the questions, which are almost always open-ended, are formulated on an ongoing basis, it is not possible to use standardised tools with this technique. Moreover, the course and outcome of each interview is different. Therefore, the accuracy and reliability of validation using this technique, especially at the assessment stage, depends primarily on the skills and experience of the person conducting the interview and reporting the results.

This technique can be used primarily at the stage of identifying learning outcomes. At the assessment stage, the assessment process must be recorded (e.g. with a camera or voice recorder) in order to subsequently encode the candidate's replies and to enable a possible appeal procedure against the decision of the assessors.

Focused unstructured interview

In a focused interview, the interviewer also has interview instructions, but usually asks more open-ended questions than during the interview without a predefined scenario. The questions to be asked are focused – they usually concern specific issues, based on which the counsellor or assessor will be able to obtain the information specified in the interview instructions. However, the interviewer is free to formulate and change the questions in response to the candidate's needs and answers.

Sample questions may be prepared before the interview, but the interviewer does not have to use them if he/she thinks they are not suitable for a particular candidate.

The information obtained by this technique should be recorded on film, with a voice recorder or in the form of notes.

Unstructured interview with a standardised list of sought-after information

In this technique, the interview is conducted on the basis of a standardised list of sought-after information that the interviewer should obtain from the candidate. Topics for the list can be determined on the basis of previous observations or interviews conducted without an agreed scenario.

While the standardised list of information sought is closed and unchanging in terms of content (identical for each

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candidate), the questions asked to the person seeking validation do not have a strictly defined form. The interviewer can freely transform and adapt them to the needs of a particular candidate.

Questions in this technique are usually quite detailed and help narrow the scope of information being sought. They can be open- or closed-ended and their form should be adapted to the abilities of the person seeking validation.

The interview should be recorded (e.g. using a camera or voice recorder).

Examples of the use of unstructured interviews

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

This method is used, among others in the case of the following qualifications:

- [child care worker](#) in Estonia – interview technique
- [waste management: transport – hazardous waste](#) in Scotland – the interview technique,
- [administrative assistant](#) in Italy – interview and focused unstructured interview technique

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