

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

A briefing for higher education institutions and academic departments 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.

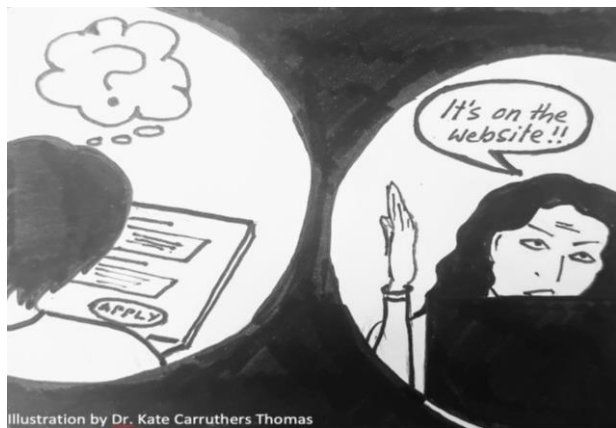


Illustration by Dr. Kate Carruthers Thomas

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

This area of doctoral recruitment lies outside of formal institutional processes. It is relatively unregulated and often open to personal judgement from all concerned. Because of the many emails circulating from prospective applicants, staff members are often making quick judgements about applicants based on indicative cues (Milkman et. al, 2015; Squire, 2020). There are concerns about balancing equality, diversity and inclusion of doctoral programmes against administrative workload, especially when both staff and applicants rely on the pre-application stage to strengthen research proposals (Kim & Spencer-Oatey, 2021; Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014).

Under-represented groups are particularly important to consider at the pre-application stage. 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.

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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"Some [potential applicants], you can clearly tell have read the website because they're asking questions that, you know, kind of would naturally follow on from the information on the website, and some of them you can tell have not even bothered to look." (Programme Officer, Science)

"You can often tell from the style of the email that arrives how serious somebody is" (Programme Officer, Arts)

"I totally remember that vulnerability and, you know, how much it mattered. And so I don't take lightly the kind of the task of responding to all of these emails, no matter what form they're in" (Director of Postgraduate Research, Social Sciences)

Recommendations for Institutions/Departments

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.

Develop pre-application communication strategies

- **Institution/department:** develop a **pre-application form** for potential applicants wishing to locate a supervisor, and consider whether the central admissions system can assist with administering this.
- **Institution/department:** hold **online opportunities for potential applicants to meet staff and current doctoral students** and ask questions.
- **Department:** develop a **recommended process for managing pre-application communications** within departments:
 - **Consult with staff and current students** about the process.
 - **Develop an agreed timeframe** for responding to inquiries from applicants.
 - Include a **flowchart/diagram** to illustrate the pre-application and application stages.
 - **Disseminate the process** to relevant staff members on a yearly basis (e.g. as an email bulletin).
 - Within this process **remind potential supervisors to consider EDI issues** while considering pre-application communications (see p. 1).
 - Within the process ensure that potential applicants who approach the department are forwarded to a **range of potential supervisors**, not always the most senior, including to other departments.
 - Develop and provide **adaptable email templates for programme directors/administrators** about common queries to assist with clear, consistent communication of information to potential applicants.
 - Develop and provide **adaptable email templates for academics** to send to potential applicants for common queries, in order to demystify the process. Contents of this email could include suggested wording on the following: web links/text about the application process/timeline, funding sources/timelines, where to obtain further assistance/information.
- **Department:** Consider developing a **tracking system** (e.g. at the administrative/programme level) to track pre-application communications and the outcome of these communications (in terms of applications submitted), at least on a temporary basis in order to identify any screening out of particular groups that may be occurring (e.g. Global South-based students who do not progress to submit applications).

Enhance professional development, training and reflective practice

- **Institution:** Provide information and discussion space to new staff, staff who are new to doctoral management roles, and as a refresher session for supervisors, on **how the institutional processes work for doctoral admissions**. Ensure that staff are reminded that potential applicants may be confused about the process (and in some contexts may not be used to checking website information), and encourage reflexive thinking about the power imbalance between applicants and institutions.
- **Institution/department:** Consider holding **development session/s for academics**:
 - To look at a range of doctoral proposals/applications from applicants and discuss what the **expectations are of a 'good' proposal/application**.
 - To explore different **funding schemes** and the expectations and eligibility for these schemes to assist supervisors and relevant members of staff in advising potential applicants on opportunities that may (not) be open to them.
 - To discuss **underrepresented groups** in doctoral education and how screening out of underrepresented groups can unintentionally occur during the pre-application stage.
- **Department:** ensure there is a clear handover when new doctoral programme directors or programme officers come into role; include in this the pre-/admissions processes of the department. Provide written information that can be handed down and amended over time.
- **Department:** provide department-level induction (including information relating to the pre-application stage) for new supervisors and also supervisors who are new to the department, as well as refresher sessions at relevant intervals.

Develop clear webpage information

- **Institution/department: consult with relevant staff and current students** when revising web information about admissions. Consider consulting on (with staff and students, using data on enrolments) a **statement welcoming applicants from underrepresented groups**.
- **Institution/department: avoid complicated web design and texts** (e.g. multiple tabs, vague language, long paragraphs and invalid links). Also consider that potential applicants may use phones or tablets to access the information; the webpage design should be tablet/phone-friendly; consult with marketing on this. Pay attention to the diversity of people represented in images used. Check the page is accessible for e.g. visually impaired visitors.
- **Institution/department: instate an annual calendar of planned checks for the accuracy of information**, valid webpage links and so on, updating information and processes in response to new areas of concern identified through pre-application communications.
- **Institution/department: consider the following points for webpage information:**
 - Check where information is stored on the website and **link to central information** rather than duplicating information at department level, especially in relation to scholarships.
 - Display a **checklist/flowchart for the pre-/admissions process**, including the time frame and decision-making process and who is involved (see p. 2). Ensure the information includes whether students should contact supervisors before applying and, if so, what is expected from this contact.
 - Clearly indicate on the webpage whether **cross-departmental supervisor teams are available/encouraged**, and how/whether applicants should act in relation to this in the pre-application stage.
 - Include **some short videos on the webpages from doctoral students** from a range of backgrounds discussing the choices/actions involved in applying for a doctorate (including any pre-application actions).
- **Department: encourage academic staff to update their staff profile web pages** with consistent information e.g. current projects supervised, information on interests (topic, methodology/approach, country contexts, also capacity to take on new students).
- **Department: consider the following points for webpage information:**
 - Display **information about eligibility** (e.g. academic credentials) for doctoral study and ensure that alternative pathways are clearly signalled (e.g. if professional experience can be accepted instead of a Masters qualification, then how much/what kind of experience).
 - Display information about what is expected from applicants in terms of **locating a supervisor** before applying.
 - Include expectations of **what counts as a 'good' research proposal (or disciplinary equivalent)**, potentially including information on expected sections and further guidance. Include the **evaluation criteria** for the proposal.
 - Include clear **contact information** for the department for potential applicants, including which queries should be directed at **which named members of staff** and how long the **wait time** may be for responses.

Resources accompanying this brief:

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

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

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