THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

Guidance for Writing Job Descriptions
&
Using Generic Job Descriptions

Contents

Writing a new Job Description 1

Overview 1

5 Principles for writing Job Descriptions 3

The Job Description – Working through the template 5

Why this role matters 6

What you will be doing (main responsibilities of the job holder) 6

Our Values and Behaviours underpin everything we do at the University. 8

Planning and Organising 8

Problem Solving 9

Decision Making 10

What you bring to the role 10

What else you need to know about the role 13

Using a Generic Job Description 14

Other Considerations 14

Disclosure and PVG 15

Key Job hazard information specific to the role 15

Writing a new Job Description

Overview

The Job Description (JD) and Job Advert may be the first time a candidate engages with the University and our values. It is important to carefully consider how the JD is written. It should be easy to understand and demonstrate our commitment to inclusivity and integrity. Consider referring to the University Strategy to include information about our vision, purpose and values.

Before you start writing a new job description, please refer to our Generic Job Description Library as a suitable template may already exist.

To help you write your JD, you will need the following documents to hand:

- A Job Description template, which can be found on the HR A-Z Forms page.
- The Grade Profiles document - a reference guide for the skills and experience expected for each grade and job category (academic, technical, administrative).
- The University's Standardised Matrix for Planning & Organising; Problem-Solving; and Decision Making, which can be found on the HR A-Z Forms page.

You must consider and include within the Job Description if the role requires the person to hold a Disclosure or Protection of Vulnerable Groups membership or whether there are any Health and Safety requirements. Further details to include in all JDs is in the Other Considerations section.

Purpose

The Job Description is the basis for attracting, developing, and evaluating employees and acts as a guide for expectations of performance. It is important that the information listed in the Job Description has the right level of detail so that it meaningfully outlines what the role is designed to achieve. It is equally important that the Job Description is not an

exhaustive task list -- it should be a summary of the type of work that is done.

Across the University, Job Descriptions are used for:

- Prospective staff - providing a clear description of the role, expectations and context.
- Current staff - supporting performance and development conversations.
- Organisational consistency - role matching and evaluation.
    - Role matching involves matching roles against the University grade profiles to determine the grade of new roles or the re-grading of existing roles.
    - Role evaluation is a detailed review by trained evaluators (used for a small number of roles).

5 Principles for writing Job Descriptions

1. It's about the role, not the person

A good job description focuses on the role itself, its purpose, responsibilities, and expected outcomes, and is not defined by the competency or capability of the current role-holder. Job descriptions contribute to workforce planning and should be designed to enable continuity and stability within the local area and broader organisation.

Managers are responsible for defining roles based on organisational needs. Job Descriptions should only be updated when there are sustained changes to the requirements of the job, not specific achievements of the role-holder.

2. It's a summary, not a list

A well-written Job Description summarises the role, bringing it to life by focusing on its purpose, key responsibilities, and areas of ownership, rather than listing tasks. Long task lists can quickly become outdated and may overwhelm or deter strong applicants.

Framing responsibilities around processes and outcomes helps candidates understand the

scope of the role and see where they add value, while allowing flexibility in how work is delivered. See the 'What you will be doing (main responsibilities of the job holder)' section below for examples of how to move from task-based lists to more meaningful outcome-focused descriptions.

3. Think objectively about what is needed

Try to describe the Job Description as objectively and accurately as possible, focusing on what is genuinely required rather than understating or overstating expectations. A clear, factual description helps candidates understand the level of responsibility required and supports realistic expectations, which is important for longer-term employee satisfaction and performance.

Be specific. For example, rather than saying a technician 'maintains equipment', it is better to describe the activity like: 'performs preventive maintenance inspections and service on X machines.' This makes expectations more transparent and easier to talk about how to perform well in the role.

4. Keep language simple and welcoming

Overly complex language, jargon and unexplained acronyms can cause confusion and may deter good candidates from applying. Try to use plain English, using simple wording and sentence structure. Short, clear sentences are more accessible and easier to understand for everyone (GOV.UK, Accessibility, Readability).

A warm, direct tone can also make the role more engaging. Using "we" and "you" (e.g. "we value...", "you will...", or "your responsibilities will include..." helps candidates to see themselves in the role and creates a sense of inclusion and ownership.

5. Be inclusive and take steps to avoid bias

We want to attract people from a wide range of backgrounds, perspectives and experiences because this strengthens decision-making, supports innovation, and helps us better reflect and serve our community. Unconscious bias can influence how roles are described and who feels encouraged to apply. Small changes, such as avoiding biased or exclusionary terms can make a meaningful difference to who sees themselves in the role. When writing your job description aim for clear, neutral language. Try using tools like the Gender Bias Decoder, which highlights wording that may unintentionally deter some applicants.

There are a number of online courses in the People and Money Learn App to complete before starting to recruit. These are practical tools to support fair and inclusive recruitment:

- Recruitment and Selection Essentials
- Challenging Unconscious Bias
- Equality and Diversity Essentials

We encourage you to look through Diversifying Recruitment pages for more information.

The Job Description – Working through the template

Job Descriptions should usually be **no more than two pages long** and describe the core of the role in broad terms: fine details are not necessary. Take care not to repeat the same information in different sections.

- **Job title:** The role title should clearly communicate the nature of the role and be consistent with similar roles. Please refrain from using internal acronyms within the job title.
- **Grade:** e.g. UE03.
- **School/Department:** The title of the department or where the job will be based.

- **Reports to:** Enter the **job title**, not the individual, to which this role reports (e.g. Head of School, Housekeeping Supervisor, Chief Technician, Director of Finance). If the role is answerable to more than one post for different areas of responsibilities, please give a brief indication of this division of reporting line. Please also highlight if the line manager is in a different location to the role-holder.

Why this role matters

This paragraph should summarise the overall purpose of the role from the University's point of view in **2-3 sentences**.

It should not be a detailed description, but rather a highlight that attracts the reader to continue down to the more detailed sections. Outline what the role is intended to achieve, providing relevant information that describes the scope of the role on an ongoing basis.

For example: "As a School/Department Administrator you will play an important role in enabling the day-to-day running of [School/Department]. Working closely with academic, professional service and technical colleagues, you will be a reliable and approachable point of support for staff and students, playing a key part in enabling teaching, research and student activity to run smoothly."

What you will be doing (main responsibilities of the job holder)

This section should outline the key areas of responsibility and outputs of the job. Most jobs will have **4-8 main responsibilities in total**. If there are more than eight, it is probably a list of duties rather than the key areas of responsibility. You will find the Grade Profiles document particularly useful here.

Write the responsibilities in order of importance and estimate the approximate amount of time spent on each activity during the year (this will enable responsibilities that vary over the annual cycle to be described accurately). Time spent should be captured as a percentage. Each key responsibility must be no less than 5% of time and should add up to 100% (percentages listed below in the "Examples" are examples from a range of different roles)

Each responsibility statement should be constructed in two halves:

- First describe the main activity (what is done and to what/whom) by beginning with an action verb in the present tense (e.g. coordinate, analyse, design).
- Then describe why or the end result of the role.

Examples:

- Move and set up furniture and equipment in rooms throughout the University so that meetings and conferences can take place – 20% of time
- Maintain and update the student database within the school so that accurate and reliable information is available to Senior Management - 30% of time
- Provide technical assistance to academic staff, researchers and students so that experiments and research are completed in an efficient and timely manner - 70% of time
- Supervise and develop your team so that staff have the motivation and skills to deliver required levels of performance - 10% of time
- Contribute to the delivery of teaching programmes for undergraduate students to meet the school's teaching objectives - 50% of time
- Contribute to writing bids to win research grants - 10% of time

Once the statements are drafted, check that:

- Together they represent all of the key responsibilities of the role (the

relative importance of each of these may change from year to year)

- They focus on results, not tasks
- Each one is distinct from the others, and describes a specific area in which results must be achieved
- They relate specifically to this job
- Language is clear, simple and inclusive

Our Values and Behaviours underpin everything we do at the University.

The way we plan and organise work, solve problems, and make decisions should always reflect the University's values and behaviours.

All roles have a level of decision-making, planning and organising, and problem-solving. As you complete the following sections, refer to the University's Standardised Matrix for Planning & Organising; Problem-Solving; and Decision Making. This has been designed to support consistency across the University, align with our grade profiles, and help you clearly describe the responsibilities of the role. Use the matrix to populate these sections with the grade level of responsibility that best reflects the expectations of the role.

As you do this, consider the University Behaviours Charter. The guidance in each section below contains examples of this (in italics) to illustrate how role tasks align with our behaviours in practice.

Planning and Organising

This section describes the role holder's level of responsibility for planning and organising workloads or resources. Use the Planning and Organising section of the Matrix to select the most appropriate level of responsibility for this role. Then copy and paste all the content for that level. When doing so, you will need to consider both the practical and behavioural

aspects of planning:

- Where does the work typically come from (assigned tasks and procedures or strategic priorities)? *(Excellence)*[1]
- What planning is required and over what timescale (day, week, months, or longer)? *(Excellence)*
- To what extent does the role-holder need to proactively and effectively manage their own workload and time, and that of others? *(Principled)*
- Is continuous improvement an important aspect of the role? *(Relevant)*
- Does the role-holder need to explicitly align their work to University Strategy? *(Ambitious)*

Problem Solving

This section describes the scope and level of responsibility over problems or challenges typically faced by the role holder and how they will be expected to solve them. Focus on issues that occur regularly rather than unusual situations. Use the Problem-solving section of the Matrix to select the most appropriate level of responsibility for this role. Then copy and paste all the content for that level what types of problems or challenges are typically faced and:

- What part does the role-holder play in solving these (identifying issues, analysing information, recommending solutions, or implementing them, etc.)? *(Relevant)*
- Does the role-holder think independently or in collaboration with others to solve problems? *(Accessible and Inclusive)*
- To what extent will the role-holder be expected to understand the root-cause of issues and work constructively with others to resolve them? *(Relevant)*
- How important is it for the role-holder to learn from problems and look for new

[1] Behaviours Charter

and better ways of doing things? *(Ambitious)*

Decision Making

This section describes the level of decisions made within the role and the degree of judgement involved. Use the Decision-making section of the Matrix to select the most appropriate level of responsibility for this role. Then copy and paste all the content for that level. When doing so, consider the types of decisions made, the level of independence, and the guidance available to support them, for example:

- What their role will be in how decisions are made, e.g. to what extent are decisions made independently, in collaboration with others, or escalated? *(Relevant)*
- To what extent the role-holder is expected to value different knowledge and skills from others as part of their decision making? *(Accessible and Inclusive)*
- How accountable the role-holder is for decision-making *(Principled)*

What you bring to the role

The information in this section will be used to assess candidates at both shortlisting and interview.

Criteria are grouped into three categories: Key Skills, Knowledge & Experience, and Education & Qualifications. These will be used to shape interview questions and scoring, so it is important to clearly describe the skills and experience needed and write them in a way that allows applicants to show where and how they meet each requirement. Essential criteria should reflect what is genuinely needed to perform the role.

As you approach this next section, focus on the actual skills needed and think about want you want the job-holder to deliver, the skills and abilities required, and the transferable skills candidates may bring from different contexts. Where a role has traditionally required a

degree, consider whether this is essential to do the job. Taking this approach helps remove unnecessary barriers and supports a broader and more diverse candidate pool. For further support, please see our Diversifying Recruitment pages.

Attribute	Essential	Desirable
Key Skills (what the person needs to be able to do well)	Use this section to list the core skills needed to carry out the role effectively. This should be kept to **5–8 skills in total**. Use the main responsibilities to develop these. • Write skills as short, clear capabilities. For example: Development and design, communication, customer service, collaborative working, prioritisation, data management and IT skills in MS Office Suite, etc.	Consider using this section carefully and think about skills that are desirable, but not essential.
Knowledge & Experience (how the skills are usually applied)	Use this section to expand on the Key Skills listed above and describe how they are typically used in practice. Avoid introducing new skills here — instead, focus on context and evidence. This is where you can: • Focus on what someone can do, rather than how or where they learned it. • Explain how the skills are applied in the	e.g. British Sign Language (BSL) qualification or equivalent (Level X)

	role. • Describe the types of situations or environments where they may have been developed. Here are a few examples based on the skills listed above: **Communication** Communicating complex information clearly and accurately in a range of formats (verbal and written), adapting messages for different audiences and levels of understanding. **Collaborative working** Working with colleagues and stakeholders to deliver services, resolve issues and support change in complex or fast-paced environments. **Data management** Managing and maintaining accurate records, spreadsheets or databases to support decision-making and service delivery, with appropriate attention to data protection and confidentiality.	

Education, Qualifications & Training	Use this section to set out any formal qualifications, training or professional memberships required for the role. A recommended example: The postholder will have developed relevant skills through a combination of job-related training and practical experience, including experience gained in progressively more demanding roles.	Use this section to add additional qualifications, memberships or training that would be beneficial, but not essential. Qualification in X Membership X

What else you need to know about the role

In this section, add any additional information that would help candidates better understand the scope of the job on an ongoing basis, including any management/ supervisory responsibilities. Please keep this section brief **(2 paragraphs max.)** and avoid re-stating information already mentioned in other sections.

For example, you may wish to include size of budget, grant/funder information, volume of business, direct reports (without using names), etc. Include details such as the frequency and scale of tasks and activities e.g., annual departmental reporting. Are there essential physical requirements, such as climbing, standing, lifting heavy objects (max weight expected to be able to lift)?

Please refer to the Other Considerations section before finalising your job description.

Using a Generic Job Description

The generic job description library can be accessed on the Recruitment and Advertising SharePoint site. The job descriptions you find there are pre-graded and designed to be used across the University. Each job description sets out the responsibilities and expectations for a role at a specific grade and function. They are designed so you can simply add a few area specific details and use them straight away to recruit.

To use a generic job description, please download a copy of the template. You will then see sections highlighted in yellow where you are able to edit and add in the relevant information. You must not edit any other parts.

Desirable Criteria section: Some of the generic templates have pre-populated desirable criteria in the "What you bring to the role" section. These are potential options added to save you time when creating a job description. You do not need to use these options. You can edit and add in your own desirable criteria, where relevant.

Once you have made your edits, you can proceed with the recruitment process.

Other Considerations

The following sections are applicable for **both new job descriptions and generic job descriptions.**

Pre-employment checks for the role:

Disclosure and PVG

Please check if a Disclosure or Protection of Vulnerable Groups (PVG) check is required for the role. If applicable, you will need to note this in the Pre-Employment checks section. Please contact the HR Helpline if you are unsure. If there are none, please delete this

section.

Key Job hazard information specific to the role

Please refer to the Health and Safety webpages to check if any job hazards are applicable for your role. If applicable, you will need to note these on the job description. If there are none, please delete this section.