Mandatory requirements and best-practice guidelines for Selection Committees

Policies Recommended to the Academic Board by Selection Procedures Committee
(from SPC Meeting 6/09 of 7 September 2009)

Areas Covered By This Policy Document

This document addresses a number selection instruments likely to be used in postgraduate selection under the Melbourne Model, and issues a number of mandatory requirements that must be observed, and a number of best practice recommendations that should normally be followed, whenever these selection instruments are used for any award course of the University other than Research Higher Degrees.

Selection instruments addressed are

1. interviews and tests,
2. auditions,
3. folios and work samples,
4. work or professional experience,
5. referee reports and employer references,
6. applicant statements.

This policy document does not address

- ranking of academic merit based on school results (the ENTER score or equivalent) or grade-point averages for tertiary studies,
- tests conducted by an external organization, such as the Graduate Australian Medical School Admission Test (GAMSAT)[1], Graduate Record Examination (GRE)[2], Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT)[3], and Law School Admission Test (LSAT)[4],
- general English language standards.

Practices mandated or recommended here for courses other than Research Higher Degrees may also be desirable for selection into Research Higher Degrees. It should be noted that applicants for Research Higher Degrees and some coursework postgraduate programs may be expected to liaise with a staff member to devise a suitable research project proposal, and guidelines on interviewing are not intended to restrict the informal interviews that such applicants may have with a prospective project supervisor.

This document also includes guidelines concerning general declarations that applicants are required to make, handling of confidential material, and publication of information related to entry requirements and selection practices.

[1] http://www.gamsat.acer.edu.au.

[2] http://www.ets.org/gre: the GRE General Test "measures verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, and analytical writing skills that are not related to any specific field of study"; GRE Subject Tests exist in Biochemistry, Cell and Molecular Biology; Biology; Chemistry; Computer Science; Literature in English; Mathematics; Physics; and Psychology.

[3] http://www.mba.com/mba.

[4] http://www.lsac.org.

Approved by Academic Board
1 October 2009

Background

This policy document is based largely on the report[5] of the Working Group on Postgraduate Selection created[6] by Selection Procedures Committee (SPC) to consider procedures and documentation for coursework postgraduate program selection. SPC accepted the report, proposed that its six specific recommendations should become mandatory, and commended to Faculties additional comments in the report concerning other desirable practices[7]. The report was approved by the Academic Board at Meeting 4/2003 of 22 May 2003. Additional material on the use of applicant statements has been incorporated[8] and the document has been revised to become shorter and clearer.

REGULATION 11.1.R3 – PRINCIPLES OF SELECTION
FOR ENTRY TO COURSES MADE UNDER STATUTE 11.1

(1) The University is committed to maintaining high international academic standards in its courses.

(2) The University will select from those students likely to succeed in its courses.

The following guiding principles, in the context of which this document is to be read, should be noted.

- Under Regulation 11.1.R3,[9] selection is the responsibility of the Academic Board, a responsibility delegated to properly constituted selection committees, not individuals. Selection decisions must be made on proper authority, with due attention to equity, to consistency, and to appropriate record-keeping.
- Prerequisite formal educational qualifications listed in an Academic Board Resolution on Selection[10] (such as successful completion of specific subjects to at least the indicated minimum standard, or the completion of a particular award course) may be waived only with the permission of the President of the Academic Board. Other selection instruments listed under the "Selection Committee **will**" may be discarded for particular applicants only with the permission of the President of the Academic Board, or under well-defined circumstances described in this document.
- The last clause in a Resolution on Selection normally refers to selection instruments that the Selection Committee **may** use to elucidate matters related to the application. Decisions on whether for individual students the instrument is to be used must be made in the context of whether a need for elucidation exists, either to determine suitability for selection, or to select from among suitable applicants where demand exceeds available places.
- Applicants are entitled to clear guidance and timely advice concerning application and selection processes. The purpose and relative importance of the selection instruments used should be made known.

[5] http://www.unimelb.edu.au/abp/spc/pdf/selection-postgrad.pdf
[6] Item 3.2, SPC Meeting 9/02, 30 September 2002
[7] SPC meeting 4/2003 (28 April 2003).
[8] From a paper considered under Item D of SPC meeting 2/09 (20 March 2009).
[9] http://www.unimelb.edu.au/ExecServ/Statutes/r111r3.html; see especially 3. Principles
[10] http://www.unimelb.edu.au/ExecServ/Statutes/r111r3attachA.html.

1. Interviews and tests

Individual programs for which interviews or tests are prescribed, or permitted but not prescribed, may have additional special requirements for the structure and content of interviews and tests, or the way in which they are assessed. These special requirements are additional to, and do not replace, the five general mandatory requirements (A)–(E) below.

Mandatory requirements

(A) **Waiving of an interview or test that is normally required.** When the relevant Resolution on Selection states that 'the Selection Committee will conduct interviews and tests' an applicant cannot be accepted without undergoing that interview or test unless
(i) a formal decision to waive the interview or test is made by the Selection Committee (not by an individual Selection Officer); and
(ii) the reasons for waiving the interview or test are noted in documentation attached to the application; and
(iii) all of the following conditions apply:
—it is impractical to bring the applicant and Selection Committee together or convene an interview by other means during the period in which the selection decision needs to be made;
—the applicant clearly exceeds the minimum standards for selection (especially, for the case of overseas students, the English language standard);
—there are no reservations expressed by the Selection Committee and no aspects of the application that require elucidation.

(B) **Selecting applicants for optional interviews or tests.** When the relevant Resolution on Selection states that 'the Selection Committee may conduct interviews and tests', and the Selection Committee has decided that for a given intake the interview or test will not be required of all applicants, the interview or test cannot be required of an individual applicant unless
(i) the decision to interview or test is made by the Selection Committee, not by an individual Selection Officer; and
(ii) the reasons for imposing the interview or test are documented; and
(iii) these reasons include the identification of matters that the Selection Committee believes require elucidation.

(C) **Advice to the applicant on the nature of the interview or test.** The applicant must be notified appropriately of the nature of the interview or test, its format, and broad issues likely to be relevant to the Selection Committee's judgement of its outcome.

An example of acceptable notification might be "The interview will be of between 15 and 30 minutes duration, and will be conducted by a panel of from three to five people. The purpose of the interview is to elucidate any aspect of your written application that may require further consideration, and more generally to assess your suitability for selection into the course and your likelihood to be successful in it. Specific points the panel may consider include your interest in the course and motivation for undertaking it; your likely capacity for establishing and maintaining rapport with patients in a clinical setting; your communication skills; your aptitude for collaboration and decision making."

(D) **Scoring and documenting interview or test performance.** It is not necessary to describe to the applicant how the interview or test is scored, but it is essential to ensure consistency in selection that an agreed method of scoring is adopted for any given course and that the results of the scoring are formally recorded (with brief reasons for the scoring where feasible) and signed off by panel members.

An acceptable example for a lengthy panel interview would be for individual panel members to award scores in the range 1–5, with an agreed benchmark (e.g. average score 3 is the minimum standard acceptable) and record an interview outcome like this. "Mr Jonathon Apple was interviewed by Professor Lapping, Dr Piercemuller and Mr Odgers. The panel have particular reservations about Mr Apple's oral communication skills. They award an average interview score of 2.7 out of 5 and recommend against selection of Mr Apple." Other interview formats—such as "multi-mini interviews"—may require different scoring and reporting arrangments.

(E) **Scheduling of interviews or tests.** Applicants must be clearly advised how they can obtain a time for their interview or test, and should normally be supplied with their interview or test time and advice on the nature of the interview or test [cf. (C) above] at least one week before the interview or test.

Additional good practices recommended but not mandated

(a) Where feasible, all interviews should be conducted by the same panel, or by panels with one or more members in common, to ensure consistency in selection decisions.

(b) Where feasible, interview panels should include at least three interviewers, at least one of whom is an *academic* staff member.

(c) The use of a set of standard questions to be asked of all applicants is encouraged, but additional questions that arise naturally in the interview process are permitted.

(d) The University provides training to members of employment selection panels which helps to identify 'inappropriate' questions that should not be asked. This training may also be valuable for members of postgraduate selection panels, and selection officers are encouraged to undertake it.

(e) It is expected that applicants not already present in Australia would not normally be required to attend a face-to-face interview at their expense in Australia. If face-to-face interviews are required, such interviews would need to occur at a place more accessible to the applicants. Where telephone interviews replace face-to-face interviews, Selection Committees should consider carefully how results of face-to-face and telephone interviews can be compared fairly, and how the identity of an applicant interviewed by telephone may be verified.

(f) As academic and administrative staff frequently travel to countries that are major sources of postgraduate enrolments, interviews outside Australia may sometimes be possible. It is important that appropriate distinctions between *promotion* and *selection* activities be maintained in these cases.

(g) Interviews are not primary mechanisms for determining English language competency, as the University imposes recognized standards in other ways, but poor communication skills evidenced on interview can be relevant to selection decisions. However, in the case of overseas applicants (and especially for telephone interviews) due allowance may be made for the difficulties that applicants unused to interviews conducted in English may face, and the attendant stress to which they are subject.

2. Auditions

Mandatory requirements and additional good practices recommended for interviews and tests apply equally to auditions for music programs or for other performing arts programs. However, there are additional matters requiring clear advice to applicants undertaking musical auditions that are included in a specific requirement below.

Mandatory requirements

(A) Auditions are to be regarded as tests and subject to the mandatory requirements listed under "1. Interviews and tests" above.

(B) For musical auditions, clear advice must be given to applicants on repertoire, provision and tuning of instruments, provision of accompanists, and any responsibility for provision of music or texts consistent with copyright regulations either for their own use or the use of the assessors.

(C) For theatrical auditions, or auditions for other forms of performance-based activity, clear advice must be given to applicants on repertoire or texts to be used, and any responsibility for provision of texts consistent with copyright regulations either for their own use or the use of the assessors.

3. Folios and work samples

Clear guidelines need to be given to applicants and Selection Committees concerning presentation standards. Some applicants may be advantaged by access to superior facilities (e.g., architecture applicants currently working in an especially well-equipped firm). The importance of assessing content rather than surface polish is noted.

The University must be able to take appropriate steps to verify the authenticity of submitted work. Attention is drawn to the remarks on page 10 concerning applicants who prefer not to have their current employers made aware of their application.

Individual programs for which folios or work samples are prescribed may have additional special requirements for the structure and content of the folios or work samples, or the way in which they are assessed. However, these special requirements are additional to, and do not replace, the three general requirements (A)–(C) below.

Mandatory requirements

(A) **Authenticity of the submitted work.** An explicit declaration that the work submitted is the original, individual work of the applicant is required. If the work is necessarily collaborative, the nature and extent of the applicant's contribution must be declared, and details of the principal collaborators also supplied. If there are restrictions on how long ago the work was done, these should be incorporated in the declaration.

(B) **Specified nature of the submitted work and its assessment.** Clear guidelines on the nature and extent of submitted work and assessment criteria must be provided to applicants. Selection Committees must document the criteria against which submitted work is assessed. Generally, submitted work is to be assessed according to its quality (including artistic merit, technical competence, or other attributes as appropriate), its extent, and its relevance to the proposed course or demonstration of potential to succeed in that course. Clear guidelines need to be given to applicants and to Selection Committees concerning presentation standards.

In areas where applicants are expected to display significant artistic or creative ability, the guidelines for submitted work need not be unduly restrictive as to content, but should clearly indicate any limits on size, types of materials, and so on, that need to be imposed.

(C) **Subsequent disposal or use of the submitted work.** The applicant must be clearly advised of way in which material submitted with the application will be treated subsequently. If the applicant has the opportunity to have the material returned, the manner in which it is to be returned, and the responsibilities for costs involved must be explained. If the material will not be returned, the applicant should know this before sending it.

Additional good practices recommended but not mandated
(a) Where feasible, independent verification of the authenticity of the work should be required. In many disciplines, it will usually be possible for applicants to provide in addition details of of appropriate clients, employers, collaborators or peers who can verify the authenticity of the work. For those disciplines, details of people who can verify the authenticity of the work should be required, and applicants who are unable or unwilling to provide such details must provide a clear justification for this, and must supply a statutory declaration or equivalent document attesting to the authenticity of the work.
(b) For other disciplines, the use of statutory declarations or equivalent document for all applicants is strongly encouraged.
(c) Applicants should be notified that the University reserves the right to check authenticity and that in submitting an application, the applicant gives consent for the University to perform such checks.
(d) The Selection Committee, or the Faculty or Graduate School on whose behalf it acts, are not obliged to check rigorously the authenticity of work supplied by each applicant, but it is suggested that checks be performed in randomly selected cases and especially in any case where authenticity is considered questionable. Note that the rejection of an application on the grounds of suspicion that the submitted work is not the authentic work of the applicant is problematic unless appropriate checks have been performed to test this hypothesis.

4. Work experience

In Resolutions on Selection where work experience is specified, 'documented relevant professional or work experience' or similar phrasing is normally is used. Appropriate selection practices will respect and address carefully the meaning of these words. Attention is drawn to the remarks on page 10 concerning applicants who prefer not to have their current employers made aware of their application. Individual programs for which work experience or professional experience is prescribed may have additional special requirements for the nature, documentation and assessment of this experience. However, these special requirements are additional to, and do not replace, the following three general requirements (A)—(C).

Mandatory requirements

(A) **Nature and relevance of the work experience.** The applicant must show how the work experience is relevant to the program of study to be undertaken. Examples of what constitutes acceptable work or professional experience for the discipline should be given. This includes not only the type of employer, but also the type of duties performed for that employer. In some disciplines, a great variety of types of work experience may be appropriate, but work experience of dubious or undemonstrated relevance should not be accepted.

(B) **Extent of the work experience.** Periods of work experience are to be interpreted as full-time equivalent, so that for people with an employment history in part-time positions, an appropriately longer period of relevant employment is required. It should be clearly indicated for each course in guidelines to the Selection Committee if fragmented work experience is not acceptable, or if it is to be valued differently from an equivalent period of continuous experience in a single organization. Where work experience is a prescribed requirement for selection, the prescribed minimum amount must have been completed before the student commences the course. It is not acceptable to permit the student to make up a deficiency in required prior work experience by undertaking such work while enrolled in the course.

(C) **Authentication and documentation of the work experience.** The submitted documentation must include the name of the organization, the dates of employment, and the nature of the work done. The documentation that will be given the greatest credence will be that which
(i) is employer or client supplied, or able to be checked by contacting the employer or client,
(ii) includes a position description, contract brief or other appropriate details.
The explicit reference to 'client' recognizes that in some cases the applicant may have been self-employed, or have a professional history that is not that of an employee in a firm or organization. When references are supplied, these may be used to substantiate work experience claims made. When it is not possible for the University to verify independently that the submitted work or professional experience information is correct, the Selection Committee should normally require the applicant to submit a Statutory Declaration or equivalent certification that the schedule of work experience submitted is accurate.

5. Referee reports and employer references

Individual programs for which employer references or reports are prescribed may have additional special requirements for the structure and content of the references or reports, or the way in which they are assessed. However, these special requirements are additional to, and do not replace, the following three general requirements (A), (B) and (C). Attention is drawn to the remarks on page 10 concerning applicants who prefer not to have their current employers made aware of their application.

Mandatory requirements

(A) **Authenticity of the reference or report.** Where feasible, the reference or report is to be sent directly to the University by the referee, independent of the applicant. Such references may be sent by conventional post, fax, or e-mail. Conventional post or faxed references should bear the letterhead of the employer and be signed. Postmarks or sending fax numbers that are inconsistent with the letterhead details should be regarded as raising doubts as to the authenticity of the reference. References or reports sent by e-mail should be sent from an identifiable e-mail address consistent with the location of the referee, and their receipt must always be acknowledged by e-mail.

When the reference or report is unable to be forwarded directly by the referee, as in the case of many international applications, the reference or report must either be a signed original copy on letterhead paper, or a formally certified or notarized true copy of a signed original letterhead paper. References or reports sent by the applicant by fax or e-mail are never acceptable.

In the event of any uncertainty as to the authenticity of a report or reference for an applicant that the Selection Committee is inclined otherwise to accept, the employer or referee should be contacted to confirm that the reference is authentic.

(B) **Specified content of the reference or report.** Guidelines should be provided for the benefit of employers or referees in writing references, and to assist applicants in selecting appropriate referees. The following minimal standards apply in all cases.
(i) Employer references or reports must contain or be accompanied by a position description or descriptions relating to the applicant's career with the referencing employer.
(ii) In personal references from mentors, professional colleagues or former employers, the workplace relationship between the referee and the applicant and the duration and closeness of the relationship need to be clearly stated.
(iii) The reference or report should address in some detail the competence and performance of the applicant.
References or reports that establish the relevance of the applicant's past employment or activities to the proposed course of study, or their continuity of purpose in seeking to undertake the course, are to be valued more highly than references or reports that do not address this issue.

(C) **Relevance of certain content.** In keeping with the University's legal obligations with respect to discrimination, comments in references or reports that are immaterial to the application must be ignored in assessing the application. These immaterial matters include, but are not limited to, ethnicity, gender, family circumstances, and age (as distinct from years of professional experience). However, statements that cast doubt on the integrity of the applicant or on their ability to conduct themselves within the expectations of the University in respect of academic integrity, ethical conduct, discrimination or harassment should be considered.

6. Applicant Statements

When applying to the Academic Board via Selection Procedures Committee for permission to use applicant statements, the relevant Faculty or Graduate School must explain clearly why the use of applicant statements will improve selection, how the statements will be used, and how they will be assessed. These details will not appear under the published Resolutions on Selection, but must be recorded by the Faculty or Graduate School.

Since discipline preparation and educational background are assessed using other selection instruments, the applicant statement needs to address matters other than these to be an appropriate selection instrument. Information in the applicant statement is generally unverifiable, and should not be used to elucidate, for example, information in the applicant's academic transcript.

The use of applicant statements as part of a holistic assessment needs to be cognisant of the requirement for an objective assessment of the applicant's ranking and potential to succeed in the course, and must be publicly defensible.

Mandatory requirements

(A) For each intake, the Selection Committee must be aware of the details for the use of applicant statements for the course that have been approved by Selection Procedures Committee, and must understand in which of the following ways the statement is used:

- as a preliminary screening device;
- as a primary selection instrument, with substantial weight in the selection decision;
- as a secondary selection instrument, with small weight in the selection decision;
- to break ties between comparable selectable applicants when selectable applicants exceed available places.

It is acceptable, in a sequential selection process, to use applicant statements in two of these ways at different stages in the process.

(B) The Selection Committee must understand how the quality of applicant statements is to be assessed and use a consistent agreed method of scoring statements appropriate to the way in which the statement is being used.

(C) Where it is not possible for the same individuals to read all applications, some application statements must be re-scored by additional Selection Committee members to verify acceptable consistency in assessment. Each statement must be rated by at least two Selection Committee members, at least one of whom should be an academic staff member, and a consistently applied method of determining final ratings must be used when committee members assign different scores to the same statement.

(D) Applicants must be informed about the relative importance of the applicant statement, its purpose, appropriate content, format and length.

(E) The statement is to be a statement about the applicant by the applicant, not by a third party, and must be the original and unassisted work of the applicant. The applicant must be required to attest that the statement is original, unassisted, and correct.

7. General declaration by an applicant

It is important to explain clearly to applicants the University's expectations on the accuracy and integrity of the application, and to secure the applicant's explicit acknowledgement of these expectations. While the general declaration recommended below implicitly covers all aspects of the application, it does not remove the requirement for statutory declarations or equivalent statements discussed in some of the recommendations above, to deal with cases where normally available independently verifiable information is unable to be provided. It is felt that the specific requirement for statutory declarations in these cases draws special attention to the matters covered.

The precise wording of the general declaration that is either signed on paper or acknowledged during an on-line application process may be discipline-specific but the wording should conform to the following general principles.

(A) The applicant attests that all statements made in the application are correct.

(B) The applicant attests that all attached documents and all documents that they have arranged to be forwarded separately are authentic.

(C) The applicant understands and agrees that the University may contact listed employers, referees or educational institutions to verify details or seek further information.

(D) The applicant understands and agrees that the University may terminate enrolment for students whose applications or supporting documents are found to be false or to contain false information.

(E) Applications that seek to remove or modify any of these conditions should normally be immediately rejected.

8. Confidentiality issues

Confidentiality of an individual's status as an applicant
On some occasions an applicant may prefer not to have a current employer aware of their plans to undertake further study before they have actually been offered a place. The applicant's wishes in this respect, if clearly stated in the application, should be accommodated, but the applicant is then obliged to ensure that appropriate evidence is available to support the application for those programs where employer references or documented relevant work experience are specified in the selection resolution.

If concerns as to the accuracy of work experience claimed subsequently arise, the university is entitled to contact the employer *after the student has been offered and accepted a place.* In a similar manner, where the authenticity of folios or work samples can only be verified by a current employer of the applicant, an applicant's request for confidentiality should also be accommodated, but again the university retains the right to contact the employer *after the student has been offered and accepted a place* if concerns as to authenticity arise.

Confidentiality of application materials
Except as obliged by relevant legislation,

(1) all material related to the application supplied by persons other than the applicant, including referee reports and employer references, is regarded as confidential and is not available except to university staff with a genuine need to access it for the purposes of selection, quality assurance, or unsatisfactory progress investigation;

(2) all material supplied by the applicant in connection with the application, including personal statements, folios and work samples, is regarded as confidential and is not available except to university staff with a genuine need to access it for the purposes of selection, quality assurance, or unsatisfactory progress investigation;

(3) confidential application-related material that the university does not seek to retain should be either disposed of in a manner appropriate for confidential material, or returned to the person who supplied it.

9. Publication of information related to entry requirements and selection practices

All courses must have a resolution on selection that has been approved by Academic Board, and that the resolution on selection should be a *statement of the minimum requirements for eligibility for consideration* rather than a list of all possible entry pathways.

Except where the Academic Board has approved guaranteed entry standards, entry to courses is competitive and subject to the Selection Committee's judgment of relative merit of applicants and to access and equity provisions approved by the Academic Board. Advice to applicants must not suggest that all applicants eligible to be considered will be selected.

Faculties and graduate schools must not publish descriptions of entry requirements that are inconsistent with the relevant resolutions on selection approved by the Academic Board.

It is appropriate to publish or disseminate information that explains the requirements in terms likely to be more clearly understood by the general public or assists applicants to prepare applications that are complete, conform to format standards that the selection committee may favour or require, and are likely to be successful. This information may include guidance as to the purpose of the selection instruments used and their relative importance of the selection instruments used.

It is not appropriate to provide applicants with the details of scoring procedures used for individual selection instruments or precise details of how the scores associated with various selection instruments are combined to make a final decision.