

## Telephone interviewing: semi-structured interviews

### What is it?

Researchers enter into a personal dialogue with learners by pre-arranged telephone interviews. This can be used to collect learners' answers to open questions with prompts for specifics and can be repeated over time to build a fuller picture of the learner.

### Strengths

- Can build up a picture of the process of studying over time and track developments.
- More interactive and immediate than email interviews.
- Less time intensive than email interviews
- Minimal intrusion into learners' time.
- Almost as good as a face-to-face interview.
- Maximises sustained participation through establishing a personal dialogue between researcher and learner.
- Digital recording of the interview allows editing and transcription.

### Weaknesses

- Transcription of the interview is very time consuming.
- Scheduling of interviews can also be time consuming and requires 'chasing' participants.
- Possible to lead the participant
- Possible to move on too quickly and not get a full answer from the participant.
- Digital recording may not always be clear depending on the phone line quality.
- Often an answer would need further explanation, It is helpful to ask if a specific example from the interviewee to improve this
- While answers may seem okay during an interview, on later transcription, they may found lacking in explanation – often this can be resolved using follow-up emails.
- Interviews of around 40 minutes seem to be the maximum participants thought reasonable

### Process

1. Email contact to arrange an interview time.
2. Semi-structured interview schedule specific for each course and time point.
3. The depth of responses is improved when the edited list of questions are sent to participants before their interview. Giving them time to reflect and form their answer to each question.
4. An email reminder the day before the interview much increases the chance of the participant answering the phone at the arranged time.
5. Interviews spread across each course, timed to follow important stages, but avoid when coursework or exams are due.
6. Later interview schedules adapted to take account of responses in earlier interviews.
7. Recordings transcribed for inclusion in case studies and analysis in NVivo

### Examples from the Learner Experience projects

The PB-LXP project has been conducting telephone interviews with research participants over three time points during their course. This semi-structured interview method has been used in combination with questionnaire research to understand the impact of ICT on practice-based learning across the courses contributing to the project.

