Method:	Interviews

Description:	Interviews aim for rich and detailed information through a one-on-one conversation between the researcher and interviewee (in person, by 'phone or online). Often, they are structured around a script, although still allowing people to say what they think and mean using their own words. They can be adapted according to the interviewee's responses (freeform), according to a fixed set of questions (structured) or somewhere in between (semi-structured). The results are usually analysed qualitatively (but could be analysed quantitatively as well if all the interviews are conducted in the same way).
Application:	Interviews with students and participants are probably most appropriate when thinking about the personal development aspects of the NERUPI Framework. They would also be useful to get an in depth perspective from stakeholders close to or working with the target groups. As well as providing rich data on which to draw conclusions, interviews can also be useful as part of developing in-depth case studies. Interviews can also be used in exploratory ways, for example, to find out impacts of policies and processes or outcomes of an activity/intervention that had not previously been considered.
Type of evidence:	OfS Type 1 (narrative) but could be OfS Type 2 (empirical) in some circumstances. Interviews can be used as a reflective tool to elicit perspectives on pre/post change, development or growth. Interview data is qualitative but can be quantitative if questions are consistent and the sample size is large enough (generally at least 30 if you want to use percentages).
Strengths:	The main benefit is getting an in-depth perspective of people's experiences and views. This can be helpful in answering 'why' and 'how' questions. Collecting personal stories can tell you something of how people perceive and experience their conditions. Structured interviews provide more focus but it is useful to include some flexibility to avoid overlooking aspects, which might otherwise not be covered. There is the opportunity to explain the questions if necessary, and to probe on the reasons why a participant gives a certain response.
Weaknesses:	Interviews are often time-consuming to set up, conduct, transcribe and analyse. The data can take some time to analyse and interpret. If there is a lot of data however using qualitative data analysis software could be an option. A disadvantage is that the results can be affected by various factors including the dynamic between the interviewer and interviewee, as well as the interviewee's level of motivation. Interviewees may conceal aspects of themselves, may have a hidden agenda, or may tell researchers what they think they want to hear. Using experienced interviewers and thinking and the format and location of the interview can help with this. This type of interview cannot be integrated into interventions.
Mixed Methods:	Using interviews can sometimes help to explore a topic to find out the range of views before planning a questionnaire survey. Or they could be held following a survey to explore the issues arising in more depth.
Indicators:	Interviews can be a good way of exploring engagement issues and outcomes for participants including those relating to imagined futures, self-belief, acquisition of expertise, application of learning and social networks. Interviews with stakeholders will be useful when considering "what works".
Expertise:	High
Requirements:	Interviews are usually best conducted by trained researchers. Another approach is to use peer to peer interviewees, and in this instance the interviewers need to be trained. There may be costs involved for travel etc. if interviews are done face to face. Barring checks will be needed, and possibly parental consent, in cases where the interviewees are minors or vulnerable groups. Interviews generate a lot of information and this needs to be stored and analysed appropriately. It is often a good idea to record the interview and use the transcription because otherwise a lot of meaning might be lost, although

transcribing interviews can be quite a laborious or costly process. A key part of the process is also piloting or testing interview questions to ensure they are clear to the interviewee and that they elicit a relevant response.

Ethical considerations: It is common practice to conduct interviews on the basis of informed consent. This process usually involves giving interviewees written information detailing the key information such as: the purpose of the interview and topics to be covered; time required from them; data handling arrangements; any risks or benefits of participating; the right to not answer a specific question and to withdraw from the research all together, including at a later date after the interview. If you are offering reimbursement that you would also need to specify the financial arrangements and procedures. It can be helpful to use a form for these, which interviewees sign to give their consent.

Barring checks will be required for interviews with children and young people. Because interviews are used to probe in-depth on sensitive personal perspectives, issues of harm also need to be considered and agreement reached on how to deal with this if it emerges.

Using a recorder to capture the interview in a verbatim way can be helpful to avoid interviewer bias creeping in. If the interview is being recorded, then the interviewee will need to agree before the recording begins.

Interview records need to be held securely to preserve confidentiality. When reporting, to preserve anonymity, you need to make sure that your write-up does not enable individuals to be identified.

Depending on where and when interviews are conducted, safety of the interviewee may also need to be planned for.

For more on the ethical considerations in research interviewing see: https://methods.sagepub.com/book/doing-interviews/n3.xml

Work planning: The first step is to select your interviewees. Interviews are usually only carried out with a sample rather than the whole population so you need to think about the best way to select interviewees. You could aim for a cross section of views, or to target a particular set of people/characteristics. The sample doesn't need to be large if you are aiming for qualitative data, although you will need to include enough people to the point where you are happy you have collected an appropriate range of views.

Thought is needed about the interview script and questions you want to answer and the best way to structure the interview. Having at least a checklist is a good idea to make sure you cover the key issues (and can also help with the analysis). You could consider using alternatives to interview questions to get the information you need. For example, asking participants to draw a timeline describing a series of events. It is usually a good idea to pilot the survey with a small number first to check the questions are understood before launching into the interviews.

It is generally best practice to set up the interview in advance, and you'll need to take time to go through the informed consent process. If interviews are in person a comfortable neutral location is best. Interviews could last anywhere from 30 minutes upwards. An hour is probably optimum to avoid over burdening interviewees.

During the interview, the interviewer should restate the purpose and so on. The aim should be to put the interviewee at ease, but it is important to avoid leading questions and gestures. Open questions are used to encourage detailed answers and the interviewer may need to probe to get more information and clarification.

At the end of the interview, the interviewer should check if the interviewee has any questions or concerns (as well as thanking the interviewee for their participation and explaining the next steps and how the information will be used).

Analysis: Once interviews are complete, and the interviews have been transcribed (or written up if notes were taken), the next stage is usually data analysis and this could be done in a range of ways. One common approach to qualitative data analysis is to interpret the comments made into categories and 'code' these in order to draw out the themes. Sometimes it is useful to use a spreadsheet to record the themes against specific interviewees, which can help you to quantify the range of views if this is what you are aiming to do. The approach needs to be undertaken systematically and you should define your coding framework and rules followed for the coding as precisely as possible. The data usually needs to be reviewed more than once.

Coding can help with the next stage, which is interpreting the data. This could involve looking for similarities and differences between different participants to identify the insights relevant to the research questions. Other themes and areas for further research are also likely to emerge.

The evaluation report should include an account of what you did, and the process for analysing the qualitative data. It is important to be transparent about your methods and any limitations. Quotes and other commentary should be careful not to break interviewee confidentiality.

Reporting:

Interview findings are likely to be of considerable interest to the Praxis Team but particular care is required because preserving confidentiality and/or anonymity is required.

For formal reports and presentations quotes and comments can complement and illuminate findings from other methods such as questionnaire surveys. For process evaluation, rich data from qualitative interviews can be especially important in examining the experiential dimensions of activities/interventions.

Useful links:

Article on different types of interviews. https://www.simplypsychology.org/interviews.html#design

Research Methods in Education: Interviews. Guidance on types of interviews, including tips for interviewers. https://lled500.trubox.ca/2016/225

Article on using templates in structured interviews. https://www.cleverism.com/interview-schedule-definition-types-templates-tips/#:~:text=An%20interview%20schedule%20is%20basically,a%20specific%20topic%20or%20issue.

University of Hawaii: Example interview template. Sets out suggestions for an interview questionnaire. https://www.hawaii.edu/mauispeech/pdf/interviewschedule.pdf

Interviews: Practice example

Researchers at the Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute (LHERI) used biographical life-grid interviews with students as part of research to understand the impact of University of Lincoln's Access Covenant (AC). This research project also included interviews with staff delivering AC services, a survey of university students including those who have accessed AC support, as well as the biographical life-grid interviews, which were held with students who have at least one characteristic of disadvantage.

The interviews with staff were seen as a way of drawing on tacit and implicit knowledge of the practitioners, in accordance with a critical realist approach to widening participation evaluation. Twelve members of staff took part between October-December 2018, all of whom were in posts related to, or funded by the AC. Participants were asked questions about the nature of their role; the relationship of their work to the AC; if their service was targeted to AC students, and if so how; if the service was reaching the AC students; how this information was recorded and shared; the impact of their service and how their service might be improved. The interviewees received a copy of the questions prior to the interview to help them to prepare and bring relevant documentation to the evaluation.

Biographical life-grid interviews were chosen for the interviews with students because they can help with the discussion of sensitive issues. The approach involves interviewees and researchers mapping events along a timeline. The student interviewees were selected as a follow up to the online survey, which asked students to volunteer for participation in further research. Ten biographical life grid interviews with students were undertaken between March and May 2019 and analysed in July 2019. The first interview was a pilot and was used to help refine the questions and prompts used in the subsequent nine interviews. Each student was asked to complete a 'life-grid' with details of their life experiences and education prior to entering HE and were asked questions about their decision to study at the University of Lincoln and how this was made; their experience of their first year of university; their awareness and experience of the AC services; and their reflections on the efficacy of the services and areas for improvement. The students were an extremely diverse group, although all possessed one or more characteristics that matched the remit of the AC. Although the findings were not generalizable, they were used with the results of the staff interviews and student survey to give a nuanced understanding of the student survey results, and for insight into how people's personal experiences influence interactions with student support services.

The interviews with staff and students were recorded and the audio files transcribed and then analysed thematically by the researchers. In order to preserve anonymity, since the numbers of staff within some services is small, responses and quotes were referred to by interview number. In the case of students, the interviewees chose or were allocated a pseudonym. Four central themes were identified through the analysis of the student interviews: awareness of the services; deciding to access the services; the impact of the services; and the future of the services. Short, descriptive accounts of the individual interviews were appended to the evaluation report.

The information from interviews was used alongside findings from the wider student survey. The conclusions from the evaluation focused on the take-up of AC services, the identification of 'what works' most effectively, and what can be improved. Recommendations included facilitation of a community of practice for AC staff; involvement of students in the creation and evaluation of the services designed to support them; improved communication to manage student's expectations; development of a Theory of Change for the AC; more consistent data collection and targeting across AC services, data sharing. The study suggested that further longitudinal research would be beneficial to explore longer-term impacts of the AC, along with further work on understanding and addressing the 'hidden' barriers to accessing AC services and interventions that some students may experience.

<u>References</u>

Spacey, R., and Sanderson, R. (2019) Understanding the impact of the Access Covenant: Access and participation plan evaluation report 2018/19. Lincoln: Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute (LHERI).