

THE ROLE OF THE SUPERVISOR IN PRE-APPLICATION DOCTORAL COMMUNICATIONS: PROJECT BRIEFING

A briefing for doctoral supervisors based on the project 'Opening up the Black Box of Pre-Application Doctoral Communications', funded by the Research England Enhancing Research Culture Fund

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What are pre-application doctoral communications?

Prior to making formal applications for doctoral study, applicants often contact potential supervisors as well as departments and doctoral programme directors and administrators. Most commonly, this takes the form of an email, but may also include referrals of potential applicants from other colleagues, approaches on social media, or in-person meetings.

What is the role of the potential supervisor?

The role varies, but supervisors may reply to potential applicants to ask for more information, offer a meeting, give feedback, refer them to other potential supervisors, advise them to check web-based information, or let them know they do or do not have the capacity to supervise new students.

Why would supervisors be concerned about pre-application doctoral communications?

This area of doctoral admissions lies outside of formal institutional processes and is therefore relatively unregulated. Because of the many emails circulating from prospective applicants, supervisors are often making quick judgements about applicants based on indicative cues and personal judgement. There are concerns about balancing equality, diversity and inclusion within doctoral programmes (Squire, 2020; Milkman et al., 2015) against the workload for academics who receive these communications (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014). Little guidance is made available on how to make judgements about pre-application doctoral communications, including as a part of supervisor inductions, especially in terms of how pre-application communications are important to the recruitment of under-represented groups.

The study found that the following attributes were likely to privilege potential applicants during the pre-admission stage: applicants from the UK (in our UK-based study), current students in the institution, Anglophone applicants, applicants from an elite academic trajectory. Applicants with none or only some of these attributes were less easily seen to 'fit'. It was clear from the study that applicants who have more access to support with their application are more able to navigate the pre-application stage, especially if the admissions information is hidden or tacit.

What did the research involve?

1. **Literature review** on doctoral admissions
2. **Webpage analysis** of doctoral admissions material on departmental webpages
3. **Data collection** across Warwick faculties:
 - 1) (i) semi-structured interviews with Doctoral Programme Directors and Programme Officers,
 - 2) (ii) solicited diaries with doctoral supervisors followed by focus group discussions.



"I am getting really behind with these emails. I haven't replied to any for ages [...] I feel quite guilty about this" (Elise, Faculty of Social Sciences)

63 potential applicants contacted supervisors during the study. For 27% of applicants (N=17), supervisors delayed replying for at least a week due to e.g. levels of busyness or uncertainty about next actions.

"I do feel sorry for the person I have 'rejected' because she seems good [...] I am not rejecting her based on anything other than my commitments" (Alexina, Faculty of Science, Engineering and Medicine)

This project is led by a team based in the Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick, UK, with the endorsement of Warwick Doctoral College.

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Recommendations for Supervisors

These recommendations have been developed in the UK context, with awareness of variation between institutions, including in terms of centralisation of systems versus devolvement to departments.

Managing pre-application doctoral communications

- **Update your personal online staff profile page**, clearly stating supervision interests and capacity.
- Establish a **process for managing pre-application communications** e.g. an inbox folder.
- Develop **pre-written adaptable email text for common queries** including: text/web links to application process/timelines, funding information; reasons for not pursuing (if applicable) e.g. capacity, relevance of topic; recommendation for other supervisor/department/institutions.

Responding to pre-application doctoral communications

- Check about potential applicants with Doctoral Programme Director or Programme Officer and/or other colleagues for a **second opinion**.
- Hold an **informal video call or meeting** with potential applicants to discuss the proposed project, the nature of doctoral study, funding considerations; offer this opportunity fairly.
- Consider **referring potential applicants to other colleagues**, including those who may not have many students and/or who are outside of your own department, if relevant.
- Encourage potential applicants to **submit formal application/s in proportion with your capacity** to take on new students to reduce applicant disappointment.

Reflecting on pre-application doctoral communications

- **Speak with colleagues** and ask questions about how they make judgements about pre-application doctoral communications and **attend any relevant supervisor development opportunities**.
- **Reflect on your motivations for encouraging potential applicants to (not) apply**, in relation to:
 - Reaction to **quality of email and/or proposal**, taking into consideration that some students have access to resources, advice and also potentially agents to assist with approaching a supervisor, while others may have high potential but not have access to these resources.
 - Encouraging or discouraging **unfunded/self-funded students** and **part-time/full-time students**.
 - The **background of the potential applicant** and whether they come from a disadvantaged group.

Resources accompanying this brief:

- Final project report
- Briefing for Institutions
- Professional development workshop activity kit

Available at: www.warwick.ac.uk/padc

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