

# Pre-Application Doctoral Communications (PADC) Projects

## Final Report



Illustration by Kate Carruthers Thomas

### PADC Projects

1. Opening up the Black Box of Pre-Application Doctoral Communications (PADC1)

2. Searching for a Supervisor: Demystifying Pre-Application Doctoral Communications (PADC2)

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## Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the University of Warwick.

## Accompanying resources for the project

In addition to this report, other resources about the project are available on the project website: <https://warwick.ac.uk/padc>. This includes various project outputs such as project reports, training materials, and presentations, as well as other information about the project and the people involved. The project can also be found on Twitter **#PADC\_project**



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>AB</b>	Advisory Board
<b>ADC</b>	Academic Development Centre
<b>CDT</b>	Centre for Doctoral Training
<b>Co-I</b>	Co-Investigator
<b>CPD</b>	Continuing Professional Development
<b>CV</b>	Curriculum Vitae
<b>DC</b>	Doctoral College
<b>DPGR</b>	Director of Postgraduate Research
<b>DTP</b>	Doctoral Training Partnership
<b>EDI</b>	Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion
<b>FGD</b>	Focus Group Discussion
<b>HSSREC</b>	Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
<b>PADC</b>	Pre-Application Doctoral Communications
<b>PGR</b>	Postgraduate Research
<b>PGT</b>	Postgraduate Taught
<b>PI</b>	Principal Investigator
<b>PO</b>	Programme Officer
<b>WDC</b>	Warwick Doctoral College

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# ABOUT THIS REPORT

Who is this report for?

## **1. Higher education institutions**

- Doctoral colleges (DCs)/graduate schools, central admissions teams, academics and academic/researcher developers
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) teams
- Academic managers and heads of department

⇒ *To consider the roles of various stakeholders in the pre-application stage of doctoral recruitment and potential channels of action that could ameliorate some of the inequalities that emerge in this stage of admissions.*

## **2. Departmental staff directly working with potential doctoral applicants/ applications**

- Directors of Postgraduate Research/Directors of Graduate Studies
- Programme managers/officers, departmental admission tutors, postgraduate coordinators
- Staff creating public-facing content about applying for a doctoral degree

⇒ *To improve transparency and inclusivity in pre-application communications and to make inclusivity-aligned judgements.*

## **3. Academics with supervisory responsibilities**

⇒ *To encourage further discussion of the challenges and strategies involved in communicating with potential doctoral applicants at the pre-application stage.*

⇒ *To facilitate pre-application doctoral communication processes in terms of management, responses and reflection, with a particular focus on enhancing inclusivity.*

## **4. Prospective and current doctoral students**

- Applicants who may be experiencing disadvantage or barriers in the doctoral admissions process

⇒ *To better understand the process of applying for a doctorate.*

⇒ *To provide an evidence base for student representatives to advocate for enhanced inclusivity in doctoral admissions.*

## **5. Researchers investigating doctoral admissions, EDI and researcher development**

⇒ *To develop existing knowledge of doctoral admissions, in particular relating to pre-application doctoral communications and EDI issues.*



## Accompanying resources for the project

In addition to the project report, the following project resources can also be accessed/downloaded from <https://warwick.ac.uk/padc>:

- ⇒ **Briefings with recommendations** for (i) higher education institutions (including guidance on developing informative webpage information for potential applicants), (ii) supervisors, (iii) applicants to doctoral degrees and those working with them on the application process.
- Burford, J., Henderson, E. F., Akkad, A., Dangi, Kier-Byfield, S. (2022). The Role of the Institution in Pre-Application Doctoral Communications: Project Brief. Coventry: Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick. <https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/169426/> (see Appendix 5)
- Burford, J., Henderson, E. F., Akkad, A., Dangi, KierByfield, S. (2022). The Role of the Supervisor in Pre-Application Doctoral Communications: Project Brief. Coventry: Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick. <https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/169425/> (see Appendix 6)
- Burford, J., Henderson, E. F., Kier-Byfield, S., Akkad, A., Dangi, Mansuy, J. (2023). Potential Doctoral Applicants and those Working with them in Pre-application Doctoral Communications: Project Briefing. Coventry: Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick. <https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/179604/> (see Appendix 7)
- ⇒ **Professional development activity kit** to be used in professional development sessions for doctoral supervisors at institutional/departmental levels.
- Burford, J., Henderson, E. F., Akkad, A., Dangi, Kier-Byfield, S. (2022). Pre-admissions Doctoral Communications: Professional Development Activity Kit for Working with PGR Supervisors. Coventry: Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick. <https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/170733/> (see Appendix 8)
- ⇒ **Advice video on Youtube** for applicants to doctoral degrees and those supporting them with the application.
- Burford, J., Henderson, E. F., Kier-Byfield, S. (2023). Searching for and approaching a doctoral supervisor [video resource]. Available at: [www.warwick.ac.uk/padc](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc)

(See Section 7, for full details of project outputs).

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

This report provides an overview of the work undertaken for, and findings and recommendations drawn from, two university-wide projects about inclusion in doctoral admissions; 'Opening up the Black Box of Pre-Application Doctoral Communications' and 'Searching for a Supervisor: Demystifying Pre-Application Doctoral Communications' (<https://warwick.ac.uk/padc>).

These projects focused on **pre-application doctoral communications (PADC)** as an under-considered facet of the doctoral admissions process. **PADC refers to communications that potential doctoral applicants engage in with university staff prior to making a formal application to study.** Often these communications are emails from applicants to prospective supervisors, Programme Officers (POs) or Directors of Postgraduate Research (DPGRs) and are forwarded within and between departments (e.g. from DPGR to supervisor). Video/phone calls, dropping by an office, and approaches on social media or at conferences or events are also included in the definition.

University staff who receive such communications often make quick judgements about these inquiries due to the quantity they receive. However, in deciding how to respond, supervisors, DPGRs and POs and any other recipients effectively become gatekeepers to doctoral education, and by extension to the academic profession and the wider research workforce.

PADC occurs in different ways across disciplines, universities and countries, due to differences in the ways in which doctoral admissions processes unfold. However, PADC is a recognised phenomenon across different contexts.

For prospective doctoral applicants, the application process is often challenging to navigate. Applicants have to negotiate unfamiliar systems and sometimes unfamiliar genres (e.g. developing a research proposal), and this tends to disadvantage underrepresented students who may have less access to key informants or reliable sources to explain the processes. Previous studies on doctoral recruitment inequalities have tended to focus on formal admissions. This study fills a gap in knowledge about how university staff involved in the pre-application process manage PADC.

## Literature findings

Doctoral admissions research often focuses on entry criteria and different application components for Postgraduate Research (PGR) programmes, including the relationship between entry requirements and the exclusionary nature of doctoral admissions. Entry requirements are queried as predictors of success. The role of faculty members in admissions decisions is also explored. EDI-related studies have reported on ways in which doctoral admissions can become more inclusive, including EDI training for those involved and redesigning the process with equity in mind.

PADC is rarely covered in existing research. When the pre-application stage is mentioned, it is usually in relation to a potential applicant emailing a potential supervisor. There are many advice texts (e.g. blogs, webpages, videos, web fora) about contacting a supervisor. Some sources imply the burden that PADC causes in academics' workloads. Inequalities that arise during PADC are also referred to, especially in terms of prior contact with a supervisor serving as an informal credential for formal admissions. EDI-related recommendations from previous studies that are relevant for the PADC stage include working with Postgraduate Taught (PGT) course staff to ensure progression, PGR ambassadors, and pre-doctoral schemes.

## The PADC projects

Taking an institutional case study approach, the PADC projects sought to bring about improvements in PGR access for underrepresented groups. Project objectives for PADC1 included:

- evaluating PGR admissions webpages for transparency;
- exploring how key stakeholders make decisions about PADC and EDI implications of this;
- identifying potential institutional changes; and
- producing enduring resources to facilitate sustained change.

Project objectives for PADC2 widened the research scope further to:

- understand the enablers and barriers minoritised doctoral applicants experience;
- explore what popular advice videos say and how they operate;
- create an advice video addressing those who may be disadvantaged in searching for a supervisor; and
- continue to develop resources and workshops for staff professional development that include an applicant/student perspective.

The projects adopted an exploratory design, providing detailed, multi-stakeholder data on the nature of and practices involved in PADC. The studies included a literature review on doctoral admissions and PADC; institutional webpage analysis; semi-structured interviews with DPGRs and POs; solicited diaries and focus groups with supervisors; interviews with current Warwick doctoral students who identify as minoritised in UK higher education in a range of ways; and a study of PADC-related advice videos on YouTube. The projects included various activities and outputs, including workshops for DPGRs, POs and supervisors; briefing documents for institutions/departments, supervisors and applicants/those working with applicants (see Appendices 5, 6, and 7); a professional development activity kit with adaptable activities (see Appendix 8); an advice video for doctoral applicants on searching for a supervisor; blog posts about PADC and the project findings; conference presentations; and research papers based on the data.

## Findings

### Webpage review

Departmental PGR admissions pages are key sources of information for the PADC stage. Our webpage review indicated the following typology of information:

- Department introduction, doctoral programme specifications and initial contact point;
- Admission process information (timeframes, guidance and process), including signposting applicants to the central university portal for application advice and guidance and providing tailored information on a department's process;
- Scholarships and funding, including departmental and institutional sources;
- Identifying a potential supervisor. Most departments signpost applicants to staff webpages (containing profiles of individual academics) and encourage applicants to contact potential supervisors directly. Applicants are also encouraged to contact the relevant DPGR. In several departments, especially in the Faculty of Science, applicants may apply for a project-based doctorate which has a pre-allocated supervisory team.

- Drafting a research proposal. The majority of the departments provide the link to the central university portal for application advice and guidance, and a list of department requirements. In several departments, department guidance on drafting a research proposal can be found, providing an outline/structure with word count and what to include in detail.
- Decision-making process information is rarely found on webpages, such as the criteria, who is involved, or the timeline;
- EDI-related information signalling a department's priority to welcome under-represented groups or create an inclusive environment is displayed on very few PGR admissions webpages.

### *The role of DPGRs in PADC*

- The admissions role of DPGRs varies widely, with some highly involved and others devolving admissions to a separate role. The role of DPGRs in relation to PADC also varies widely as a result, with some replying to many prospective applicants and others completely removed from this area of work.
- The role changes over time, in relation to institutional changes, changes in the funding landscape, and initiatives to improve admissions.
- DPGRs are often involved in replying to prospective students, developing webpage and prospectus content, and consulting with other staff members about potential applicants.
- PADC processes often came into being through habit rather than intention. Some processes had been established in consultation with staff. PADC processes did not tend to be formalised due to a desire to protect supervisor autonomy and collegiality.
- DPGRs discussed that applicants from the following may face more challenges in the PADC stage: mature students or professionals returning to study (more questions, more frustrations); applicants with different educational backgrounds to the discipline they were applying to (stringent admissions criteria); applicants with non-UK qualifications (challenges in making sense of admissions); Global South applicants (who may struggle to locate funding or be unclear on contextually specific doctoral requirements).
- DPGRs noted that the nature and style of PADC contact does in some way influence the perception of the potential applicant, particularly in terms of applicants demonstrating capacities of autonomy and independence (in terms of e.g. researching the programme via the webpages before getting in touch) though many stressed comprehensive efforts to deal with all applicants in an equal manner.
- DPGRs felt that gatekeeping did occur in the PADC stage, though they also referred to gatekeeping as the necessary process of 'screening' in order to ensure that applicants were aware of the funding landscape and the requirements of a doctorate. However, DPGRs were aware of the importance of the PADC stage and remembered their own vulnerabilities as PGR applicants.

### EDI implications from the DPGR findings included:

- lack of institutional clarity about where responsibility for EDI for admissions lies, due to variation in DPGR role;
- potential for EDI-informed practices to be lost when the DPGR ends their term;
- the need to seek balance between habitual PADC practices and formalising PADC;
- further consideration of challenges faced by mature students and international students;
- the need for training and best practice sharing between departments.

### The role of POs in PADC

- POs also had varying roles in relation to admissions and PADC. Many POs had been working on PGR for many years and had a wealth of expertise in this area. The majority dealt with PADC emails and monitored the PGR email account for the department, and updated departmental webpage content.
- Some changes had occurred in POs' roles over time, largely in relation to personal development such as taking on new responsibilities and establishing new processes, with other changes relating to updates in institutional policy.
- POs' admissions work included responding to day-to-day queries, monitoring applications, liaising with marketing, and managing admissions. POs' role in decision making was blurry, in that many POs were involved in e.g. checking eligibility in transcripts, or deciding which emails to forward on for deeper consideration by DPGRs or supervisors.
- In relation to PADC, POs engaged in extensive email communication, signposting potential applicants to sources of information and forwarding their queries to relevant parties. Most common email topics were eligibility and entry requirements, funding and scholarships, and how to identify a supervisor.
- Processes tended to have developed over time through experience and habit. PADC generally had not been discussed as an area of work needing formalised processes.
- POs discussed that applicants from the following groups may face more challenges in the PADC stage: mature applicants returning to study (not as familiar with university systems/emails; not as up to date with the literature); working candidates (frustrations with the pace of PADC and admissions); international applicants from places such as China, Africa and the Middle East (unclear expectations of doctoral study, style of communication, more questions about admissions and funding rather than the nature of doctoral study); applicants from different educational backgrounds to the areas they are applying to study in (strength of research proposals); and those who have qualifications that are not accepted by the university.
- POs expressed they were committed to treating all PADC equally, though they did express frustration at potential applicants who did not seem to consult the webpages before asking what were seen to be basic queries.
- POs acknowledged that gatekeeping does occur in the PADC stage, especially in relation to eligibility checks. POs also noted that they tried to only refer on suitable applicants to DPGRs and supervisors in order to avoid adding too much to academics' email workloads.

### EDI implications from the PO findings include:

- the variation in PO roles resulting in an unclear sense of where responsibility for EDI lies;
- the need to recognise through professional development that administrative decisions (e.g. which email to forward to DPGR) are also EDI decisions;
- a need for EDI-oriented admissions webpages and email templates;
- a lack of formal discussion about PADC processes, and a need for these discussions to include EDI considerations;
- attention to be paid to mature students and international students in terms of challenges faced during admissions;
- the potential to develop practice based on exploring the source of current frustrations (e.g. basic queries when the information is on the webpage).

### The role of supervisors in PADC

- A major issue for supervisors was their capacity to recruit new students. Many were approached by several applicants but were limited (in terms of personal principles and/or institutional restrictions) to taking on one or two new students each year.
- Supervisors expressed various recruitment priorities and principles, in particular in relation to the fit between an applicant's topic and their expertise. Other priorities included prior familiarity with the applicant, proposal quality, academic background, personalised style of communication with potential supervisor, scholarship funding potential, and departmental priorities.
- Supervisors identified some official practices for managing PADC, such as being asked to refer PADC emails to POs and/or DPGRs, to meet with potential applicants online, to use official email templates. However, these were not necessarily known about or followed by supervisors.
- Supervisors had also developed their own personal practices for managing PADC, including listing their capacity/areas of expertise on their institutional web profiles, developing template emails, setting up an inbox folder to manage PADC emails, forwarding PADC to other potential supervisors.
- Our study revealed the behind-the-scenes processes of PADC for supervisors:
  - There are variations in how many potential applicants contact supervisors. Some receive many approaches, others almost none. This applies across individual supervisors and also across departments. Some supervisors/departments are therefore managing more PADC than others.
  - When supervisors are engaging in PADC, they are more or less aware of applicants' characteristics. For example, gender was difficult to discern from the emails, especially where names were unfamiliar to supervisors. On the other hand, most applicants stated their nationality in their emails.
  - Most PADC involves contact via email from a potential applicant to a potential supervisor. Other first contact involved communications between DPGR, PO, or another supervisor getting in touch with a supervisor to discuss a potential applicant.

- Once supervisors have received an initial contact, they tend to reply within the same week or wait for a week or more to reply.
- Many PADC lead to a combination of actions, such as replying to applicants and forwarding their enquiries to other members of staff.
- When supervisors delay their response, it can be for various reasons such as consulting with other colleagues or due to busy periods of other areas of work.
- If supervisors forward PADC to other colleagues, it is often due to the lack of fit between the proposed topic and their area of expertise; in other cases, a supervisor was seeking a co-supervisor.
- Where supervisors replied to decline the possibility of supervision, they often also directed potential applicants to other supervisors/departments, gave initial feedback on the proposal, and gave links to sources of funding. Reasons for declining included capacity issues, lack of fit with area of expertise, and concerns with the quality of the PADC (e.g. clarity, length – very short or very long, style).
- When supervisors replied to pursue PADC further, this was mainly to request information/clarification and additional items from applicants/referring colleagues, to set up an informal virtual meeting, to provide feedback on draft proposals, or to encourage potential applicants to submit an official application. Supervisors were motivated to pursue PADC further based on alignment with the topic and their expertise, and quality of proposal and style of PADC (including expression in English).
- Supervisors identified various characteristics that could lead to a more favourable PADC experience. Current students could be advantaged in terms of knowing the system and being known, but this could also be a disadvantage if their previous performance had not met certain standards. Those with UK qualifications were perceived as more likely to pitch the email/proposal appropriately, but could also be excluded based on the perceived status of the previous institution; part-time home applicants and applicants from UK-based minority communities were also identified as potentially meeting more challenges. Those applying from the Global South were identified as often less likely to pitch the email/proposal appropriately, but there were variations such as being from an Anglophone context bearing a linguistic advantage. There were also variations relating to government funding, such as this being a positive sign for supervisors as well as potentially having negative associations with certain political regimes or queries about 'genuine' proposals.

EDI implications arising from the diaries and focus group discussions (FGDs) with supervisors included:

- capacity restrictions increasing competition to work with some supervisors;
- supervisors having their own (more or less EDI-oriented) recruitment priorities, which would benefit from reflective discussion;
- supervisors both welcoming and not following official PADC processes;
- supervisors having their own PADC processes, leading to potential for more or less EDI-oriented applicant experiences;
- volume of PADC differing across supervisors and departments, meaning that there may be heightened expectations of PADC for high-volume supervisors/departments;
- supervisors making decisions about PADC in the discerned knowledge of potential applicants' identity characteristics, particularly nationality and gender;
- since most PADC occurs by email, this is an area of potential improvement in relation to EDI, such as template emails that demystify the process for potential applicants;
- forwarding PADC to other potential supervisors is an EDI-oriented act, but this principle may not be shared by all supervisors;
- decisions to decline interest or initiate next steps are made on various principles and there is potential for discussions of EDI in relation to this;
- different characteristics may lead to different PADC experiences, such as being a current student, having UK qualifications, applying as a part-time home student, being from minority communities in the UK, applying from Global South contexts or applying after securing a government scholarship – this needs further exploration in terms of EDI.

Experiences of minoritised PGRS in PADC

- For minoritised doctoral applicants, finding a supervisor was described as a process full of mixed emotions, including excitement as well as stress.
  - Excitement stemmed from the opportunities that this contact could result in, but the stress related to imposter feelings, fears of rejection and not knowing how to structure an approach that would stand out.
- Several enabling factors were described by participants:
  - Aspects of family background, such as motivation and encouragement from family, previous experience of and understanding of the UK system, and having an existing understanding of academic norms in different contexts;
  - Peer support from friends and acquaintances going through the doctoral application process;
  - Support from academic staff where there are existing relationships, or potential supervisors who are receptive to enquiries;
  - Online resources where others share their experiences;
  - Early exposure to research can aid in developing skills and gaining contact with potential future supervisors.



- Clear PADC and application information, such as easy-to-navigate websites, contact information and research interests.
- Several barriers were identified by participants:
  - Incorrect advice from institutional staff about, e.g. application timeframes and potential supervisors that were difficult to communicate with;
  - Restricted access to online information, such as opportunities or staff credentials being behind an institutional log-in portal;
  - Limited awareness of EDI among academics and a lack of representation of minority staff members and epistemological approaches.

#### EDI implications:

- Early research opportunities are crucial for gaining an understanding of research skills and careers that non-minoritised applicants might gain through existing connections or tacit knowledge of research and higher education.
- Minoritised applicants experience a range of specific barriers to doctoral study—starting from earlier in their academic studies, through to the initial stages of contacting supervisors and onwards—many of which might prevent or delay applying.
- Minoritised applicants often learn how to engage in PADC by doing it, feeling that they understand the process only once they are insiders.
- Peer and familial support were considered enabling factors for some, but this necessitates knowing others who are engaged in doctoral education or higher education more broadly, which many potential applicants may not.
- Without peer or familial support, applicants may rely on university staff, particularly those they have known or worked with previously, for example during undergraduate study. This can result in students relying on the luck of a good connection or indeed staying at the same institution rather than exploring options elsewhere.
- Minoritised applicants are particularly reliant on proposal feedback and endorsement from potential supervisors if they have limited academic networks or knowledge about what an application should look like.
- Online resources are important for minoritised applicants, even if they have (albeit limited) access to familial and peer support, as they provide crucial insight into the process of applying and carrying out a doctorate.
- Due to the extent that minoritised applicants rely on staff, more accessible and centralised institutional support is needed for learning about and engaging in PADC.
- More staff training is required for understanding the needs of students facing barriers in applying to doctoral study.

### *The role of online advice videos in PADC*

- Numerous advice videos about PADC can be found on YouTube and have been created and uploaded by institutions, associations, academics and students, many of whom could be termed 'doctoral influencers', as they have garnered a large following online from which revenue is generated.
- These videos were noted by several interview participants during the study with minoritised applicants as having been essential sources of advice, thus suggesting that these videos serve under-represented communities in higher education.
- YouTube advice videos provide a range of advice types to potential doctoral applicants, such as:
  - o How to find a project or supervisor using institutional webpages and staff listings.
  - o What to look for in terms of supervisor or project match, with a particular emphasis on how to ensure both interest and personality matches.
  - o Advice on how to contact supervisors concerned the tone of the email and what to include, for example focusing on the supervisor's research interests.
  - o Some content creators provided email templates and paragraph-by-paragraph guides that were often universal in their address (in spite of contextual differences in doctoral admissions practices).
- Advice-givers on YouTube consolidate their messages through a variety of audio/visual techniques:
  - o Institutional videos favoured having multiple speakers and group videos, whilst doctoral influencers primarily spoke individually and directly to camera.
  - o Videos are filmed in neutral spaces generally emulating a calm yet studious environment.
  - o Light music was utilised to again create a sense of calm but also to uplift and portray positivity.
  - o In addition to the expected branding in institutional videos, doctoral influencers often utilise branding by creating a strong online presence, having a logo, creating regular content, engaging with their audience (unlike institutions) and even selling products.

### EDI implications:

- Minority applicants both create and make use of YouTube PADc advice, but these texts only speak to disadvantage in higher education implicitly, rather than addressing barriers explicitly.
- PADc advice videos are often concerned with encouraging adaptation for success, rather than challenging the status quo.
- Advice videos simultaneously the hierarchical subject positions of applicant, student and supervisor, and employ the discursive techniques necessary to both make the viewer feel at ease and informed, whilst also reinscribing the need for more advice on the topic.
- Minoritised applicants rely on freely available advice in the form of video content as they may not have existing networks; if advice is lacking in detail or context or is misleading, it means they are at a disadvantage in terms of accessing clear and reliable information.

## Recommendations

The report includes recommendations for institutions/departments, supervisors and PGR applicants (and those working to support them). Please refer to Section 5 Recommendations for the full list of recommendations.

## Conclusion

The two PADc projects aimed to evaluate institutional webpages; analyse popular PADc advice; understand the decision-making processes of different stakeholders involved in PADc; understand the experiences of minoritised doctoral applicants; explore implications for inclusivity in doctoral education; identify potential changes that can be made in view of these implications; and develop enduring resources for both staff and applicants to facilitate sustained institutional and sector transformation in this area.

The two PADc projects have initiated an institutional conversation at the University of Warwick and a wider sectoral discussion about the importance of PADc as a part of wider inclusivity-focused doctoral recruitment agendas. A major change through this project is that relevant stakeholders have come to recognise PADc as a stage of admissions, and perceive PADc as a source of potential gatekeeping from an EDI perspective. A number of stakeholders have been inspired and planned to initiate further discussions about PADc as further research in relation to PADc is needed.

To conclude, it is hoped that this pathbreaking report and the accompanying resources will contribute to positive change in terms of enhancing inclusivity in doctoral education, which in turn would have positive implications for the diversity of the research workforce and academic profession. In order to gain access to doctoral education, applicants have to first gain *access to admissions*, and a focus on the *pre-application stage* is necessary in order to understand who is excluded from even applying for doctoral study, and how these exclusions can be addressed.

**We would encourage any readers who learn from this report and/or who implement any changes as a result to contact us with comments and findings:**  
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# 1. INTRODUCING THE PADC PROJECTS

## 1.1 Introduction

This report provides an overview of the work undertaken for, and findings and recommendations drawn from two interconnected research projects 'Opening up the Black Box of Pre-Application Doctoral Communications' (PADC 1) and 'Searching for a Supervisor: Demystifying Pre-Application Doctoral Communications' (PADC 2).

<https://warwick.ac.uk/padc>

These projects focus on **Pre-Application Doctoral Communications (PADC)** as an under-considered facet of the doctoral admissions process. PADC refers to communications that potential doctoral applicants engage in with university staff prior to making a formal application to study. Often these are emails from applicants to supervisors, Programme Officers (POs) or Directors of Postgraduate Research (DPGRs), but PADC may also include video/phone calls, dropping by an office, and approaches on social media or at conferences and other events. These forms of communication are forwarded within and between departments (e.g. from DPGR to supervisor). University staff who receive such communications often make quick judgements about these inquiries due to the quantity of emails received. However, in deciding how to respond, supervisors, DPGRs and POs effectively become gatekeepers to doctoral education, and by extension to the academic profession. As Posselt (2014) has argued,

professors play an underexamined role as gatekeepers of the professions, including the professoriate. One context in which this gatekeeping occurs is admission into graduate programs, which entails evaluative processes that are often opaque to outsiders and taken for granted by insiders. (p. 482)

PADC occurs in different ways across disciplines, universities and countries, due to differences in the ways in which doctoral admissions processes unfold. As Mellors-Bourne et al. (2014) note,

PGR recruitment processes tend to be quite complex and in detail vary greatly amongst different institutions, disciplines and funding programmes. They range from programmes where multiple applicants compete for a known project in a funded programme, through to extended individual engagement with a potential supervisor prior to an application for a self-funded project. Responsibility is held in a wide variety of hands, from centralised processing through to decisions on individual suitability at faculty, departmental or supervisor level. (p. 57)

However, despite the variety of processes involved in doctoral admissions, PADC is a recognised phenomenon across different contexts – even when it is explicitly discouraged – in part due to the myriad informal advice sources which prospective applicants consult in addition to formal institutional guidelines. This report illustrates how PADC is occurring across different departments in one institution, but also provides valuable insights for considering PADC in other contexts.

For prospective doctoral applicants, the application process is often challenging to navigate. Applicants draw on tacit knowledge to negotiate unfamiliar systems and practices (e.g. inquiry emails to supervisors). This tends to disadvantage underrepresented students who may have less access to key informants or reliable sources to explain the processes. Previous studies on doctoral recruitment inequalities have tended to focus on formal admissions (see Section 2). It is equally vital to understand the pre-application phase of admissions (NERC, 2021). This

study fills a gap in knowledge about how university staff involved in the pre-application process manage PADC.

The project was developed in alignment with national research culture priorities to attract and retain a greater number of people into the research profession (Department for BEIS, 2021). At the heart of the R&D People and Culture Strategy is a desire for increased workforce diversity: 'The vision for the strategy is: a more inclusive, dynamic, productive and sustainable UK R&D sector in which a diversity of people and ideas can thrive' (ibid., p.14). To build a more dynamic and diverse research workforce in academia and industry, talent must be attracted and subsequently encouraged to stay. Secondly, the project was developed in view of identified gaps in the literature relating to doctoral admissions and in particular the pre-application stage (see Section 2). Additionally, in December 2021, Emily Henderson (Project Co-Investigator or Co-I) organised a fact-finding consultation with supervisors in Department of Education Studies in her capacity as DPGR. This session revealed that many academics process admissions communications without consideration of EDI, though some do take an explicit social justice approach to admissions, and the consultation showed that there was an appetite to understand how PADC could be approached from an EDI perspective.

The 'Opening up the Black Box of Pre-Application Doctoral Communications' and 'Searching for a Supervisor' projects were small-scale, exploratory studies which aimed to explore this phenomenon in a single university context in the UK. Ultimately, the projects aimed to help supervisors and other staff members to make inclusivity-aligned judgements about potential applicants and demystify the PADC stage of admissions for applicants facing particular barriers and challenges.

## 1.2 Research objectives

Taking a single institution case study approach, the projects sought to bring about improvements in PGR access for underrepresented groups at the University of Warwick.

### Project objectives for PADC1 were:

1. To evaluate the extent to which Warwick Doctoral College (WDC)/departmental webpages on PGR admissions transparently describe the pre-application stage for doctoral applicants.
2. To understand how DPGRs, POs and supervisors make decisions about responding to potential doctoral applicants at the pre-application stage, and to explore how these decisions may negatively impact the recruitment of diverse researchers.
3. To identify potential changes that could be made at institutional and department levels to create a more transparent and inclusive doctoral admissions process, with a particular focus on enhancing inclusivity for currently underrepresented groups.
4. To produce a suite of professional development opportunities and enduring open access resources that facilitate the implementation of these changes.

Project objectives for PADC2 were:

1. To undertake empirical research at Warwick to understand how current doctoral students who are members of minoritised social groups navigated locating a doctoral supervisor, identifying potential barriers and obstacles in the process as well as enabling factors. To identify recommendations for change based on these findings.
2. To undertake a review of existing video resources which inform students about how to search for and approach a doctoral supervisor, both those produced by institutions and those produced by others globally.
3. To create a video resource which seeks to demystify the process of finding a supervisor which takes applicants from minoritised social groups as its primary target audience. This video resource brings together findings from PADC1 (Stage 1 of the project), findings of the empirical research and the video review from PADC2.
4. To deliver previously piloted PADC workshops at Warwick.

### 1.3 Research questions

In line with these research objectives, we developed the following research questions for PADC1:

1. *To what extent do WDC/departmental webpages on PGR admissions transparently describe the pre-application stage?*
2. *How do DPGRs, POs and supervisors make decisions about responding to potential doctoral applicants at the pre-application stage? How may these decisions negatively impact the recruitment of diverse talent?*
3. *What changes at institutional and department levels could be suggested to create a more transparent and inclusive doctoral admissions process?*

Additionally, the research questions for PADC2 were:

1. *How do doctoral applicants from minoritised backgrounds navigate the process of finding a doctoral supervisor?*
2. *What do existing advice videos tell prospective applicants about the process of finding and approaching a potential doctoral supervisor?*

### 1.4 Summary of project design

The two projects adopted an exploratory design, providing detailed, multi-stakeholder data on the nature of and practices involved in PADC.

The first stage of PADC1 involved:

- A literature review of existing scholarship on doctoral admissions to synthesise existing findings and best practice (see Section 2);
- Webpage analysis of public-facing admissions material across Warwick University webpages (see Section 4);
- Data collection across Warwick faculties (Table 1).

Table 1: Research Design and Participants for PADC 1

Multi-method design; institutional case study	
Semi-structured interviews	Solicited diaries & FGDs
<p><b>Design</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1-hour semi-structured interviews</li> <li>• focus on i) the role in relation to postgraduate research, ii) the role in pre-application stage of doctoral admissions, iii) inclusivity practices.</li> </ul> <p><b>Participants</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>12 DPGRs, 8 Doctoral POs</b></li> <li>• Participants drawn from across Warwick faculties</li> </ul>	<p><b>Design</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solicited diary forms with questions/prompts</li> <li>• 6 weeks</li> <li>• Online forms via Qualtrics</li> <li>• Follow up FGDs</li> </ul> <p><b>Participants</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>19 doctoral supervisors in diary study</b></li> <li>• 60 applicants represented</li> <li>• 3 focus groups with total of 11 supervisors</li> <li>• Participants drawn from across Warwick faculties</li> </ul>

The second stage of PADC1 involved designing impactful activities and resources based on the literature review and empirical work:

- Delivery of interactive professional development activities:
  - o Briefing for DPGRs and POs on the issue of PADC;
  - o Supervisor development session on doctoral supervisors' role in enhancing inclusivity during pre-admissions communication.
- Three project briefings with checklists (see Section 7):
  - o for higher education institutions and academic departments (Appendix 5);
  - o for supervisors, on the role of supervisors in pre-application doctoral communications (Appendix 6);
  - o for potential applicants for doctoral degrees and those working with them during the application process (Appendix 7).
- A professional development activity kit *Pre-Admissions Doctoral Communications: Professional Development Activity Kit for Working with PGR Supervisors* (Appendix 8) which can be used by relevant stakeholders in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) at institutional/departmental levels (see Section 7).

The first stage of PADC2 involved:

- Data collection across Warwick faculties and on YouTube (Table 2).

Table 2: Research Design and Participants for PADC 2

TWO-PART PROJECT	
Semi-structured interviews	YouTube video study
<p><b>Design</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1-hour semi-structured interviews</li> <li>• focus on journey to doctoral study; PADC experiences; minoritisation; recommendations for institutions</li> </ul> <p><b>Participants</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>15 current Warwick doctoral students</b></li> <li>• Recruitment through departmental channels first, followed by professional networks.</li> <li>• Sample includes students from across 3 Warwick faculties and various axes of inequality</li> </ul>	<p><b>Design</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Video corpus of 100 videos</b></li> <li>• 'How to find a potential doctoral supervisor' and related search terms</li> <li>• Videos by institutions, academics, students</li> <li>• 10 videos with the highest views taken as a sample for in-depth analysis</li> </ul>

The second stage of PADC2 involved continuing to work on project dissemination and impact:

- Filming and production of an evidence-based advice video.
- Continuing to offer development workshops across the university using the toolkit, activities and briefings developed in PADC1.

## 1.5 Key concepts

In this section we outline key terms and phrases that recur throughout the report. This is important because different terms circulate in the doctoral education sector for similar phenomena and processes.

- **Doctoral admissions:** The process by which applicants submit applications for research degrees at the doctoral level at higher education institutions, and then the applications are processed and reviewed within higher education institutions. 'Admission' in this report does not necessarily refer to funding for doctoral studies, but rather refers to an applicant being offered a place on a doctoral programme.
- **Pre-application doctoral communications:** This term has been coined by this project. PADC refers to communications that happen between potential applicants and university staff/institutions prior to any formal application being made, and between members of university staff about potential applicants. This can include but is not limited to: emails, phone calls and video discussions with academic or professional staff; connecting through social media; connecting through a conference; visiting an institutional website for advice and guidance; or dropping into the office to speak with academic or professional staff.
- **Doctoral college:** A DC is an entity within a university that administers, ratifies and awards doctoral degrees. Also known as graduate schools, they are sometimes



represented by physical buildings in universities, but can also be groupings of staff supporting the doctoral awarding capacities of an institution. They are also responsible for any doctoral study-related policies and strategies, and can host/fund development opportunities for doctoral students.

- **Postgraduate Research:** PGR is used to refer to the postgraduate pathway that is not teaching led (i.e. Postgraduate Taught or PGT). It can include Masters by Research programmes as well as various doctoral degrees.
- **Directors of Postgraduate Research:** DPGRs are academics with leadership roles with responsibility for coordinating the PGR programme in a department. Sometimes this role is parcelled out to a number of staff members, e.g. admissions lead, student experience lead.
- **Programme Officers:** POs are professional services staff who support the administration and delivery of doctoral programmes.
- **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion:** EDI is an umbrella term used widely in the Higher Education sector. It designates policies and initiatives that aim to increase participation and remove the barriers experienced by minority groups entering universities as students or working as staff. In this report, we approach EDI from two perspectives: First, we engage actively with sector guidance in this area, including University of Warwick EDI and Social Inclusion priorities, research and reports from other institutions, and academic literature on the issue. Second, we engage critically with the current landscape and endeavour to identify neglected areas in current practice. We approach EDI from a broad and intersectional perspective that encompasses race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, dis/ability, age, faith, socio-economic background/class, educational background/experience, having current care responsibilities or having left care, and nationality/language.
- **Gatekeeping:** This report takes a keen interest in the notion of admissions procedures as acts of gatekeeping. The report is informed by the work of Posselt (2016), who notes that the 'urgency to reconsider gatekeeping is greater than ever' in an education system that often perpetuates rather than alleviates inequalities (p. 5). It is important to state that gatekeeping is not negative *per se*; some screening is essential in admissions, as a sustainable doctoral lifecycle is ensured by admitting applicants who are able to contribute to their research environment and complete projects whilst maintaining their health, wellbeing and other commitments. However, gatekeeping is damaging when bias and discrimination, conscious or unconscious, dictates which candidates are deemed worthy of admission, based on the norms of historic and entrenched privilege and visibility.
- **Minoritisation:** We took a deliberately wide and exploratory perspective in our definition of minoritisation. We understand minoritisation in postgraduate research to be possible on the basis of *any* of the following: disability, race, class, socioeconomic status, first-in-family to university, sexuality, gender identity (including non-binary, trans), age (e.g. being a mature student), care responsibilities, people with experience of forced migration (including those with asylum/refugee status, scholars at risk), being a care leaver, being a student estranged from their families, being a member of Gypsy, Roma and Traveler communities, being a member of a nomadic community, being of a faith that is underrepresented in UK HE, originating from a Global South country where few students are enrolled in HE in the UK, being from an indigenous community in country of origin. We also welcomed doctoral students who experience minoritisation in postgraduate research for other reasons not listed here.

## 2. EXISTING EVIDENCE: DOCTORAL ADMISSIONS, EDI AND PADC

### 2.1 Introduction

This section lays out different debates and issues that surround PADC and covers the ways in which PADC is addressed across a variety of sources. The principal areas covered in the section are: (i) doctoral admissions, including EDI issues and EDI-related initiatives; (ii) PADC, including dominant features and EDI-related schemes.

It is noteworthy that there is a general disparity between the wealth of PADC guidance sources in the doctoral admissions advice space, and the paucity of scholarly research that explicitly covers PADC (see Appendix 2 for the search criteria). There are three primary ways in which PADC tends to emerge in the literature: (i) studies which imply pre-application contact only implicitly; (ii) studies which mention pre-application communications in passing; and (iii) studies which explicitly focus on pre-application communications. The vast majority of texts fall into categories (i) and (ii). When scholarly research does consider pre-application communications specifically (iii), PADC does not tend to be actively conceptualised, which means it remains a hidden and disparately addressed phenomenon – hence the coining of the term PADC. Scholarly literature also does not tend to explicitly cover the prospects of minoritised groups in relation to PADC, which also therefore remains a rather neglected area. It should also be noted that the majority of the scholarly literature in English on doctoral admissions is produced in the US, with fewer publications from Global South or ‘peripheral’ nations in the global higher education sector. There are publications which originate from researchers based in other countries (e.g. Tang et. al, 2020, on China; Tonbul, 2014, on Turkey), but these are in the minority and at times take a deficit approach. While the US doctoral system is very different from many others, PADC as discussed in the US literature has much applicability to other contexts, including the UK.

At the same time, the sheer quantity of advice literature on the topic and the level of engagement with that literature from potential applicants (e.g. seen through number of views/reads) suggests that PADC is a source of high anxiety and confusion for people who are seeking to find a supervisor and navigate the application process towards doctoral study.

The review concludes with implications and an outline of the gaps in the field that the PADC studies we have conducted seek to address.

### 2.2 Doctoral admissions and EDI

Doctoral admissions research is a broad and international field of enquiry comprised of different areas of focus (Jung, Li & Horta, 2023; Nerad, 2020). **A notable interest in the field is to discern which criteria are most important for students to be accepted into postgraduate research degree programmes.** This body of research is important as it seeks to explore and then regulate admissions practices in certain disciplines.

For example, Littleford et al. (2018) explored which admissions criteria for US Psychology doctoral programmes had the most impact upon admission. They found that the most important variables of ‘*primary* importance’ in admissions were considered to be ‘personal statements, letters of recommendations, interview, undergraduate GPA, student–mentor research match, and GRE scores’, although there were variations in the importance of some variables depending on the type of course (p. 79).

In the discipline of Counselling, Young (2005) sought to determine the **influence of references** in the application process in one US-based doctoral programme. Research has also looked into the role of **personal statements** in doctoral admissions (Fernández-Gil, 2015; Chiu, 2015; 2016; 2019; Hollman et al., 2022). Hollman et al. (2022) sought to understand how the personal statement is read, assessed and understood in the context of a US Physical Therapy doctoral programme. Chiu (2015) also looked at the use of personal statements in the US and the UK, and argues that 'the bureaucratic admission procedures and the epistemological assumptions of particular discourse communities have shaped the ways in which academics come to evaluate an admissions document' (p. 71).

Some previous studies have explored the **relationship between entry requirements and EDI**, particularly in the US context, where EDI-related admissions studies are often concerned with challenging the prevalent benchmarking that is based on test scores. Scholars have argued that test score-driven admissions policies prevent diversification of programmes, and many studies are aimed at convincing those who make admissions decisions to reduce their reliance on GPA and GRE scores and to examine the premise for admissions more closely (Mountford et al., 2007; Potvin et al., 2017; Caño et al., 2018; Ghose et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2019; Posselt et al., 2019; Slay et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2019; Squire, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021). Indeed, it has been observed that Black women with a higher GPA are denied admission over white women (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017).

Some studies explore the **reliability of entry requirements as predictors of success**, particularly because these fixed requirements are often exclusionary to minoritised groups. For instance, Biazotto et al. (2022) found that nursing students admitted to doctoral programmes in Brazil through affirmative action routes performed just as well as those who did not.

Often, studies on EDI issues in the doctoral admissions literature **focus on a single axis of disadvantage**, or at most a double axis. Previous studies have focused on the following axes of disadvantage, for example: gender and race (Squire et al., 2018), sexuality (Hsueh et al., 2021), disability (Ling et al., 2020), weight and body size (Burford, 2015), and the chances of those with a criminal record (Connor and Tewksbury, 2012). There is a distinct need for studies on doctoral admissions which take a fully intersectional perspective, exploring across a number of interrelated axes of disadvantage.

A further area of interest that emerges in the literature on EDI and doctoral admissions is the **role and identity of staff members from marginalised groups**. For instance, Squire (2020) examined the views of faculty of colour on admissions at a white-dominated US institution and found that 'faculty of color considered applicant diversity immediately and at all times throughout the process' and that they 'did not consider the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) or other standardized measures of merit valid indicators of quality or excellence' (p. 188). It was also found that 'faculty of color also are attracted to students who share similar racial identity, backgrounds, and epistemologies' (p. 188). Despite adopting a firm position in their admissions approach, faculty reported feeling 'restricted in their ability to fully engage with their faculty peers around issues of diversity, equity, and justice due to tenure status and identity' (p. 188), which suggests the risk of diversity agendas becoming detached from systemic change. This observation is supported by Maggin et al. (2022), who conducted a study of approaches used to matriculate and complete doctoral students of colour at institutions with predominantly research-intensive doctoral programs in the US. They found that, despite institutional commitment to a diversity agenda on the part of faculty, there were a lack of concrete initiatives and policies (p. 241). These studies suggest a need to explore PADC in terms of EDI, both in relation to institutional commitments and practices, and in terms of staff identity and opinion.

Studies on exclusionary practices and experiences of doctoral admissions have suggested and even trialled **EDI-related schemes and initiatives**. The report by Lindner (2020), *Barriers to Doctoral Education*, which is based on a study undertaken at UCL in the UK, suggests that the **admissions process should be designed** 'with an equity selection process built into decision-making' (p. 3). This is echoed in the *Postgraduate Diversity Strategy Blueprint* (NEON Postgraduate Diversity Working Group, 2022). Another suggestion is that all members of staff who are involved in PGR admissions should be required to undertake **EDI training** (Lindner, 2020). Linder has also emphasised the importance of institutions having a **single application portal** for PGR admissions, 'to enable collection of EDI data, facilitate transparent processes, and provide accessible data analysis' (p. 3).

In sum, key foci of literature on doctoral admissions and EDI are inequities associated with entry requirements, the relationship between entry requirements and success, disadvantage related to one or two axes of disadvantage, and the role of faculty members from minoritised groups. EDI-related admissions schemes and initiatives include redesigning the admissions process, delivering EDI training for admissions staff, and setting up institutional admissions mechanisms that facilitate EDI-related monitoring and data analysis.

### 2.3 PADC and EDI

PADC, as a term that we have developed for this study, encompasses any interaction relating to pre-application communications, including for instance a potential applicant dropping into a potential supervisor's office or writing to the programme administrator, or one academic writing to another to ask if they are interested in co-supervising a potential applicant. However, the vast majority of references to PADC practices in the literature relate to a potential applicant emailing a potential supervisor about becoming their doctoral supervisor. The prominence of email as the primary mode of communication in PADC is substantiated by Milkman et al.'s (2015) study about inferred applicant identity and correlations with staff response rates to enquiry emails in the US, and Sabet et al.'s (2021) study about the types of language used in correspondence between applicants and potential supervisors in Australia. In Hefner-Babb and Khoshlessan's (2018) study of Iranian students looking to study in the US, they note that prospective applicants reported a process of researching potential supervisors and then emailing them, which was then seen as a precursor to seeking formal admission.

Indeed, there is a wealth of information taking the form of advice texts about this specific step of PADC. Websites such as *FindAPhD*, *DiscoverPhDs*, *Academic Positions* and *Motivated Academic* present guidance on emailing a supervisor, and on Youtube many videos exist presenting similar advice, such as 'How to ace your first email to a potential academic supervisor' (Infosessionswithkingsley, 2020, 32,917 views on 14/07/23) and 'How to Write An Email To A Professor For Graduate School Admission? (Contacting Professors)' (R3ciprocity Team, 2018, 56,298 views on 14/07/23). These sources emphasise the importance of pre-admission contact with a supervisor, for instance: 'It's well known that contacting a potential PhD supervisor before applying to their position can greatly increase your chances of success' (DiscoverPhDs, 2020); 'The first contact you make with a possible supervisor will be one of the most important parts of your PhD application' (Bennett, 2021). Institutions also publish advice on emailing potential supervisors. For instance, the author of an advice text from Imperial College London, after giving examples of both 'good' and 'bad' emails, states: 'Well, please send me letters like the second one, not like the first one. And I am not an exception, other academics are the same 😊.' (Chernyshenko, 2014). Despite the range of different advice sources, much of what is said is the same: applicants are advised to address academics personally, research an academic's work before getting in touch, include information about themselves, avoid broad or vague approaches, ask specific questions and often attach documents such as a curriculum vitae (CV) and draft research proposal.

At the same time, despite the ubiquity of sources advising how to email a potential supervisor, not all programmes encourage this step, and it is not universally conclusive that prior contact with a supervisor has a positive relationship with positive outcomes in formal doctoral admissions. For instance, Littleford et al. (2018) included 'contacting faculty' in their study of US Psychology admissions as a variable that could have an impact on admission. They concluded that contacting faculty before application was only of 'tertiary' importance to admissions outcomes.

These discussions of the PADC practice of emailing the supervisor do not refer to **the role of the supervisor** who receives these emails, but there are inferences which emerge that indicate that PADC emails from prospective applicants are a **burden in terms of the time** taken in processing these emails. For instance, the report from a study by Mellors-Bourne et al. (2014) on 11 UK institutions (not including Warwick) about their doctoral recruitment processes states that,

time was often spent, usually by supervisors, in communicating with potential applicants. This ranged from just providing information on the process, providing feedback on a potential research proposal, through to mentoring prospective candidates through the application process. (p. 35)

Also inferred in the same report (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014) is the **potential for inequalities to emerge in during PADC**, noting that in one institution a pre-application workshop meant that 'an advantage [was not given] to applicants with existing internal contacts or knowledge about pre-application etiquette' (p. 57).

PADC, particularly in the form of contact with a potential supervisor, appears in several studies as an **inferred or informal credential for formal admissions**. For instance, in Posselt's (2013) work on doctoral admissions, she notes that the sociologists she interviewed were 'sensitive to the ways in which early contact with faculty can strengthen an applicant's chances' (p. 165). In another example, Potvin et al.'s (2017) study of diversity in Physics admissions uses the more generalised phrasing 'proximity or familiarity to department' as a variable, which points to the relevance of the pre-application stage. In the case of Lachmann et al.'s (2020) study of doctoral admissions for Life Sciences in Germany, the decision was taken to categorise students who were in contact with a supervisor before applying along with those who 'obtained their doctoral position or their enrolment with help from superiors, colleagues or peers' or with 'no selection procedures at all' as 'informal admission' to the university, thus creating a different category of applicant altogether (p. 24). The notion of informal admission is illuminated further by studies such as Angervall and Gustafsson's (2016) work on PhD and early career pathways in Education research in Sweden. They differentiated three different career paths, one being 'the invited' group who 'talked about how their tutors, professors and networks had invited and encouraged them to apply for the research education program' (p. 676).

Aside from direct contact with potential supervisors and other members of the targeted department, there is evidence of **other sources being used in the pre-application stage**. In Kim and Spencer-Oatey's (2021) investigation into the role of pre-application contact for international students who are applying to study in the UK, they conducted a study of online activity in two **chat rooms** amongst potential doctoral applicants from South Korea. On this forum, potential applicants shared information and opinions on, for example, whether and how to contact a potential supervisor. **Websites about PGR study** are also discussed in the paper, as these pages are a key site of information gathering for applicants and therefore constitute a facet of PADC between institutions and applicants. Indeed, other research on institutional webpages has demonstrated that webpages serve 'as a context for orientation' (Woo et al., 2016, p. 99) and help them learn about institutions and departments, search for suitable programmes and make an informed application.

One study, the Mellors-Bourne et al. (2014) report referred to earlier, refers to **institutional attempts to track PADC** activity. Four of the 11 institutions taking part in the study stated that the pre-application stage was monitored centrally.

Though again PADC often needs to be traced inferentially through sources on doctoral admissions, there are various **schemes and recommendations with an EDI focus which relate to PADC**.

Firstly, there are **general PGR schemes which, by default, would cover the PADC phase**. For instance, the Institute for Community Studies (2022) report *Understanding the lived experience of ethnic minority students in postgraduate research* highlights the need for **supervisor training** on race and ethnicity. The aforementioned report by Lindner (2020) recommends that both **supervisors and administrative staff should receive training** on EDI issues for PGR, and also suggests that supervisors should engage with training such as the UKCGE's **supervisor accreditation** programme. Another general PGR initiative recommended by Lindner (2020) is to 'establish a **Postgraduate Diversity Advisory Council** to promote and support PGR recruitment and retention' (p.3). All of these suggestions would indirectly benefit PADC by raising general awareness of EDI issues, but do not target the PADC phase explicitly.

There are also **recommendations that pertain to the PADC stage** specifically within Lindner's (2020) comprehensive report. Firstly, working to bridge the gap between PGT and PGR by **working with PGT staff** to ensure progression to PGR. Secondly, the use of **PGR ambassadors** to inform and mentor potential applicants. Thirdly, organising **application training workshops**, including for under-represented groups. Fourthly, creating schemes such as a **pre-doctoral programme or pipeline scheme**. Pre-application communications are relevant to many of these recommendations, although they are rarely named explicitly. Pre-application communications are therefore somewhat hidden within existing EDI initiatives.



Illustration by Yara Aboasfour

## 2.4 Implications

The growth of numbers and diversity of doctoral applicants and candidates are topics which are reflected in various policies and research studies across the world (Duke & Denicolo, 2017; Posselt, 2014); meanwhile further research is necessary to supplement the limited existing knowledge on the pre-application stage in order to enhance the accessibility of doctoral education for minoritised applicants.

The literature review reveals a need to define, consolidate and explore the notion of PADC, given the neglect of this specific area of practice in the scholarly literature on doctoral admissions.

- What is included in PADC? Which forms of information/communication?
- Who is involved in PADC, what are they doing and why?
- How do institutions deal with PADC, if they do?
- What are the implications of PADC practices for inclusivity in doctoral admissions?

The PADC project aims to contribute knowledge of this kind to the field, as examining PADC through an EDI lens will also contribute to tangible changes that can be implemented into the daily practices of institutions.

## 3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND STUDY INFORMATION

### 3.1 Research design and methodology

The PADC studies adopted a multi-method approach. Predominantly qualitative data were collected as part of the study using a range of methods, and then data were analysed separately, with the findings then combined to inform interpretations based upon the full range of sources. Data collection was arranged differently for different stakeholder groups. For PADC1, as we explain below, one set of methods was employed with doctoral programme officers and directors of PGR, and the other set of methods was employed with doctoral supervisors. For PADC2, one method was used with current doctoral students who experience minoritisation in HE and another was used for gathering and analysing YouTube advice videos.

Ethical approval for the studies was granted by the appropriate ethics committee at the University of Warwick: the Humanities and Social Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC). All the study participants' names and other identifiable characteristics were carefully anonymised. A key concern we adhered to was to not reveal the departmental affiliations of participants; as a result, in our project outputs for both PADC1 and PADC2 we only share faculty affiliation. The draft instruments were shared with the Advisory Board for feedback.

#### *Opening up the Black Box of Pre-Application Doctoral Communications (PADC1)*

At the start of the study, the team gathered information about PADC by conducting a **webpage review** of relevant, public-facing webpages which were relevant to doctoral admissions at Warwick (conducted between March 14 and June 9 2022). Our primary goal in conducting this webpage review was to understand: (i) the nature of pre-application information on the university webpages, (ii) whether this information was consistent across the institution, and (iii) whether it was of sufficient detail that it would adequately explain key steps to potential applicants. The webpage review entailed a comprehensive examination of the available websites covering 34 departments, which resulted in a typology of information. In order to develop a list of websites, we located a list of all departments on the Warwick webpage, and then manually visited each PGR admissions page of each of the departments. As a result, 34 departments were identified for the webpage review (see Sub-section 4.1).

**Semi-structured interviews with DPGRs (N=12) and POs (N=8)** were conducted about departmental pre-application practices. The team arranged online interviews with relevant university staff involved with PADC. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure that they were currently in the role of DPGR or PO (or equivalent). Participants could be from any department or faculty, but the team aimed to recruit four staff members from each faculty to create a total of 12 for each group. This goal for recruitment aimed to reflect the variety of practices across the institution but also a realistic data collection process given the project's short time span. Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs) or Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs), which sometimes have their own directors and administrators within faculties, were not included in the study. This decision was taken in order to explore the most common model of doctoral admissions; moreover, some of the CDTs/DTPs use departmental admissions systems for doctoral recruitment. There were no other selection criteria. The interview guide was developed based on reviewed literature, the research questions and Henderson's (Co-I) direct experience as a DPGR. Following ethical approval, pilot interviews were conducted with one DPGR and one PO. Several feedback points were actioned as a result, including clarifying the focus and sequence of some questions and emphasising, at the beginning of the interview, that department-specific information would not be mentioned in research outputs.



The interviews covered: (i) general questions relating to PGR (e.g. DPGRs'/POs' role in relation to PGR admissions and how this role has changed over time); (ii) particular doctoral admissions pre-application communications questions (e.g. types and content of PADC, processes for dealing with PADC, and how processes were established and managed); and (iii) inclusivity questions (e.g. differences between how different applicants understand the process, feelings about roles in the process, thoughts on possibilities of gatekeeping, and recommendations for improvement). Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were recorded using Teams (videoconferencing software). Prior to each interview, the participant was given a short online participant information questionnaire to complete (using Qualtrics). This was designed to collect basic information about the participant (e.g. duration of employment and gender).

**Solicited diaries** were employed with supervisors to understand their actions and reflective processes in their PADC with doctoral applicants. 19 supervisors from different faculties completed the weekly diary over six weeks. Four online forms were developed (using Qualtrics): (i) Pre-diary Form to explore supervisors' previous supervision experience; (ii) Form 1, a repeated form each week to capture new first contact with potential doctoral applicants; and (iii) Form 2, a repeated form used each week to track participants' ongoing actions with doctoral applicants after the first contact made during the study. (iv) An additional Post-diary Form was also developed to explore the experience of keeping a diary from the participants' perspectives at the end of the study. Participants for the diary study were recruited using open calls for participants through the DC and through DPGRs, followed by purposive and snowball sampling in order to ensure that there was a greater range of departments in the sample. 19 supervisors kept a weekly diary over six weeks in relation to their contact with or about potential doctoral applicants. Solicited diary recordings were event-based (Cao & Henderson, 2021); the aim was to capture the experiences of participants whenever they were approached by potential doctoral applicants, and how supervisors responded to applicants, including their reflections on these responses. The diary was initially developed by the Principal Investigator (PI) and the Co-I comparing their own practices and through informal discussions with colleagues. The diary was then designed and tested for functionality by the PI and Co-I. Following the ethical approval being granted for the study, the diary was then piloted with three supervisors over a period of two weeks. Modifications were made accordingly, including changing the order of some questions/prompts on the forms and shifting specific closed questions to open ones and vice versa where appropriate.

Each diary form included different prompts to gain a wider understanding of supervisors' practices in the pre-application communications stage. The Pre-diary Form contained prompts to broadly understand supervisors' capacity issues and priorities for recruiting new doctoral students, and personal and/or official practices in place for responding to potential applicants. Forms 1 and 2 included prompts which were more specifically oriented to supervisors' actions and decisions in dealing with pre-application communications with doctoral applicants during the six-week period. The prompts in Form 1 were related to the nature of first contact with applicants, actions taken after the first contact, reasons behind these actions, and reflections on practices involved in the process. In Form 2, the major prompt was about capturing follow-up practices with applicants who had contacted the supervisors during the previous week in the study. In the Post-diary Form, the prompts were related to the usefulness of the diary, limitations involved, and recommendations for improvement or development.

Following the diary study with supervisors, **FGDs** were organised to delve further into supervisors' views on PADC. While the diary study captured individual's practices and experiences, FGDs were considered more appropriate for gathering debates about PADC practices and views on these. FGDs were held with a total of 11 supervisors from the diary study, which was the number of diary participants who agreed to participate. These were held

online using Teams. A pilot of the FGD was conducted with three volunteer supervisors and it was concluded that FGDs could include up to five supervisors. The FGDs included general questions about doctoral admissions and PADC, and then moved into the core component, which was an activity where participants discussed two sample emails, one brief and impersonal and one detailed and personalised (see *Pre-Admissions Doctoral Communications: Professional Development Activity Kit for Working with PGR Supervisors*, available at [www.warwick.ac.uk/padc](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc), see also Appendix 8). The discussion included familiarity with these types of emails and how the supervisors would respond. The FGD also included a discussion of supervisors' thoughts around PADC and inclusivity, such as whether particular applicants are disadvantaged and what the role of the supervisor should be in PADC. The FGDs concluded with a request for any suggestions or recommendations from supervisors for improving inclusivity in PADC.

### *Searching for a Supervisor: Demystifying Pre-Application Doctoral Communications (PADC2)*

**Semi-structured interviews with Warwick doctoral students (N=15)** were conducted about their experiences navigating PADC and accessing doctoral studies, the resources and supports they relied on and the challenges they faced. The team arranged online interviews with doctoral students. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure that they were currently enrolled in a doctoral programme at the University of Warwick and represented a minoritised position (see Sub-section 1.5 on key concepts). Participants could be from any department or faculty, but the team aimed to recruit five students from each faculty to create a total of 15 students. This goal for recruitment was achieved and aimed to reflect the variety of practices across the institution but was also a feasible data collection process in the project's limited timespan. The interview guide was developed based on reviewed literature and the research questions aimed to reflect an interest in both the experiences of applicants, the resources they used and their thoughts on improving PADC. Following ethical approval, pilot interviews were conducted with two current doctoral students. Several feedback points were implemented, including clarifying the focus and sequence of some questions and ensuring that there were ample follow-up questions to illustrate the application narrative if participants struggled to give an in-depth account.

The interviews covered questions about: (i) students' personal orientation to minoritisation in higher education and how they applied for a doctoral degree; (ii) which resources and strategies they relied on, and which factors in the process acted as enablers and barriers; (iii) advice for other minoritised applicants and thoughts on potential institutional improvements for the PADC stage. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded using videoconferencing software (Teams). Prior to each interview, the participant was given a short online participant information questionnaire to complete (using Qualtrics). This was designed to collect basic information about the participant (e.g. their gender, when they started studying at Warwick, etc.).

The research team's interest in PADC advice texts from PADC1 was further explored in PADC2 through **a study of YouTube videos about finding and contacting a supervisor**. The video search began with the phrase: "How to contact/find a potential PhD supervisor" being typed into the YouTube search bar, whilst being logged out of any of the researcher's accounts to not influence the results algorithm. No filters were enabled, but hits were organised by relevance. The main search phrase was then supplemented with further search attempts that were reflective of a varied and global HE system and the different ways of naming doctoral education and supervisors (e.g. PhD/doctoral/HDR and supervisor/advisor/guide/Professor). Making these adjustments did not return any noticeable variation in the search results.

YouTube was the chosen website due to its free availability and wealth of content. The research team were aware that some applicants would not be able to access YouTube or would be using sites that offer advice in other languages. However, due to the focus on English language content in this study and the language skills of the research team, YouTube was decided to be the best option. Further research could look at the content on other video sharing platforms.

The research was carried out between March and May 2023. A corpus of 100 videos was compiled in an Excel spreadsheet, and the following information was recorded about each video: video link, video title, presenter name and account background, perceived gender and race, video length, views and likes, comment number, publication date and date viewed by researcher, and the video description. The corpus was assembled using purposeful sampling and reflected a specific set of search criteria to ensure relevant, popular and recent videos on the topic (see Appendix 3).

### 3.2 Study participants

#### *Opening up the Black Box of Pre-Application Doctoral Communications (PADC1)*

The **DPGR participants** (N=12) (see Appendix 4, Table A) were from all three faculties: Social Sciences (N=5), Arts (N=2), and Science (N=5). Listed ethnicities were White (N=9), Indian (N=1) and not stated (N=2). Represented genders were woman (N=5), man (N=6) and not stated (N=1). Participants were evenly split when it came to having sought out the role of DPGR. Some had been asked to do it and were willing to serve in the role, while others intentionally sought the role out due to their interest in PGR or their preference for that type of leadership role. Most DPGR participants had been in the role between three and five years, with two having held the role for one to two years, and one being in post for less than a year.

The **PO participants** (N=8) (see Appendix 4, Table B) were split across the three faculties: Social Sciences (N=3), Arts (N=2), and Science (N=3). One self-identified ethnicity was listed: White (N=8). Two genders were represented: woman (N=6) and man (N=2). PO participants were evenly split in terms of whether they had sought out a role working with PGR students. While some POs described themselves as 'hunt[ing] out' a PGR-focused role, others saw it as a possible opportunity within a wider career in higher education administration. The PO participants were evenly split between being in the PGR role for 3-5 years, and those who had been in post for more than 5 years, with two participants serving in the role for 10-20 years.

The **supervisor diary participants** (N=19) (see Appendix 4, Table C) were also from all three faculties, but with the vast majority in Social Science (N=15), and fewer in Arts (N=2) and Science (N=2). Ethnicities listed were White (N=10), Mixed (N=7), Asian (N=1), Black African (N=1). Genders listed were woman (N=14), man (N=4) and not stated (N=1). The majority of supervisors (N=13) were employed at Warwick between 2010 and 2020, with others having started between 2000 and 2010 (N=3), before 2000 (N=2), and after 2020 (N=1). Most participants (N=9) had between 1-5 doctoral completions, whereas four participants had 6-10 doctoral completions, and three had 15+ doctoral completions. Three participants did not have any doctoral completions.

For the **supervisor FGD participants** (N=11) (see Appendix 4, Table D), in order to protect the anonymity of the supervisors involved in both the FGD and diary elements of the study, no demographic information is provided for FGD participants so that their diary data remains anonymous.

#### *Searching for a Supervisor: Demystifying Pre-Application Doctoral Communications (PADC2)*

The **doctoral student participants** (N=15) (see Appendix 4, Table E) were evenly split across the three faculties: Social Science (N=5), Arts (N=5), and Science (N=5). Several ethnicities were listed: White (N=7), Arab (N=3), Indian (N=2), Mixed (N=1), Asian (N=1), and Black

African (N=1). Three gender categories were represented: woman (N=5), man (N=7) and gender non-conforming (N=3). The participants were predominantly studying full-time (N=13) with only a small number of part-time students represented (N=2). Most were in receipt of a scholarship (N=12) and a small proportion were self-funding through student loans (N=3). Whilst most participants were classed as home students (N=11), some were international (N=4). Additionally, one student was a part of the CARA scheme.<sup>1</sup> We interviewed students across faculties to capture a full institutional picture of PADC, rather than focus on one facet of disciplinary practice (e.g. students who look for supervisors for their own self-developed projects). Therefore, different experiences emerged depending on if applicants were looking for a supervisor for a self-designed project or a supervisor attached to a pre-designed and funded project. Although many of the minoritised participants stated that funding was an issue for them and that they would not have been able to do a doctorate without it, this was more prominent for a few participants who said that they would *only* apply to pre-funded projects. It is important to note that this trend did run along multiple disciplinary lines: the majority of participants who stated this were working in the Sciences where pre-funded and lab-based projects are the norm, but one participant in Arts also took this approach.

The **YouTube advice videos** (N=100) were presented by individuals with a range of identities. In terms of perceived gender, 63 were presented by men, 29 by women, and eight videos featured mixed gender groups. A range of ethnic backgrounds were represented: 29 White, 24 Black, 20 South Asian, 10 Asian, two Latinx, and one Arab; the remainder were not identifiable or mixed group videos.

Video presenters were split into the following categories in terms of occupation to demonstrate the nuance and range of different speaker positions: student (N=28), student talking to academic (N=1), students who also have a consulting business (N=13), consultants with a visible doctoral credential (N=4), consultants without a visible doctoral credential (N=4), academics with visible institutional affiliation or stated position (N=12), academics with a visible position who also have a consulting business (N=4), academic talking to students (N=1), independent researchers without a visible institutional position (N=12), institution (N=14), academic association/society (N=2), and affiliation unclear (N=5).

Many of the individuals presenting videos, primarily students with or without consulting businesses, academics with or without consulting businesses and some of the independent researchers, can be understood as 'doctoral influencers' due to their large following on social media and strong online profiles. They regularly upload content about the experience of applying for a doctorate, completing one and different aspects of research and research careers.

Information about the inferred national context of the videos and their advice was also recorded. Context was inferred by several factors, such as clear information about the speaker's location, stories told by the speaker about their own experience in certain contexts or clear information in the video title or description. Contexts represented in the corpus were: Australia, Austria, Canada, China, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Israel, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Spain, UK and the USA. However, only a small number of videos explicitly stated that their advice was directed at applicants looking to apply in a specific country. The majority of advice, although coming from a specific context and set of experiences, spoke to a general audience without differentiation.

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<sup>1</sup> CARA, the Council for At-Risk Academics, provides application support and financial assistance to academics at risk of danger or persecution, enabling them to continue their work.

### 3.3 Data analysis

The analysis of the different data sets in the study involved a multi-stage, individual and collaborative process. A preliminary analysis was conducted for each of the data sets by different team members to identify key themes or issues and to summarise participants' responses on an individual basis.

#### *Opening up the Black Box of Pre-Application Doctoral Communications (PADC1)*

For the **webpage review**, information from public-facing Warwick university websites was collected in relation to admissions processes, and data were stored on an Excel sheet and analysed using thematic coding. The **DPGR and PO interview** audio files were transcribed using an automated transcription service via Microsoft Teams, then the transcripts were checked and corrected. The data were then analysed and synthesised according to the key thematic areas explored in the project. For the **supervisor diary** data, the Qualtrics diary forms were exported to the IBM SPSS Statistics 27 software and this data was also inserted into Excel. Descriptive statistics analysis was used on SPSS for the quantifiable variables in the diary (e.g. percentage of actions taken by supervisors in responding to applicants), whereas open-text responses in the diary were analysed using thematic coding. The **supervisor FGDs** were also analysed using thematic analysis based on the diary data. Emerging codes were also considered alongside the codes developed earlier.

Following the analysis of each individual dataset, the research team worked together in a data analysis workshop to compare the findings in order to reach some overarching interpretations and conclusions. Across all data sets, individual cases of supervisors, DPGRs, and POs were created to show how different decision-making processes and practices involved in pre-application communications could shape gatekeeping in responding to doctoral applicants. Creating these profiles also involved compiling cases of doctoral students contacting supervisors to shed light on journeys taken by applicants.

Initial findings from the analysis were presented to Advisory Board meetings and in research presentations at conferences (see Section 7) to determine the potential for the full analysis that was conducted afterwards. For the project recommendations (see Section 5), an open list of recommendations emerging from the data was developed, and other recommendations were added or modified following subsequent discussions with the research team, at conference presentations, and during development and training workshops.

#### *Searching for a Supervisor: Demystifying Pre-Application Doctoral Communications (PADC2)*

The **doctoral student interview** audio files were transcribed using an automated transcription software via Microsoft Teams, then the transcripts were checked and corrected. The data were then analysed and synthesised according to the key thematic areas explored in the project regarding enabling factors in the PADC process and barriers and challenges faced by minoritised applicants. Initial themes emerged from a collaborative analysis process between two team members.

Key information about the **YouTube advice videos** was compiled into an Excel spreadsheet, and then ten videos were more closely analysed to draw out key types of advice and common features of the advice videos.

Initial findings from the analysis were presented to Advisory Board meetings and in research presentations at conferences (see Section 7) to determine the potential for the full analysis that was conducted afterwards. For the project recommendations (see Section 5), further recommendations emerging from PADC2 were integrated into the existing list developed during PADC1, ensuring no overlap or repetition.

## 4. PROJECT FINDINGS

### 4.1 Webpages as a form of PADC

The web review was designed to respond to the first research question from PADC 1: *to what extent do WDC/departmental webpages on PGR admissions transparently describe the pre-application stage?* As discussed in Sub-section 3.1, the goals of the webpage review were to understand the nature of pre-application information on the webpages, to review the consistency of this information across departments, and to establish the level of detail of the information provided.

The types of information available included: doctoral programme introduction materials, PGR admissions deadlines, details for relevant contacts, research proposal drafting guidance, and advice on seeking relevant funding and scholarships. Often this type of information was clearly marked on Warwick websites through an 'Applying to Study' menu, which then allowed potential applicants to click on specific information for postgraduate research applications.

From the webpage review, seven broad categories of pre-application information were identified.

**Department introduction, doctoral programme specifications and initial contact point:**

Based on the reviewed webpages, we found that all departments provided information which introduced applicants to the department and offered guidance about what they could expect if they applied to study there. Often these were 'opening pages', which covered the basic details surrounding the specifications of the programme. A wide range of details were included within the introductions to the departments. Some departments included short paragraphs, while other departments offered more elaborate introductions which included orienting students to the research areas of the department, the ranking of the department in UK league tables, and student testimonials.

**Admission information (timeframes, guidance and process):** Two categories of admission information were found across department webpages. (i) The first category was a link to signpost applicants to the **central university portal for application advice and guidance**. This webpage, titled 'Research course applications', covers information on how to prepare an application. This central university portal provides an institutional-level overview of the pre-application procedure for potential applicants to follow. For example, the 'Stage 1: Prepare your application' page on this portal has short paragraphs on: identifying areas of interest, making contact with an academic department, contacting a supervisor, drafting a research proposal, checking entry requirements, checking application deadlines, exploring funding options. This page is hyperlinked, and offers links to information on other pages (e.g. on how to find a supervisor, and how to prepare a research proposal). (ii) The second category of admission information is commonly more tailored to the **departments' specific procedures and processes** and is often accessed via a 'how to apply' section for applicants. Though varied in level of detail, such department-level application and admission information tends to be more detailed, encompassing application checklists and/or step-by-step guidance for applicants from preparing to submitting their applications.

**Scholarships and funding:** Another key category of information present across the departmental webpages is information on scholarships and funding. The review identified two categories of scholarship and funding-related information. (i) Firstly, many departments have a **specific webpage on scholarships and funding at the department level**, indicating relevant departmental funding opportunities and specifying eligibility and application guidance. (ii) Secondly, another category can be found in many departments, which

**signposted applicants to the university funding and scholarship page** (containing many different funding routes available).

**Identifying a potential supervisor:** As suggested by the central university portal for application advice and guidance, the majority of departments advise applicants to contact prospective supervisors in advance of the application, to discuss with them how applicants' research interests may be compatible with supervisors' interests and experience. However, it should also be noted that some departments do not require a nominated supervisor for an application and others explicitly advise against this. Our web review identified that the majority of the departments at Warwick do consider this process to be key pre-application step, and some provide relevant information and guidance regarding how to identify a potential supervisor. Three categories of information around how to identify a potential supervisor can be found across faculties. (i) Most departments **signpost applicants to the staff webpages to browse their profiles and encourage applicants to contact potential supervisors directly**. (ii) In the majority of the departments in the Arts and Social Sciences, **applicants are encouraged to contact the DPGR** to identify which member of staff is best placed to supervise the proposed research. (iii) In several departments, especially in the Faculty of Science, **applicants apply for a project-based doctorate**, which means that any PADC that occurs is with respect to the advertised project role.

**Drafting a research proposal.** Another category of pre-application information is around how to draft a research proposal. Different departments have different requirements as far as a proposal and/or application is concerned. Most departments require a research proposal for an application to be considered, and research proposal guidance can be found in two categories. (i) The majority of the departments provide the **link to the central university portal for application advice and guidance**, which contains the general structure of a research proposal (e.g. an overview of research question, main objective of research, potential contribution to existing research field/literature, research techniques, suggested data collection procedures and an outline timeline), **and a list of department requirements**. (ii) In several departments, **a webpage or a link to department/discipline-specific guidance** can be found, providing an outline/structure with word count and what to include in detail.

**Decision-making process.** Compared with the widely available information and guidance on preparing and submitting applications, information and explanation about the decision-making process for admissions are rarely found across departments, with few departments briefly explaining the decision-making process, such as the evaluation criteria, who is involved (e.g. panel, DPGR, supervisor), the maximum cohort size each year, and the timeframe of decision-making process (i.e., 'this can take 3-4 weeks').

**EDI-related information.** As one of the key objectives of this web review/project, we paid particular attention to EDI-related information on departmental webpages during the web review, in order to explore to what extent the information is inclusive for potential applicants from a wide range of backgrounds and with different experiences and sources of support. A search of available information and keywords such as "EDI", or separately, "Equity", "Diversity" and "Inclusivity" on Warwick departmental webpages showed that only two departments across faculties included EDI-related information in their pre-application information webpages. The information varied in format. Specifically, the Education Studies webpage states:

In the Post-graduate research degree programme, we are committed to maintaining standards of excellence – including identifying potential and helping students to succeed who may not otherwise have considered a doctoral degree. This information is presented in order to demystify the admissions process, as part of our commitment to enhancing inclusivity in doctoral education.

In a video clip that was linked to from the Department of Engineering doctoral degrees information webpage, EDI-related information was provided along with the text 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion', which stated:

The University of Warwick provides an inclusive working and learning environment, recognising and respecting every individual's differences. We welcome applications from individuals who identify with any of the protected characteristics defined by the Equality Act 2010.

## 4.2 The role of DPGRs and POs in PADC

This sub-section addresses the second research question from PADC 1: *how do DPGRs, POs and supervisors make decisions about responding to potential doctoral applicants at the pre-application stage? How may these decisions negatively impact the recruitment of diverse talent?* The sub-section moves through each stakeholder in turn, from DPGRs to POs (based on the semi-structured interviews).

### *The role of DPGRs in PADC*

**Variations in the role of DPGR in doctoral admissions:** Across Warwick, the role of DPGR varies greatly in relation to admissions and in particular the pre-application process. In some departments, these role holders are involved in every aspect of PGR admissions, from communicating with potential applicants to answering queries, interviewing them, and making decisions on offers. In others, the role of DPGR takes the form of oversight, with the role-holder being responsible for arranging selection and scholarship panels, contributing to decision-making about borderline candidates and taking the lead on designing processes. The extent to which these role-holders engage in pre-application communications therefore also varies, with some handling many communications in their role as DPGR and some handling almost none unless enquiries reach them directly in their parallel role as supervisors. Whilst in some faculties the role of DPGR is held by a single individual, in others the role is distributed across two or more members of staff, with tasks and responsibilities being shared with other affiliated role-holders, such as Deputy Directors, Admissions Tutors, Admissions Advisors and those in charge of Subject Divisions or Subject Groups. As a result of this distribution, some of the staff we interviewed were currently Deputy Directors or Directors with varying or shared responsibility. In this sub-section, we group the participants under the designation 'DPGR', while acknowledging the variety of roles.

**Change in the DPGR role in doctoral admissions over time:** The majority of DPGRs noted that they had experienced changes in their role in admissions since taking on the position. Whilst for some this was as a result of institutional changes, such as the introduction of new systems, strategies at the institutional level or shifts in the funding landscape; a few DPGRs reported leading on significant department level changes since taking up the role. For some, this was a case of streamlining, or having 'tightened' up what was already happening (Charlotte, Social Science). Others had been involved in designing and implementing entirely new ways of managing admissions. For instance, Marc (Social Science) described moving from an admissions process based on direct conversations with supervisors, to 'the same process that we use in the [department] to hire new faculty'.

**DPGR doctoral admissions tasks:** One of the main ways in which DPGRs engage in the admissions process and contribute to decision-making is in an overseeing capacity. Activities include arranging and participating in selection panels, matching prospective applicants with supervisors, recommending offers to the Doctoral College, advising on who can serve as a supervisor, and managing PGR activity. A small number of DPGRs were almost completely detached from admissions, with that responsibility having been delegated to other members



of staff. In contrast, some DPGRs reported being more heavily involved in the (pre-)admissions process by engaging with students, answering questions, conferring on topics and proposals and interviewing, as well as inducting students. Included in admissions tasks was maintaining the departmental webpages on doctoral admissions. The majority of DPGRs reported being involved in some way in updating and maintaining webpage information for their departments. This was typically in collaboration with professional services and marketing staff, and was described as an ongoing process.

**DPGR role in PADC:** Only a small number of the staff members that we interviewed stated that they did not deal with pre-application communications in their role as DPGR. In contrast, the majority of DPGRs reported being involved to some extent, such as receiving and answering queries about funding, application timeframes, research culture, research topics and finding a supervisor, in addition to consulting with staff about potential applicants. Ethan (Science) also referred to the DPGR role in working with the central marketing team, for instance in developing prospectus material. DPGRs reported that they received and responded to pre-application communications in a variety of ways and in collaboration with other members of staff: they were forwarded queries by both academic and professional services colleagues; equally they forwarded queries onto these colleagues, and often worked collaboratively with colleagues to ensure communications were dealt with. Whilst the majority were adamant that everyone would receive a response either from themselves or a colleague, a few DPGRs disclosed regularly not responding to queries that were too general or vague. Only one DPGR described being heavily involved in pre-application communications, having implemented a system where all expressions of interest come through the DPGR, rather than supervisors engaging directly with applicants or their proposals: 'I think if you spoke to anybody in the department, they would say they don't do it, but it goes to me' (Charlotte, Social Science).



*Illustration by Kate Carruthers Thomas*

**DPGR perspectives on how PADC processes are established:** Participants were evenly split when it came to questions about whether there had been internal discussions about implementing the current processes for handling PADC. Roughly half described having conversations and seeking/gaining the approval for processes among colleagues, especially in the case of implementing a new admissions system. For some, this was an ongoing issue of discussion and management, based largely on the need to keep up with the number of communications and ensure that responsibility was shared. Although the other half of the DPGRs did not describe any particular decision-making conversations about processes, almost all of the DPGRs said that elements of their processes had been inherited over time and were 'habitual' (Olivia, Social Science). Levels of formalisation for PADC varied from process descriptions to notes passed down from predecessors and mutual understandings of how things worked in a department. There were expressions of hesitancy in relation to formalising PADC. This was for a variety of reasons, such as maintaining supervisor autonomy and concerns about rigid processes leading to people being less 'flexible and collegial' (Anna, Arts).

**DPGR perspectives on applicants struggling with admissions:** In order to delve into the question of whether PADC has implications for the recruitment of diverse talent into doctoral programmes, the interview guide included a question about whether different 'types' of applicant emerge through the PADC process who may appear through PADC to be more or less confident about the admissions process, for instance. DPGRs described a variety of categories of applicant, and there were clear indicators of which categories might be at a disadvantage in the application process:

- mature students or professionals returning to study, who were described as having more questions about the application process in terms of research topic, and frustrated by delays in admissions;
- applicants with different educational backgrounds to the subject they are applying to, due to the rigidity of admissions criteria in some departments; and
- those with qualifications from non-UK institutions, especially overseas students from countries or regions such as China, countries in Africa and the Middle East; overseas students from the Global South were fairly commonly described by DPGRs as having less familiarity with regard to what a doctorate involves, having challenges with funding processes, and sending more generic approaches to supervisors/departments.

The majority of DPGRs believed that perception of applicant type did lead to a difference in how applicants were responded to during the PADC stage. For instance, Isabella (Arts) noted:

it cannot *not* influence the way you respond... if somebody writes an email where the English is really, really bad then we would still reply obviously very, very politely et cetera, et cetera, but [I would] flag this up to the colleague if I were to...refer it to somebody.

DPGRs were divided on whether and how perceptions of applicants' understanding (or lack thereof) of the admissions process influenced how their PADC were responded to by staff. It is important to note that differences in response were not necessarily negative. In terms of applicants struggling with the admissions process, David (Science) referred to spending more time explaining the system in order to 'try to accommodate anyone', as long as time permitted. On the other hand, there was also evidence of measuring PADC against the expectation of autonomy from doctoral students. Luke (Science) indicated that, compared with Masters' level study, doctoral study involves 'much greater ownership of what you're doing as a student', and that therefore PADC should demonstrate 'that they've looked into what they want to do or what the supervisors or what the department can offer'. This latter issue also emerged in relation to potential applicants' engagement with admissions webpage information. Several DPGRs expressed concern about the enquiries they receive from applicants about the departmental webpages. They considered the webpages to be clear and informative and were

frustrated that applicants were not able to find the information themselves. Some DPGRs felt that potential applicants' difficulty in understanding information on department websites did not bode well in terms of their ability to conduct independent research.



*Illustration by Kate Carruthers Thomas*

**DPGR perspectives on gatekeeping in PADC:** Three quarters of DPGRs agreed that gatekeeping happens at the PADC stage. However, 'gatekeeping' was not generally conveyed as a negative or exclusionary process, or a case of 'keeping anyone out' (Anna, Arts); rather it was described as a necessary part of admissions and a case of clarifying the realities of a doctorate, and/or as a byproduct of clarifying the competitive nature of the funding landscape. Ethan (Science) stated that,

Yes [gatekeeping occurs], but that's exclusively because, you know, there are good reasons for it. They [potential applicants] are clearly not, you know, they haven't got the right background, [it] is not within our entry requirements. So you're basically clarifying that, you know, that they don't satisfy the conditions that are set out on the webpage already and so on. We rarely dissuade, certainly not actively. Whether we do it without realising, I don't know, you can be asked, you know, "how many scholarships do you have for overseas students?" And if you answer honestly, which I do, that might dissuade a person simply because they assess their own probabilities of gaining one.

In terms of the EDI implications of PADC gatekeeping or screening, most DPGRs were confident that explicitly unfair or biased judgements were not taking place at this stage, but did refer to experiences where they had witnessed gatekeeping e.g. on scholarship funding panels.

DPGRs reported a spectrum of feelings associated with their PADC work. Whilst some conveyed a sense of neutrality or confidence with their current process and practices based on experience, others described an ongoing sense of unease, drawing attention to the difficulty and sensitivity of pre-application process:

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 are in. So I, you know, I think it's quite complex work actually that I don't always feel completely 100% happy about because it's difficult work, but I'm not sure

what the policy response to that would be. It's not something I could [see an] easy solution to, which is why I've kind of just lived with this sense of, um, quite difficult labour. (Olivia, Social Science)

Several DPGRs noted the volume of these communications to be a negative aspect of the role, suggesting that a 'number of the questions that come could potentially be fielded by a secretary or program coordinator' (Anna, Arts). However, it was also noted that pre-application contact from academic staff has a valuable role in the admissions process:

I remember trying to apply to American universities and the professors didn't really speak to you. They said 'OK, go and apply here'. While the British professor, the professors in the UK were always 'Yeah, let's have a chat, you know. Let's discuss. Let's think about what you want to do before going to anything formal'. And I kind of like that and I hope we can maintain it in the UK because it's personable. (David, Science)

**EDI implications:** There are various implications for EDI which arise from the interviews with DPGRs:

- The fact that the role varies significantly across departments means that it is difficult to shape institutional expectations of where the responsibility lies for ensuring an EDI-oriented admissions and PADC practice within a department.
- Because the role lies with DPGRs who, to an extent, shape their own role, this opens up the potential for an EDI-oriented DPGR to move on and for the EDI principles not to be sustained in the PGR programme, especially if role handover is not formalised.
- Many PADC processes occur through habit and tradition, which includes the potential for inequalities to be reproduced. A balance needs to be struck between formalising PADC (which is difficult to do) and leaving old habits in place (for the sake of autonomy and collegiality).
- Particularly mature students and international students were identified as groups who may face more challenges during PADC, from a DPGR perspective.
- Sharing of best practice and training between departments would be beneficial, especially with regards to what has worked or not in terms of formalising PADC.

### The role of POs in PADC

**Variations in the role of PO in doctoral admissions:** The professional services staff who work at the department level to support doctoral recruitment play a diverse and layered role in the pre-application doctoral communication process. None of the POs we interviewed shared the same job title, despite all of them having a PGR-focussed role, with titles ranging from managers, officers, coordinators and administrators, among others. Overall, POs tended to carry a wealth of institutional knowledge and experience. While some POs (N=2) had oversight of the doctoral admission process (with less direct communication with doctoral applicants), the majority dealt with communications and monitored the relevant departmental email account as part of their multifaceted administrative role.

**Change in the PO role in doctoral admissions over time:** Half of the POs noted that few changes had occurred in their role, and the other half observed that changes had occurred over time. For some participants, these changes were a result of experience they had gained, and taking on additional responsibility and gaining greater confidence, whereas others had developed new processes, responded to institutional policy changes, or noted changes that had arisen due to the move to remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**PO doctoral admissions tasks:** In terms of their role in relation to PGR admission process, most of the POs were involved in managing the day-to-day queries that are sent to the programme's resource account from potential applicants (e.g. around how to apply or eligibility) and checking the applications as they come through the university admission portal. Some POs kept spreadsheets of submitted applications. Other programme officers were involved in liaising with marketing and organising open days, or working with other colleagues (e.g. other PGR coordinators/administrators) to manage the admission process. Half of the POs considered that they contributed to admissions decision-making, such as by checking an applicant's eligibility (e.g. transcripts) or by selecting whether or not to move initial inquires forward, by for instance sending them to an admissions tutor, DPGR or potential supervisors for further consideration. The remainder of POs considered that they 'just do the paperwork side of it' (Carole, Science) and do not contribute to the decision-making that takes place around doctoral admissions. However, at times there was a blurry edge between what was or was not considered to be 'making a decision' (e.g. not forwarding an email effectively constituted making a decision). POs also played a role in maintaining departmental doctoral admissions webpages. Among the POs, half were involved in developing and updating admissions information, and the rest either oversaw the process, or worked with professionals in the department who updated the webpage information. In terms of the POs who were involved in updating the webpages, they mostly did this on a yearly basis, liaising with the marketing team, such as updating the terms and conditions of funding, and clarifying the process for making an inquiry about supervisors.

**PO role in PADC:** Only one of the POs in the study did not deal with PADC, as there was another staff member who was a communications manager in the department. Seven POs extensively dealt with pre-application communications in their everyday work, for instance receiving queries from applicants and then pointing them in the right direction to find information or who to contact. The amount of communication varied and depended on the established departmental procedures: for those departments that encourage students to first contact potential supervisors and DPGRs (which is suggested on their departmental webpages), the POs experienced less email traffic. For many departments that used a PGR resource email account as the main channel for communications, the POs either worked alone or within a team to answer general inquiries from potential applicants. The majority of POs not only dealt with the pre-communications with applicants, but they were also involved in passing their inquiries to relevant stakeholders, e.g. potential supervisors. In terms of the content of the communications, POs received a wide range of topics in the enquiry emails from potential applicants, ranging from very general and broad inquiries such as 'I want to do a PhD' (Fiona, Social Science), 'How to apply' (Anna, Science) and 'life story' (implying an email including substantial information about the potential applicant's background) (Adam, Science), to very specific emails on particular aspects of the doctoral application and the programme. Nine categories of content were mentioned, and many of these topics tended to be inquired about in the same email:

- eligibility and entry requirements (most common);
- funding and scholarships (most common);
- identifying a potential supervisor (most common);
- application timeframe;
- visa and healthcare information;
- research interests;
- access issues (e.g. wheelchair access);
- teaching opportunities; and
- PGR community.

The majority of POs processed the emails by reading and responding to, either replying with personalised text or with a standard or adapted template. For academic-related questions that require further discussion, such as research specialism and proposals, POs usually forwarded them to relevant colleagues, including DPGR, supervisors, other administrative colleagues and services in the same institution (e.g. doctoral college, student services).

**PO perspectives on how PADC processes are established:** The majority of POs (N=6) considered that this process was developed and learned through undertaking the work over the years. There had been discussions around the admissions process with different stakeholders in different departments, as part of the administrative role, including DPGRs, line managers and academics, but PADC was not a distinct topic in the discussion. As a result, the specific processes to deal with PADC relied on POs' own initiative to make their work easier. All POs were engaged in different levels of change regarding the admission process, mostly in line with changes at the departmental level (e.g. funding for a particular programme, staff turnover) or at the institutional level (e.g. the central application system). Some POs proactively considered creating new procedures for a smooth process. For instance, Bluebell (Social Sciences) tended not to forward the inquiry if the applicant did not meet certain criteria, in order to be 'a bit more autonomous to be selective'. Half of the POs confirmed that procedures had been formalised in their job description, such as taking responsibility for the admissions process, though this was not specific to PADC.

**PO perspectives on applicants struggling with admissions:** Although POs stated that they consider that most applicants are broadly the same, they discussed a number of different types of applicants:

- mature applicants who have had a non-research career or a break from study and therefore might struggle with university systems and expectations of the process;
- working applicants who are juggling multiple responsibilities which contributes to frustrations with the timeline of the application process;
- international applicants (e.g. from China, Africa, Middle East), who were associated with having unclear expectations of what doctoral study involved, communicating with a different style, and asking questions about funding (rather than the content of the doctorate, which was stated to be more common for home students), though international students who had already studied in the UK were noted to be at an advantage;
- applicants with various educational qualifications that are not accepted by the university;
- applicants from different disciplinary backgrounds than the degree they are applying to, which makes it harder to create a strong research proposal; and
- applicants from institutions where they have not been given adequate preparation and detailed advice on applying for a doctorate.

Not all POs thought that these different types of students led to a different reception when dealing with their requests. For instance, Bluebell (Social Science) stated: 'I don't have a problem with any of those styles and accept those [emails], and I wouldn't judge anyone on those'; Fiona (Social Sciences) noted that 'provid[ing] good customer service' is important for these applicants, who 'might become our students of the future' (Fiona, Social Sciences). Carole (Science) referred to 'personality type' of wanting all the details rather than a particular group. Rebecca (Arts) said that she tried to think, "why are they asking that?" If they're asking that, maybe it's not clear on our webpages'. Adam (Science) also thought that when queries were about admissions criteria that are clearly listed 'on our website', it might

be the case that applicants 'probably expect the answer' but are just 'asking on the off chance' that they might be considered.

However, some POs demonstrated a wariness of certain types of emails, and indicated that certain styles of communication are received differently:

What we do discount is when you get a scatter gun approach and the same person sent 10 emails to 10 different people in the department because it's like when you're not showing respect and you haven't done research on who does it. (Bluebell, Social Sciences)

**PO perspectives on gatekeeping in PADC:** More than half of the POs acknowledged that gatekeeping happens in PADC, especially when it comes to suitability and eligibility checking, and, as with DPGRs, they saw this as a necessary screening process. For example, 'there's definitely a judgment that's inevitably formed about the suitability but also the quality' (Stewart, Social Sciences). POs also referred to their role in screening out unsuitable PADC to reduce academics' workload in this area:

I'm like the gatekeeper or the filter, but it's quite easy. Well, I think in my experience as administrator, it's quite easy to see like the ones that are a definite 'no' [...] Obviously, if I'm filtering off the ones that aren't going to-, so the one liners or the two liners [i.e. very short emails], that's reducing the workload on the academic who should be spending time on the ones that could be successful students. (Bluebell, Social Science)

**EDI implications.** Implications for EDI which arise from the interviews with POs include:

- As with the DPGRs, the variation in how PGR is administered across departments means it is difficult to implement institutional expectations about where responsibility for inclusivity in admissions and PADC lies.
- It is important that POs develop awareness, e.g. through professional development, of the ways in which administrative tasks relating to admissions contribute to EDI. For instance, that deciding on the suitability of a PADC email to be referred through to the DPGR or declined by the PO seems to be an administrative decision but is also an EDI decision.
- Since POs have responsibility for updating PGR admissions webpages, there is a need to develop POs' skills in developing EDI-oriented admissions pages (in collaboration with DPGRs and marketing).
- POs often use template emails to respond to common queries. There is potential for these template emails to be developed with EDI in mind, particularly in terms of signalling sources of support for different challenges that applicants may face.
- As with DPGRs, POs' work around PADC generally developed through habit and experience, rather than being a point of discussion in terms of systems and processes. Making PADC a formal topic of discussion in admissions administration would lead to more open discussions about EDI implications of PADC practices.
- Along with the DPGRs, POs also singled out mature students and international students as facing particular challenges.
- There is great potential in mapping frustrations that POs encounter, such as receiving basic queries where the information is available on webpages, and exploring why these frustrations keep occurring—for instance, checking that the webpages are clear and easily accessible. Frustrations perceived in this way can lead to improvements.

### 4.3 The role of supervisors in PADC

This sub-section addresses the second research question from PADC 1: *how do DPGRs, POs and supervisors make decisions about responding to potential doctoral applicants at the pre-application stage? How may these decisions negatively impact the recruitment of diverse talent?* It therefore considers the role of supervisors (based on the pre-diary questionnaires, the diaries and FGDs).

**Supervisors' recruitment capacity:** Capacity issues mean that it can be difficult for potential applicants to locate a supervisor who both has availability and whose research topic is close to the student's proposed topic. Supervisors were asked in the pre-diary questionnaire about their supervision capacity. For recruiting new doctoral students for the next academic year, 17 participants said they would consider taking on 1-2 students, whereas only two said they would take on 3-4, and no supervisors stated more than this. Supervisors noted that the capacity to recruit new students was determined by a host of personal and institutional factors, such as: departmental workload and capacity limits (e.g. being on a part-time contract or capacity restrictions for assistant professors), departmental constraints on the permitted number of students per supervisor, having personal principles about capacity. Sarah (Social Sciences), for instance, commented, 'I just don't like to take on more than I can give full attention to in any one year'.

**Recruitment priorities and principles:** In order to understand how participants were approaching doctoral student recruitment, in the pre-diary questionnaire participants were asked about any priorities and principles they were bringing to doctoral admissions in the academic year of the study (2021-22). The chief priority was related to supervisors' research interests and expertise. The majority of participants (N=11) stated they would consider recruiting new doctoral students on the basis of the proposals' relevance to the supervisors' research interests and expertise. Some participants also noted their regional or national context interest in taking on doctoral applicants, stating a particular interest in recruiting applicants from a specific region/country that may also be related to the supervisor's research expertise. Others identified applicant-related priorities such as: having prior familiarity with applicants, applicants' academic background and the quality of their proposal, their personalised style of contact with supervisors, and having secured or showing potential for funding (or targeting a particular scholarship scheme). Some participants underscored the influence of their departmental needs or priorities in their recruitment of new doctoral students, e.g. to establish cross-departmental collaboration. Priorities relating to social justice aims also came through; for instance, in FGD2, Participant 3 expressed principles of recruiting students from British minority communities in order to boost community development.

**Official practices for managing PADC:** In the pre-diary questionnaire and FGDs, supervisors identified official department processes for PADC, which varied across departments. Participants also noted that they were not necessarily aware of official processes and that supervisors did not necessarily follow them; a participant referred to the DPGR in their department, who was implementing a more formal PADC system, 'trying to herd us [supervisors] like cats' (FGD1, Participant 1). Participants mentioned the following official practices:

- referring emails from potential applicants (either generic emails or emails on topics that were unrelated to their expertise) to POs so that they would respond;
- referring emails to DPGRs, especially when official application documents were involved;
- being encouraged by their departments to meet potential applicants online and to discuss funding opportunities with them;



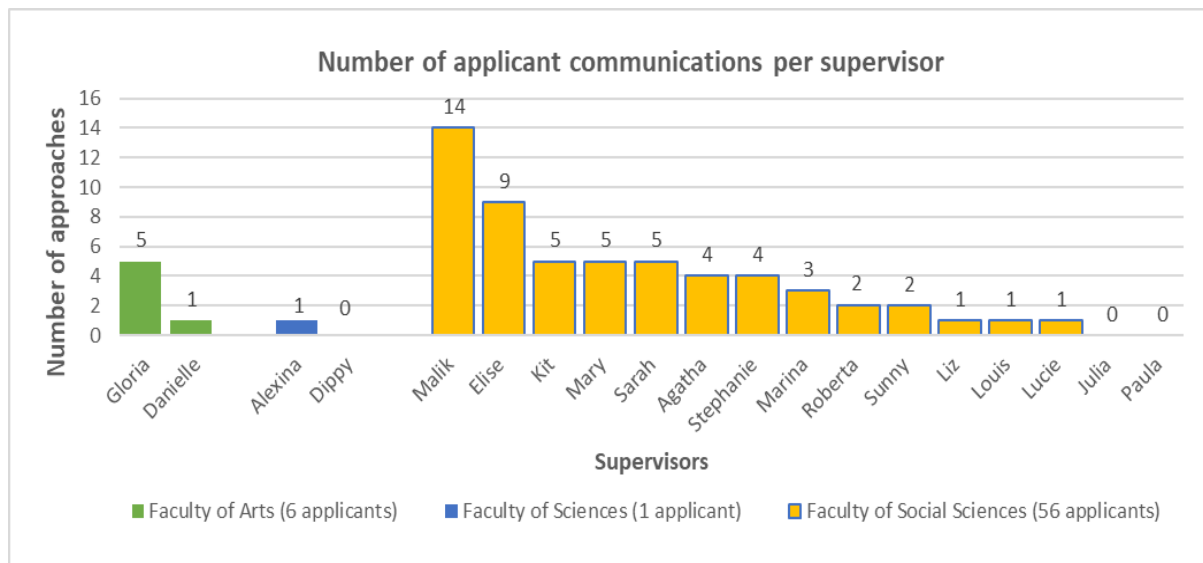
- using official email templates provided by departments to respond to doctoral applicants; and
- being encouraged by departments to use email communication with applicants to help them develop their proposals.

**Personal practices for managing PADC:** In the pre-diary questionnaire and FGDs, supervisors also identified personal practices they had developed for managing PADC. These included:

- listing information on supervision interests/capacity on their university profile webpage, e.g. current/completed students and topics, research topics;
- making judgements on emails based on whether they seemed to be personalised or sent to many other academics;
- making use of their own or department-provided standard template emails to respond to doctoral applicants (and/or adapting email text for specific queries);
- sending personalised responses to all new applicants ('Never any template for anything. This is not a toothpaste factory!' – Louis, Social Science);
- setting up informal (video) calls for more in-depth communication and to informally assess the potential applicant's English language capacity;
- checking the 'junk' folder in email to retrieve all potential approaches;
- setting up an inbox folder to store and keep track of PADC;
- delaying replies to unrelated proposals;
- referring potential applicants to DPGRs or POs as a standard practice; and
- forwarding PADC to other potential supervisors.

**Variations in PADC frequency across supervisors:** The six-week diary study gathered 63 diary entries (using Form 1). This signifies that 63 new potential applicants contacted the supervisors who were participating in the study (or other staff members contacted the supervisors about the applicants). There was variation in terms of how many PADC supervisors were involved in (Figure 1), with some receiving no approaches in the six weeks and others receiving nine (Elise) and 14 (Malik). As discussed in FGD1, some departments are inundated with PADC and other departments are always looking for more applicants; the variety occurs across individual supervisors and departments. In two FGDs, a supervisor in each explained that they tend to receive a high volume of PADC due to working in a relatively rare field of study, meaning that they are one of the few supervisors to choose from in this field. The vast majority of applicants (90.5%, N=57) contacted the supervisors about applying for a PhD course, and only one applicant was interested in a professional doctorate (EdD). In five cases, the intended course was not identified by participants, which may be explained by the fact that, in many departments, the PhD is the only doctoral degree on offer.

**Figure 1: Number of new applicant communications per supervisor during the six-week diary study**

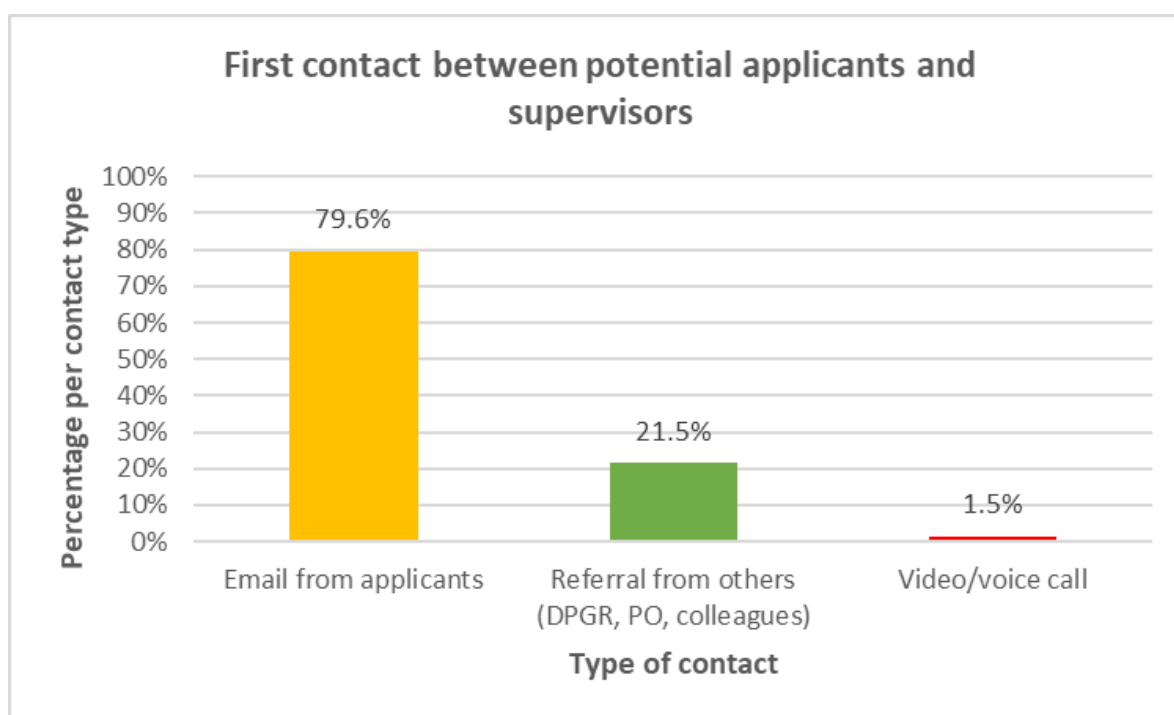


**Discerning the characteristics of applicants from PADC:** Supervisors were asked to state any characteristics they could discern from the potential applicants, in order to give the impression of how many personal details supervisors are aware of (guessing at these from names, for instance) while evaluating PADC. Out of 63 applicants, participants discerned that 28.6% were women (N= 18), and 25.4% were men (N=16). The gender of the remaining 46.0% (N=29) was either difficult to identify or not identified by participants. Participants were also asked if they could discern the nationality or nationalities of potential applicants, where this was stated. The nationality was only not identified for six applicants (9.5%). For the identified nationalities of applicants, the majority of applicants who made up 22.2% (N=14) of the overall number of applicants were discerned by supervisors as being Chinese, followed by Saudi (12.7% N=8), British and Azerbaijani (both 9.5% N=6), Indian (6.3%, N=4), with other nationalities being Afghanistan, Egypt, France, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Portugal, Singapore, Turkey, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, and Zimbabwe. Two potential applicants were identified as having dual nationalities. Participants were asked to note other discernible information about the potential applicants who contacted them. This information included: already being a student at Warwick, the applicant potentially being a scholar at risk (i.e 'scholars suffering grave threats to their lives, liberty and well-being', Scholars at Risk Network, 2023), and the applicant currently working in a third sector organisation. It is clear that supervisors are frequently aware of a potential applicant's gender, almost always aware of nationality, and also aware of other aspects as well. This also came through in the FGDs, where supervisors discussed particularities of potential applicants from Global South countries and also who were funded by government scholarships from regimes that supervisors may not wish to support. FGD2 included discussion of changes in government scholarship regimes and how this influences the flows of PADC from different countries.

**Nature of first contact between potential applicants and supervisors:** The study sought to map forms of PADC that supervisors receive, and these constituted 65 communications for the first approach; in two cases there were two forms of communication constituting the first approach (see Figure 2). As expected, the most common communication form was via email from potential applicants; the referral of potential applicants from DPGRs, or POs, or colleagues was the second most common form. Two out of these 14 referrals also saw the applicants contacting the participants via direct email. There were also two other referrals

amongst the 14 communications from colleagues outside the department of the contacted supervisors. The least common form was via phone/video call (N=1).

Figure 2: First contact type between potential applicants and supervisors from the six-week diary study



**Supervisors' actions and explanations in relation to PADC:** Participants in the study demonstrated varying timing of responses to PADC. For 31.7% of the applicants (N=20), supervisors had initiated next steps (e.g. asking for a proposal or requesting a meeting) within the same week as receiving the first approach. In many cases, supervisors delayed replying for at least a week (30.2% of applicants, N=19). For 28.6% of applicants (N=18), the response was to decline interest in proceeding further. A few applicants, 9.5% (N=6), were referred to another colleague for consideration. While these figures refer to what participants identified as their primary actions, more than half of the approaches by potential doctoral applicants were dealt with via a combination of a major action and another related action (e.g. by replying to decline an applicant's approach for supervision and forwarding the applicant's email to another colleague for consideration at the same time). Forwarding potential applicants' emails to other colleagues was the predominant action accompanying most of the other primary actions taken by participants as described above.

For instance, Mary (Social Sciences) was approached via email by a potential applicant, who attached a draft proposal and his CV to his email. She first sent him an email reply to acknowledge receipt of these items. Mary conducted an initial review of the items and forwarded them to three other colleagues in the department to seek co-supervision. She then replied to the applicant with feedback from her and a colleague on the proposal, and encouraged him to apply for the coming academic year.

Actions were explained in various ways.

*Delay response:* For those who delayed responding to potential applicants in the first instance, the reasons varied between delays caused by follow-up actions, workload considerations and PADC-related concerns. In terms of delaying for follow-up actions, this included searching online for an applicant's profile to check their previous work experience and their relevance to

their proposed doctoral project, and consulting with other colleagues in the department before making a decision. Kit (Social Sciences) stated,

My initial response to these emails - if they are not immediately clearly a yes or no, is to delay and then seek guidance/a conversation with colleagues to help me to decide on an action.

In terms of delays caused by workload concerns, in the cases of 10 potential applicants, the potential supervisors delayed on responding due to being busy with other work that was expressed as higher priority. Elise (Social Sciences) commented, 'I am noticing how many weeks go by before responding to these emails. I feel guilty yet can't seem to get myself to go through these emails'. To manage this, one action was to amassing incoming communications from potential applicants in order to respond to all of them in one work session. Other supervisors delayed replying due to concerns with the PADC, such as lack of relevance of the proposed topic to the supervisor's expertise and lack of funding details provided by the potential applicant. This implies that a supervisor may reply more quickly to PADC that immediately strike them as promising.

*Forward to another colleague:* Some supervisors forwarded approaches by potential applicants to other colleagues in the department. PADC were forwarded either directly to another colleague or indirectly by asking applicants to contact other (named) colleagues. Supervisors' action to forward PADC mainly stemmed from proposals' (ir)relevance to supervisors' research areas; it was also an action taken by some supervisors for seeking potential co-supervision. Malik (Social Sciences) noted,

This was a well-written proposal, but the research focus went beyond my expertise. I have forwarded it a colleague to consider the proposal and see whether there will be chance of co-supervision.

In FGD1, this practice of forwarding as a matter of principle was discussed, but it was noted that other colleagues did not necessarily view PADC in the same light, and would reply immediately to decline interest.

*Reply to decline:* Generally, responding to applicants to decline the possibility for supervision was coupled with other actions taken by supervisors. Supervisors directed potential applicants to more relevant departments; gave feedback on applicants' drafted proposals; provided links to sources of funding; forwarded emails to other colleagues with more relevant specialisms and/or greater capacity to recruit new students. From the diaries and the FGDs, there were three major reasons why supervisors declined to pursue applications further. Firstly, supervisors did not have sufficient capacity to recruit new students. Secondly, potential applicants were not targeting supervisors with relevant research interests. Thirdly, supervisors were concerned about the quality of the PADC in terms of the clarity, length and/or style of the proposal or email itself (N=3). Supervisors highlighted that emails which were lengthy, unclear and with mistakes were undesirable as coming from potential doctoral applicants. Agatha (Social Sciences), for instance, stated:

[I] replied to say not in my area and have no capacity at present, and suggested other colleagues to approach [because of] 1) my own workload 2) email clearly not targeted at me (addressed to "Dear Sir").

In FGD1, supervisors discussed that they also may reply to decline where an applicant has stated they will need a scholarship and past experience of scholarship panels/outcomes indicates that the applicant would not be successful, e.g. because of the quality of the proposal, or because their previous qualification was in a different discipline.

*Reply to initiate next steps:* When supervisors replied to pursue PADC further, the purposes of these actions were mainly to request information/clarification and additional items from

applicants/referring colleagues (i.e., research proposal, CV, writing sample, and academic transcripts) (N=7); to set up an informal virtual meeting (N=3); to provide feedback on draft proposals (N=3); or to encourage potential applicants to submit an official application (N=3). The relevance of applicants' proposed projects to supervisors' areas of expertise was the most common reason to initiate next steps (N=14), followed by the quality of proposals and the style of PADC (N=10 combined). Sunny (Social Sciences) described a desirable type of email by a potential applicant as follows:

The email was informative, and I was encouraged by the background details - relating to where the applicant was educated [...] The applicant made clear the area that she was interested in and suggested a sensible way forward.

Other explanations for initiating next steps included the level of a potential applicant's written English; having prior knowledge of an applicant; an applicant's research or professional background as shown in their submitted CVs; making reference to the potential supervisor's published work; and the originality of the proposed topic by potential applicants. In FGD2 and FGD3, a supervisor in each raised the issue of whether the proposal and/or email has been written by the applicant or by another source, and the need to pursue an applicant through a few email exchanges to establish the 'genuine' nature of the applicant and/or their English language abilities. None of the supervisors based their decision to proceed to next steps with potential applicants on one single factor.

*Applicant advantages and disadvantages in the PADC process.* In the FGDs, supervisors discussed at length different characteristics that are revealed or discernible in PADC that may lead to different outcomes for potential applicants. Supervisors identified the following items:

- Being a current student at the same university/department may be an advantage in terms of knowing the system and being known by staff in the department, but can also be a disadvantage if the previous academic performance was not deemed of a sufficiently high quality.
- Being previously educated in the UK system is an advantage (as a UK or international applicant) in terms of knowing how to pitch the email and proposal. Even more advantageous is having insider knowledge of the target institution. However, applying with a UK education record may also be a disadvantage, as supervisors have more knowledge of UK institutions than international institutions, meaning that they may exercise more exclusionary judgements based on the elite/non-elite status of the potential applicant's previous institution.
- Applying from a minority community in the UK may be a disadvantage, particularly a diasporic community where English language skills may not be developed to the level that supervisors perceive is needed for a doctoral application.
- Applying as a part-time home student may also have disadvantages as it may be more attractive to supervisors to work with full-time funded international students.
- Applying from a Global South context is a disadvantage due to prevalent lack of resourcing. However, some Global South contexts may be more favourably received than others, such as from Anglophone contexts and previous British colonies, due to language compatibility and alignment in educational traditions meaning that the email/proposal would be pitched in an 'appropriate' style.
- Applying as an international student with a government scholarship may be an advantage in that supervisors will be reassured that the student is likely to be able to enrol, but also a disadvantage if supervisors are concerned about the government dispensing the scholarship, or if the particular context has a reputation for having an 'industry' of producing doctoral proposals written by others.

**EDI implications:** Implications arising from the diaries and FGDs with supervisors include:

- Although supervisor capacity restrictions are necessary, these also result in high levels of competition to work with some supervisors, with potential EDI implications.
- Supervisors have their own recruitment priorities and principles, which may be more or less EDI oriented – it would be beneficial to create more spaces for reflection on these principles.
- Supervisors find official PADC processes useful, but may not follow these processes – this needs to be borne in mind if PADC is formalised, allowing for some flexibility.
- Supervisors have their own PADC processes, which may lead to different experiences for different applicants, with EDI implications.
- The variation in volume of PADC for particular supervisors and departments means that there are different levels of competition for applicants, resulting in different expectations of ‘quality’ of PADC.
- Supervisors are aware of applicant identity characteristics when making decisions about PADC. These may be revealed by applicants in emails, or discerned by supervisors from e.g. gendered names. Most commonly, nationality and gender are discerned. Even if supervisors are not consciously making decisions *based on discerned identity of applicants*, they are making decisions *in the discerned knowledge of an applicant’s identity*.
- Since the most common type of PADC is an email from a potential applicant to a potential supervisor, this is the area to target for EDI-oriented enhancement, such as working on template emails that demystify the process.
- Some supervisors frequently forward PADC to other colleagues where they do not have capacity or the topic fit is not close enough, which has an EDI dimension of trying to give the potential applicant a chance. However, other colleagues may not share this principle.
- When supervisors reply to decline interest or to initiate next steps, this is based on a range of factors, some of which could benefit from further reflection and discussion in relation to the basis for making these decisions and implications for EDI.
- There are advantages and disadvantages to being a current student at the same university/department, in the sense of knowing the department and being known, which can be positive or negative.
- There are advantages and disadvantages associated with being discernible as an applicant who has previous UK educational experience. This is an advantage in terms of knowing how to pitch the email/proposal, but may also be a disadvantage if the supervisor considers the previous university to be unfavourable in some way. Part-time students may also appear less attractive than full-time funded international students. Moreover, minority communities in the UK may also be at a disadvantage in terms of linguistic expression.
- Applying from a Global South context is perceived as a disadvantage in terms of pitching, but there are variations within this such as applying from an Anglophone context.
- Applying with a government scholarship may be an advantage in terms of assuring the supervisor that funding will not prevent enrolment, but may be a disadvantage if the supervisor queries the ethics of the government’s regime or the ‘genuine’ nature of the proposal.

#### 4.4 Experiences of minoritised PGRs in PADC

This sub-section addresses the first research question from PADC2: *how do doctoral applicants from minority backgrounds navigate the process of finding a doctoral supervisor?* It therefore considers the experiences of minoritised applicants in finding and contacting a supervisor, the factors that acted as enablers and those that created barriers and challenges in the overall process.

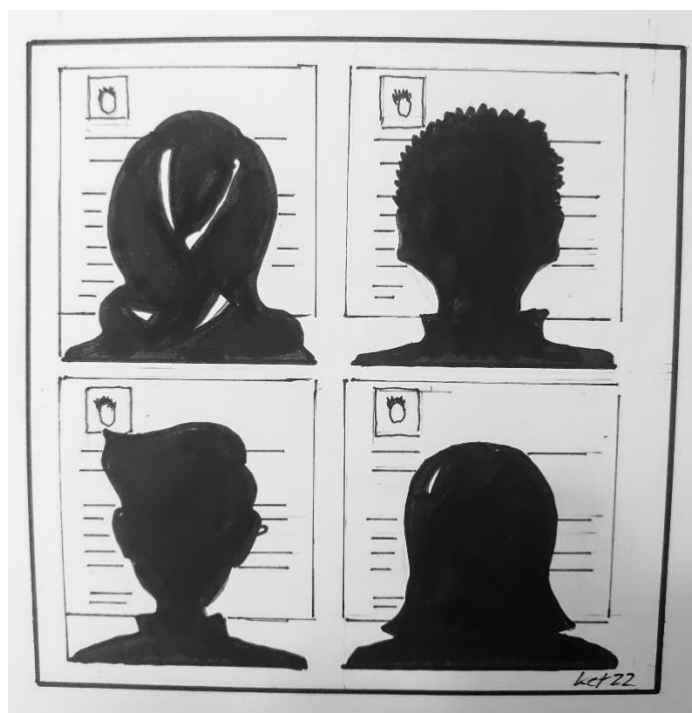
##### Contacting a Doctoral Supervisor

Participants relayed narratives of the positive elements of the process. For example, Harvinder (Science), noted that he was

really quite excited by reaching out to people because you don't know necessarily at that point who's gonna say yes or no, but also, more excitingly, where you're gonna end up.

Betty (Social Science) also conveyed the pleasure she felt whilst communicating with her potential supervisor: 'we were having these conversations by e-mail. She was sending me some articles. What do you think about this? You know, this professional [dialogue].' However, for many applicants, the process of identifying and reaching out to potential supervisors was stressful and extra support was necessary. As Lakeside describes: 'Yeah, I was super nervous about reaching out. I made my partner read the emails that I sent.' Gale was also concerned with how to make her email stand out: 'at the time it felt, I'm just a completely random person. I didn't really know apart from just like *reach out*.'

This anxiety and worry over details during the PADC stage of doctoral admissions was common amongst many of the participants, coupled with stories of long searches for supervisors, unresponsive emails and numerous conversations that did not end in endorsement. The following sub-sections describe in further detail both the different enabling factors and challenges faced by minoritised applicants in the PADC stage of doctoral admissions.



*Illustration by Kate Carruthers Thomas*

### PADC Enabling Factors

**Family background:** The positive influence of family, even if they had not been to university, was noted. As Harvinder (Science) states: 'they were good at moral support and just general encouragement [smiles].' Harvinder also described feeling 'British' and how he might therefore have a better understanding of his rights in the PADC stage more than others. On the other hand, Lily (Science), an international student, was able to get advice about what to expect from a supervisor as both of her parents were 'also academics', albeit in a different context. This meant that she felt that her expectations of a supervisor were 'more realistic than other people.'

**Peer support:** Minoritised applicants relied on friends or university peer groups, or in some cases, individual friends or acquaintances who were also applying for a doctorate. For Betty (Social Sciences), a friend told her about an open day: 'she discussed with PhD students and she told me, you know, "It is possible, it seems possible". She told me this sentence. And I stuck to it.' Similarly for Sabrina (Social Sciences), it was a friend who 'mentioned how supervisors usually respond or take on a student if the student is, if their project aligns with their field or with their research.' Beyond knowing someone who was thinking about or applying to doctoral study, some participants conceptualised their ability to call on help from people with an insider perspective already in the system as 'social capital' (Sparrow, Arts; Sameer, Arts).

**Staff support:** Feeling familiar with a potential supervisor often related to having already studied at the institution: 'Because I've been at Warwick, we seem to be able to get on better' (Simon, Arts). Institutional familiarity extended into general understandings of the university and its culture. As Zach (Social Sciences) also notes, applying to different institutions felt like there was 'much more of a kind of a jumping into the deep end. Whereas at Warwick, I was like, oh, but I know this deep end.' Unsurprisingly, Master's level tutors were noted for having given encouragement: 'he [tutor] was actually the one that encouraged me to apply in the first place' (Lakeside, Arts), and for putting applicants in touch with relevant contacts. However, a particularly interesting finding was the role of undergraduate tutors in encouraging doctoral applications and assisting with PADC. As Sparrow (Arts) notes,

when I started to be interested in the PhD, I got most of the help from my previous lecturers. From my undergrad actually, undergraduate studies, because I kept in good relation.

Similarly, as Gale states, 'I definitely relied on my personal tutor, and my [undergraduate] research supervisor. I think ... yeah ... I think because I had trust with them.'

The most frequently mentioned enabling figure mentioned was students' potential doctoral supervisors. Of note was proposal feedback, which Sabrina (Social Sciences) called a 'privilege'. Sameer (Arts) elaborated on this further:

I mean regardless of the different ways in which all of these supervisors in the UK talk to me, it was all beneficial. It was all interconnected in terms of it being very beneficial and very feedback oriented, the process.

One participant, Simon (Arts), was particularly grateful for the support of their supervisor at Warwick after being told that his project was no longer feasible at another institution, despite having already enrolled.

**Online resources consulted by applicants:** Applicants utilise a range of online resources to better navigate finding a supervisor. YouTube videos were useful for a variety of reasons, such as giving an insight into daily life of a doctoral student and advice on how to approach supervisors (Lewis, Science; Lily, Science; Lakeside, Arts; Hamdi, Social Science). Our study



revealed the importance of online resources where experiences are shared for those without access to insider networks. As Hamdi (Social Sciences) states:

Because in my social circle I don't have anybody who has been accepted to study a PhD in the UK. So that's why I couldn't ask anybody how to communicate with supervisors.

In addition to YouTube, participants mentioned the important role of Twitter in learning about what is 'trending' in academia and research (Lily, Science), to 'find positions' (Harvinder, Science) and make 'connections' (Sophia, Arts). Harvinder (Science) also mentioned having listened to some podcasts about PhD life, and several participants across the faculties mentioned the usefulness of searching on sites such as FindAPhD, or just searching key terms in a search engine (e.g. Google).

**Early exposure to research:** Internships or Bachelor's research projects provide future minoritised doctoral applicants with useful networks and with the opportunity to gain skills. As Lewis (Science) notes,

that summer internship really I think was quite grounding or quite useful for me for that PhD application because it gave me a whole set of skills that I was able to add on to my application form.

Sophia (Arts) even felt that her leverage with supervisors was enhanced the second year she was applying as she had worked as a Research Assistant, albeit in a different discipline, during the year out she took between her first and second attempts.

**Application information:** Having access to clearly listed and explained PADC instructions and opportunities was mentioned by multiple applications as an enabling factor. For instance, Betty (Social Sciences) was keen to not ask her potential supervisor too many questions and felt that it was 'not her role to mentor me in this process'. Luckily, Betty felt that 'the [application] process was pretty clear. It was pretty terrible, but I mean really clear in itself.' In addition, participants such as Lakeside (Arts) noted other sources of information about application, such as a 'live chat function' where 'you could just turn up ask your question and they would answer it straight away'; they found this useful for reasons pertaining to neurodiversity and the potential for 'misunderstanding'.

### PADC Barriers

**Staff support:** In the absence of existing networks or familial connections, minoritised applicants rely heavily on institutional staff and departments they know from previous phases of their studies for PADC support. However, several participants described not being able to get reliable advice or support from those they did know inside the sector, for example Master's level tutors or potential supervisors. For instance, Gale (Science) described how her Master's tutor, when asked about application deadlines, said 'Oh, there's no need to worry about that now'; if she had listened to this advice and not looked into it further herself, she would have missed the deadline. La (Science), an international student, also experienced an unsupportive Master's supervisor and then described being withdrawn from his Master's programme. This led him to feel embarrassed at the doctoral level because the other PhD students he was around had gained Master's qualifications.

Furthermore, Zach (Social Sciences) described not being able to find the right subject or financial support in their department and having to move to another department in order to get funding. This in turn resulted in having to shift the project focus considerably, a process which added more pressure to a process that was already challenging in terms of finding a supervisor aligned with and understanding of their identities.

Several participants described not hearing back from supervisors they were reaching out to or being made to feel implicitly discouraged from proceeding in the process. As Lakeside (Arts)

described, one supervisor responded to their query about doctoral studies with a request to see their transcript. Having sent this through, the supervisor simply replied saying the doctoral programme was 'academically very competitive', and this in turn made Lakeside feel self-conscious and discouraged.

**Restricted access to online information:** Some participants described difficulties accessing transparent information and they expressed concerns about how what they were experiencing could affect others. For example, Lakeside (Arts) encountered 'hard-to-navigate webpages or lots of technical language often on application processes' and staff information 'behind log-in pages'. Gale (Science) described how an opportunity was only listed internally:

it made me think, if I didn't know you [supervisor], like, I wouldn't have found this. Or if I had taken like a couple of years out and then came back to do PhD.

Gale felt that this could have been the result of either 'communication incompetence', or something more troublesome, such as testing applicants 'to scour, find things, or if it's like a restricting the number that apply thing.'

Furthermore, when looking for advice online about aspects of the application such as the length of a research proposal, she remembers,

being so frustrated because I just couldn't get a straight answer about like very much and it depends on like the person who's looking at it type of thing. Which I just found awful and I was just Googling and Googling and Googling.

She then stated 'now I can understand. It obviously depends on the project, but, at that time, it just felt like this huge like barrier, um, to applying really.' This notion of understanding the PADC and application process only once you have gone through it conveys the difficulties faced by minoritised applicants and the potential for greater stress and confusion as they figure it out as they go along.

Where information was public, it was sometimes out of date. Hamdi (Social Science) described communicating with a supervisor at Warwick due to his interest in a specific research cluster he found on the website, but was then told by the supervisor 'this unit is dismantled.' When communicating with a supervisor in Canada, he described being told, 'it's very good. Uh. However, I'm sorry to tell you that I'm retired.'

**Limited institutional EDI awareness:** Another challenge faced by minoritised applicants in relation to PADC was the limited approaches to inclusion. For Harvinder (Science), who has a disability, this manifested in supervisors questioning his ability to fulfil the requirements of the research projects he was interested in. Whereas staff he knew at Warwick were familiar, potential supervisors from other institutions asked more questions:

So they were then asking, are you going to be extremely slow? Do you need to go part time? The answer to that is 'No [laughs] I don't want to go part time and you shouldn't be assuming that I have to unless I ask you to.'

The representation of diversity amongst staff was also a consideration for Harvinder, but this barrier acted as a motivator:

maybe by joining the department as a student, as a PhD student, then undergrads who I would teach would see that they can do this, and publishing with papers with my name on them would show the others like me that we can do things too.

EDI also goes beyond physical representation and connects to what knowledge is produced and how this influences the ability for minoritised applicants to feel welcome during PADC. As Hamdi (Social Science) notes: 'I feel that the diversity is confined to racial diversity, sexual diversity, but disciplinary diversity or epistemic diversity, both of them are overlooked.'

**EDI implications.** There are various implications for EDI which arise from the interviews with minoritized PGRs:

- Early research opportunities are crucial for gaining an understanding of research skills and careers that non-minoritised applicants might gain through existing connections or tacit knowledge of research and higher education.
- Minoritised applicants experience a range of specific barriers to doctoral study from earlier in their academic studies, the initial stages of contacting supervisors and onwards, many of which might prevent or delay applying.
- Minoritised applicants often learn how to engage in PADC by doing it, feeling that they understand the process only once they are insiders.
- Peer and familial support were considered enabling factors for some, but this necessitates knowing others who are engaged in doctoral education or higher education more broadly, which many potential applicants may not.
- Without peer or familial support, applicants may rely on university staff, particularly those they have known or worked with previously, for example during undergraduate study. This can result in students relying on the luck of a good connection or indeed staying at the same institution rather than exploring options elsewhere.
- Minoritised applicants are particularly reliant on proposal feedback and endorsement from potential supervisors if they have limited academic networks or knowledge about what an application should look like.
- Online resources are important for minoritised applicants, even if they have (albeit limited) access to familial and peer support, as they provide crucial insight into the process of applying and carrying out a doctorate.
- Due to the extent that minoritised applicants rely on staff, more accessible and centralised institutional support is needed for learning about and engaging in PADC.
- More staff training is required for understanding the needs of students facing barriers in applying to doctoral study.

#### 4.5 The role of online advice videos in PADC

This sub-section addresses the second research question from PADC2: *what do existing advice videos tell prospective applicants about the process of finding and approaching a potential supervisor?* It therefore considers the types of advice given in videos and describes some of their general features.

##### Types of advice

**Finding a project or supervisor:** Several videos provided initial advice on how to conduct the initial search for a supervisor, although this tended to be quite limited and vague. For example, the WeDesified (2020, 2:25) presenter simply describes how she 'looked into the faculty of that university and their research interests and found one professor from each university and wrote them an email'. Furthermore, Clark (2016, 1:46) describes how he 'browsed through a bunch of projects that were being offered by different universities', giving no information about where the search took place before stating that he then applied. Memorial University of Newfoundland (2020, 1:50) advises looking at departmental websites.

**Supervisor or project match:** Match was discussed in two primary ways: interest match and personality match/relationship. In terms of the research match, viewers are advised that 'it is incredibly important for your interests to be overlined' (R3ciprocitiy Team, 2018, 1:34); 'it is really important that you find a potential supervisor who has expertise in your area of interest' (University of Kent, 2016, 0:37); 'the most important thing about choosing a supervisor is finding a project you're interested in' (Graduate Research School Western Sydney University, 2015, 0:28). In terms of finding a personality fit with a supervisor, applicants are advised to talk with supervisors 'about your expectations' of the relationship because 'communication is the most important part of the student-supervisor relationship' (Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2020, 3:24, 4:20). Another video advises that applicants

make sure that you and the supervisor are a good fit with each other. What I'm talking about is in terms of the level of commitment they want to have into your project (Graduate Research School Western Sydney University, 2015, 2:15).

Advice on picking a supervisor was also conveyed in ways that were very unclear. For example, the presenter of the video by R3ciprocitiy Team (2018, 0:48) asks viewers to consider whether they want a

younger professor, for example, that might be more likely to publish... but they will be really stressed out and not have a lot of time for you, uh, maybe they might have more time for you, I don't know.

This quote conveys the paradox of advice giving in this space: despite all of the assurances or experiences, ultimately no one can know how it will go with a different supervisor.

**How to contact supervisors (tone and what to include):** Another common form of advice concerned how to reach out to potential supervisors via email. One of the most salient and recurring tips within this theme that was present in almost all of the videos was appealing to the supervisor individually and their research areas directly: 'focus on the research and what they are doing' (R3ciprocitiy Team, 2018, 1:53), and never be generic because 'it is also about him or her' (Infosessionwithkingsley, 2020, 3:34). As the video from WiseUp Communications (2022, 3:40) states: 'pro tip - the more tailored your email is to the professor you are writing to the higher the chances of you receiving a response from them.' Another aspect of the advice concerned not asking for too much in the initial contact: 'do not ask for any positions or favours in your first email' (WeDesified, 2020, 3:34).

The emphasis on appealing to the supervisor results in mixed messaging across the videos about that applicants should or should not include about themselves. For instance, whilst some advised including plenty of personal achievements and examples of experience (InfosessionwithKingsley, 2020; WiseUp Communications, 2022), one video gave a very different message:

To be honest, they are not really going to care for all of these other kinds of things, what you've done in the past, you're on student committees, all this kind of stuff, I don't really care so much, unless you're highly accomplished or you're a superstar, so for example you were on the Harvard Law Review<sup>2</sup>, right? That's gonna be really cool and exciting for me, I might be curious about that, but in general if it's just this and that and, you know, I don't need, to be honest I just don't care. (R3ciprocitiy Team, 2018, 2:16)

**How to contact supervisors (format and structure of the email):** Several videos offered step by step advice on how to put an approach email together. This advice was often introduced methodically and structured paragraph by paragraph, giving clear guidance as to

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<sup>2</sup> The Harvard Law Review is a student-run organization whose primary purpose is to publish a journal of legal scholarship.

what should be mentioned when, how and in what order (WeDesified, 2020; InfosessionswithKingsley, 2020). In some cases, the entire video was dedicated to the email structure (WiseUp Communications, 2022), and some YouTubers offered email templates for download (WeDesified, 2020; WiseUp Communications, 2022). There was even advice to be found about sending the email last thing at night or early in the morning so it lands at the top of the supervisor's inbox (InfosessionswithKingsley, 2020). In some cases, the email structure advice was more vague:

You don't need to write a very lengthy essay – I think that like four or five lines will do. So first you can talk about yourself. My name is Ruby Amanda, I am from Ghana, and I am a prospective student in this program in the department... Then the subsequent letter you write about how did you meet this lecturer? How did you meet this professor? ... you don't know anything about him yet you want him to supervise you and it doesn't really work well that was, so, okay, I read your paper in one of my seminar papers but I went through your department website, I saw you've written a paper in this area, I have done something similar in this area ... I would want you to guide me if possible this fall. Are you there? Are you available? (Onyina, 2022, 16:09)

### Consolidation of advice

**Advice was consolidated through audio and visual features:** Conveying advice in the YouTube video format results in the utilisation of various details that can enhance the message being given:

- **Presentation style:** Institutional videos favoured multiple speakers in dialogue or shifting from shots of students and academics, possibly to represent notions of academic community. Although dialogue was also the presentation style of one 'influencer' who spoke to a fellow student (Onyina, 2022), the rest of the sample featured individuals speaking directly to the camera, possibly to enhance notions of single voiced authority.
- **Background:** Background settings tended to range from institutional rooms to bedrooms/offices, all conveying a sense of both calm and studiousness.
- **Music:** Most videos featured light music either as an intro or quietly behind the advice dialogue. This music tended to be gentle and could have been chosen to contribute to a positive, uplifting tone for the advice.
- **Branding:** Although it is unsurprising that institutionally produced videos would feature some aspects of branding, the doctoral influencer accounts also reflected a strong sense of 'brand identity' – channels have a name, visual identifier/logo and sometimes options (e.g. patron and products) for viewers to support their content creation in addition to the revenue that will be made from advertisements on YouTube.

**EDI implications.** There are various implications for EDI which arise from the study of Youtube advice videos:

- Minority applicants both create and make use of YouTube PADC advice, but these texts tend to speak to disadvantage in higher education implicitly, rather than addressing barriers and minoritised experiences explicitly.
- PADC advice videos are often concerned with encouraging applicants to adapt to norms for success, rather than challenging the status quo.
- Advice videos arguably recreate the hierarchical subject positions of applicant, student and supervisor, and they employ the discursive techniques necessary to both make the viewer feel at ease and as though they have more information whilst also reinscribing the need for more advice on the topic.
- Minoritised applicants may have a greater reliance on advice in the form of video content as they may not have existing networks to gain information from; if advice is lacking detail or context, it means they are at a disadvantage in terms of accessing clear and reliable information.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MORE INCLUSIVE PADC PRACTICES

This section addresses the third research question from PADC 1: *What changes at institutional and department levels could be suggested to create a more transparent and inclusive doctoral admissions process?*

The following recommendations have been broken down into three stakeholder groups: institutions/departments (which includes suggestions for DPGRs and POS), supervisors, and PGR applicants (and those who are working to support PGR applicants).

*Note: 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.*

### 5.1 Recommendations for Institutions/Departments

See also the accompanying briefing in Appendix 5.

<b>(1) Develop PADC strategies</b>	
<b>Level</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
<b>Institution</b>	Consult across e.g. DTPs and CDTs to check how admissions is being handled between these entities and departments; streamline processes if desired.
<b>Institution/ department</b>	<p>Consider developing a <b>pre-application form</b> for potential applicants wishing to locate a supervisor, and consider whether the central admissions system can assist with administering this.</p> <p>Hold <b>online opportunities for potential applicants to meet staff and current doctoral students</b> and ask questions.</p> <p>Hold <b>proposal writing workshops</b> to ease pressure on supervisors and give applicants clear guidance, advice, encouragement and individual writing support.</p> <p>Run a departmental or university-wide <b>Q&amp;A about applying for a doctorate</b> based on experiences of staff and students.</p> <p>Consider <b>extending widening participation initiatives</b> to include doctoral studies.</p> <p>Develop <b>student-led blogs</b> about doctoral study to enhance representation and storytelling about the PADC experience and application process generally, in addition to circulating information about what it's like to do a doctorate.</p> <p>Consider <b>embedding PADC conversion tracking (from potential applicant through to applicant) in charter mark action plans</b> e.g. Athena SWAN, Race Equality Chartermark.</p>

<p><b>Department</b></p>	<p>Develop a <b>recommended process for managing PADC</b> within departments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Consult with staff and current students</b> about the process.</li> <li>• <b>Develop an agreed timeframe</b> for responding to inquiries from applicants.</li> <li>• Include a <b>flowchart/diagram</b> to illustrate the pre-application and application stages.</li> <li>• <b>Disseminate the process</b> to relevant staff members on a yearly basis (e.g. as an email bulletin).</li> <li>• Within this process <b>remind potential supervisors to consider EDI issues</b> while considering pre-application communications. This could be <b>enhanced through advice (e.g. on a webpage) for potential supervisors in terms of how they make decisions</b> about responding to pre-application communications. For instance, include that applicants may have different levels of access to resources (e.g. Library resources, advice) when preparing their proposal.</li> <li>• Within the process ensure that potential applicants who approach the department are forwarded to a <b>range of potential supervisors</b>, not always the most senior, including to other departments.</li> <li>• Develop and provide <b>adaptable email templates for programme directors/administrators</b> about common queries to assist with clear, consistent communication of information to potential applicants.</li> <li>• Develop and provide <b>adaptable email templates for supervisors</b> 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. Develop the email templates in collaboration with EDI experts.</li> <li>• Include a <b>calendar of checks for the accuracy of information, valid webpage links and so on</b>, updating information and processes in response to new areas of concern identified through pre-application communications.</li> </ul> <p>Consider developing a <b>tracking system</b> (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).</p>
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## (2) Enhance professional development, training and reflective practice in relation to PADC

Level	Recommendations
<b>Institution</b>	<p>Increase the <b>opportunities for staff in different departments to communicate about practice and experiences</b> relating to the pre-application stage, e.g. DPGRs and POs.</p> <p>Provide opportunities for information and discussion to new staff, staff who are new to doctoral management roles, and as a refresher session for supervisors, on <b>how the institutional processes work for doctoral admissions</b>. 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.</p>
<b>Institution/department</b>	<p>Consider holding <b>development session/s for academics (see also Appendix 8 for our Professional Development Activity Kit)</b>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To look at a range of doctoral proposals/applications from applicants and discuss what the <b>expectations are of a 'good' proposal/application</b>.</li> <li>• To explore different <b>funding schemes</b> 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.</li> <li>• To discuss <b>underrepresented groups</b> in doctoral education and how screening out of underrepresented groups can unintentionally occur during the pre-application stage.</li> </ul>
<b>Department</b>	<p>Ensure there is a <b>clear handover</b> when new DPRGs or POs come into the role; include in this the pre-/admissions processes of the department. Provide written information that can be handed down and amended over time.</p> <p>Provide <b>department-level induction</b> (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. Include information about the process for managing pre-application communications and information about pre-/admissions practices that take into consideration that staff members may not be from the same country context or may have completed their own studies elsewhere. For new supervisors, ensure they are aware that they should not rush into encouraging an applicant to apply to work with them if they are not a good fit in terms of research interests. Include opportunities for reflection about how supervisors/the department want to come across (e.g. welcoming) and about the power imbalance between academics and applicants.</p>

### (3) Develop clear webpage information in relation to PADC

Level	Recommendations
Institution/ department	<p><b>Consult with relevant staff and current students</b> when revising web information about admissions. Consider consulting (with staff and students, using data on enrolments) on a <b>statement welcoming applicants from underrepresented groups</b>.</p> <p><b>Avoid complicated web design and texts</b> (e.g. multiple tabs/sub-pages, vague language, long paragraphs and invalid links). Also consider that potential applicants may use phones or tablets to access the information so 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. to visually impaired visitors.</p> <p>Instate an <b>annual calendar of planned checks for the accuracy of information</b>, valid webpage links and so on, updating information and processes in response to new areas of concern identified through pre-application communications.</p> <p>Consider the following points for webpage information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that <b>information for doctoral applicants is clearly distinguished</b> from information for undergraduate and Master's courses.</li> <li>• Check where information is stored on the website and <b>link to central information</b> rather than duplicating information at department level, especially in relation to scholarships.</li> <li>• Display a <b>checklist/flowchart for the pre-/admissions process</b>, including the time frame and decision-making process and who is involved. Ensure the information includes whether students should contact supervisors before applying and, if so, what is expected from this contact.</li> <li>• Include clear <b>information about funding and scholarships</b>, including timelines and eligibility, linking through to relevant webpages where possible (rather than duplicating information).</li> <li>• Clearly indicate on the webpage whether <b>cross-departmental supervisor teams are available/encouraged</b>, and how/whether applicants should act in relation to this in the pre-application stage.</li> <li>• Include <b>some short videos and/or narrative profiles, on the webpages, from doctoral students</b> from a range of backgrounds discussing the choices/actions involved in applying for a doctorate (including any pre-application actions).</li> </ul>
Department	<p>Encourage <b>academic staff to update their staff profile webpages</b> with consistent information e.g. current projects supervised, information on interests (topic, methodology/approach, country contexts of specialism if applicable, and capacity to take on new students).</p>

<b>Department (Continued)</b>	<p>Ensure that the <b>research specialisms of the department are clearly displayed on a webpage</b> so that potential applicants can target relevant departments.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This information can also <b>link to named supervisors working on these topics</b>, either by simply naming them or by using a tagging system that clicks through to relevant supervisors' profile pages.</li> <li>• Examples of <b>current/past doctoral projects</b> aligning with these areas of expertise can also be included.</li> </ul> <p>Consider the following points for webpage information:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Display <b>information about eligibility</b> (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).</li> <li>• Display information about what is expected from applicants in terms of <b>locating a supervisor</b> before applying.</li> <li>• Include expectations of <b>what counts as a 'good' research proposal (or disciplinary equivalent)</b>, potentially including information on expected sections, word count and further guidance. Include the <b>evaluation criteria</b> for the proposal.</li> <li>• Include clear <b>contact information</b> for the department for potential applicants, including which queries should be directed <b>at which named members of staff</b> and how long the <b>wait time</b> may be for responses.</li> <li>• Include <b>relevant information for both part-time and full-time doctoral students</b>.</li> <li>• Consider including <b>video clips/testimonials</b>, e.g. about the history of the department, virtual tour, to show more about the department to potential applicants.</li> </ul>
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## 5.2 Recommendations for Supervisors

*See also the accompanying briefing in Appendix 6.*

*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 PADC as a supervisor

#### Recommendations

**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.

If your department does not provide this, develop your own **pre-written adaptable email text for common queries that can be used to speed up replying to queries**. This could include the following information:

- Application process/timelines
- Funding sources
- Funding timelines
- Links to institutional/departmental webpages with relevant content
- Your capacity to take on new doctoral students (or lack thereof)
- Relevance (or not) of the proposed topic to your interests, and potential other supervisors/ departments/institutions they could contact if you are unavailable or the topic does not fit within your areas of expertise
- Advice that the supervisor cannot guarantee an offer will be made for the course (a supervisor can only recommend that an offer be made – the institution makes the offer)
- If not pursuing the application further, consider explaining why/giving some pointers if e.g. the proposal was not well developed or the area was outside of your expertise.

## (2) Responding to PADC as a supervisor

### Recommendations

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. There is also the option of being second supervisor if part of the area fits (e.g. methodological approach). Applicants can also be referred to other institutions as well. When referring to colleagues, try to include a short message about what action has already been taken, if any (e.g. replied to student to say that the application was being referred), and a comment on why referring.

Encourage potential applicants to **submit formal application/s in proportion with your capacity** to take on new students to reduce disappointment and workloads for applicants.

**If declining to pursue an application further** with a potential applicant, aim to **provide them with as much explanation as possible** so they can continue to develop their ideas.

When in conversation about research proposals, **alert applicants to funding opportunities** as not all applicants are aware of the options

### (3) Reflecting on PADC as a supervisor

#### Recommendations

**Speak with colleagues** and ask questions about how they make judgements about pre-application doctoral communications and **attend any relevant supervisor development opportunities**.

**Speak with existing doctoral students about their PADC experiences** to see if there are any suggestions for better practices.

**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.
- Why you might encourage or discourage **unfunded/self-funded students** from applying, and **part-time/full-time students**.
- The **background of the potential applicant** and whether they come from a disadvantaged group.
- Any **perceived disabilities or special needs** when reasonable adjustments could be made.

### 5.3 Recommendations for PGR applicants and those working to support PGR applicants

See also the accompanying briefing in Appendix 7 and the project team's advice video available at [www.warwick.ac.uk/padc](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc).

*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. Some of them are based on the experiences and suggestions of the students we interviewed, and therefore some of these recommendations will be particularly relevant for those experiencing additional barriers or challenges in accessing doctoral study.*

### (1) Finding Opportunities

#### Recommendations

Doctoral positions can be advertised in various ways – **search on supervisor research profiles and social media as well as departmental websites and job posting platforms** (where some doctoral opportunities are listed), and be attentive to discussions about doctoral opportunities in your networks.

If you are feeling overwhelmed by the idea of writing your own project proposal and the lack of security around funding, **consider looking and applying for a pre-established project that has funding attached**.

If you are struggling to think of a proposal area, **explore what is getting people's interest in the media or in research debates in your discipline**. Consider whether you wish to

balance researching a 'fundable' topic alongside what will sustain your interest for the duration of the doctorate.

Make the most of opportunities to **visit institutions and speak with staff or students online**.

**Consider the location of the institution** as well as the supervisor – where would you be happy living and working for several years?

If you are confused about the process and feel as though you do not have relevant contacts or networks, **reach out to past tutors from your previous studies**.

If you are unfamiliar with **funding options**, enquire early with your potential supervisor and department to **learn more about your eligibility and the processes involved**.

Application processes can be unpredictable, so **try not to have expectations of exactly how it will go** to avoid disappointment.

## (2) Choosing an institution/supervisor to contact

### Recommendations

Ensure **you look carefully at the profile of a potential supervisor to ensure a research topic match** – it is also helpful to articulate why you believe there is a good fit between you, your proposed topic and the potential supervisor.

**Consider your supervisor choice holistically**; consider the balance between subject expertise and their approach to and understanding of your needs, including any specific needs as a minoritised applicant.

If you cannot locate a potential supervisor for your area, **consider contacting the listed departmental contact for advice**.

**Familiarise yourself with the research culture/activities/specialisms/provisions for your needs of the department/s** you are applying to and express this familiarity/interest in your approaches.

Ensure you **read the required documents/eligibility on webpages** before sending an inquiry.

**Consider discussing your potential doctoral project and target supervisor/department/institution with others before making contact**; this could include friends and family, others in your network who have undertaken or are studying for a doctorate, and tutors from previous higher education qualifications.

**If you are facing barriers, seek out others with your background who have accessed doctoral study** to help support you in the process. This can be through networks or online resources, social media and digitally networked communities.

### (3) Shaping and sending an approach email

#### Recommendations

Provide as much **detail on your proposed topic of study** as you can (including by attaching a draft proposal). This is especially important if you do not have a particular supervisor in mind and are asking for assistance to locate a potential supervisor.

Write your email message carefully by making it **clear, brief and concise**, to the point, with a brief summary on personal and academic background, and by addressing it personally to the potential supervisor.

**Avoid including lengthy stories or experiences** in your initial approach with a supervisor.

Ensure you have made a **clear and genuine connection to a supervisor's publications and research interests** in the email/proposal.

**Be ready to modify the focus of the study** if necessary, as the supervisor may have ideas about how to develop your project – you can express openness to discussion of the topic in the email.

If appropriate, **be upfront with your supervisor early on** in the relationship building process to make sure they understand challenges you are facing in terms of doctoral study and you feel they can support you.

**Aim to make contact in plenty of time before the deadline** (ideally a few months), as otherwise potential supervisors may not be able to consider your inquiry in time.

You may not receive a reply to your email immediately. **Consider following up if you do not hear back within a week.**

What one supervisor sees as a negative detail in terms of your application might not even be noticed by another – **do not let initial rejection stop you.**

Cultural differences may arise during the communication process – **remember you can always ask for clarification.**

### (4) Contacting more than one institution/supervisor

#### Recommendations

**Avoid contacting multiple academics within one department/institution simultaneously.** If you wish to contact another member of a department/institution, it is important to keep people you have previously contacted informed of this, as confusion may arise if multiple supervisors think they are going to be working with you.

If you are applying to multiple institutions, **check that your proposal and email do not accidentally mention the other institutions** you are applying to (e.g. 'I am interested in applying to study with you at XX University', where XX University is a different institution!).

**Inform your potential supervisor at an institution if you are also applying elsewhere** so they can make an informed decision on how to support your application from the beginning.

**Inform potential supervisors if you accept an offer from another university**, as a matter of courtesy.

### **(5) Working on a proposal and receiving proposal feedback**

#### **Recommendations**

**Be open to working on revising/modifying proposals** and keep your potential supervisor/s posted about your progress/developments.

**Respond to contacted supervisors in a timely manner** and be considerate of their time and efforts when communicating with you

If you feel that you communicate better face to face (in person or online over video), **don't be afraid to request a meeting to talk further** about your ideas or the proposal.

Know your rights as an applicant and student and **feel confident to ask questions about opportunities or feedback if something doesn't feel right.**



## 6. CONCLUSION

The two PADC projects aimed to evaluate institutional webpages; analyse popular PADC advice; understand the decision-making processes of different stakeholders involved in PADC; understand the experiences of minoritised doctoral applicants; explore implications for inclusivity in doctoral education; identify potential changes that can be made in view of these implications; and develop enduring resources for both staff and applicants to facilitate sustained institutional and sector transformation in this area.

The two PADC projects have initiated an institutional conversation at Warwick and a wider sectoral discussion about the importance of PADC as a part of wider inclusivity-focused doctoral recruitment agendas. WDC has adopted the guidance developed for the first project, and many departments across Warwick have engaged with the project findings and recommendations, including through workshops and briefings delivered by the research team (three to date, including 40+ attendees from 19 departments). Beyond Warwick, the project has been disseminated across a range of UK-based audiences, including a workshop at the 2022 UKCGE Annual Conference with 19 participants from 15 institutions/organisations (see Section 7 for more information). Without fail, in each project-related interaction there has been rich engagement from attendees, ranging across different roles including PGR students, supervisors, professional services, academics with PGR leadership roles, and sector organisations.

Where the team has been able to conduct an evaluation of dissemination activities, a major change through this project is that attendees have come to recognise PADC as a stage of admissions and perceive PADC as a source of potential gatekeeping from an EDI perspective. Moreover, attendees made new connections between areas of practice, e.g. between website content and PADC emails. A number of attendees were inspired and planned to initiate further discussions about PADC. The majority of attendees hoped to implement some of the suggestions and recommendations in the briefings (see Appendices 5 and 6). For example, a participant from one workshop stated:

The workshop was really interesting last week; it has definitely given me a lot to think about. We are in the process of reviewing our website and will be updating before the start of term.

Further research in relation to PADC is needed, for instance to track the relationship between PADC and formal admissions, including any groups that are disproportionately 'lost' from admissions during the PADC stage, and comparative research across different types of university in the UK and across different country contexts.

To conclude, it is hoped that this pathbreaking report and the accompanying resources will contribute to positive change in terms of enhancing inclusivity in doctoral education, which in turn would have positive implications for the diversity of the academic profession. In order to gain access to doctoral education, applicants have to first gain *access to admissions*, and a focus on the *pre-application stage* is necessary in order to understand who is excluded from even applying for doctoral study, and how these exclusions can be addressed.

**We would like to encourage any readers who learn from this report and/or who implement any changes as a result to contact us with comments and findings:**  
[james.burford@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:james.burford@warwick.ac.uk)

## 7. PROJECT OUTPUTS

*Note: up to date at the time of report publication.*

### Key project outputs

**Final report:** Burford, J., Henderson, E. F., Kier-Byfield, S., Dangeni, and Akkad, A., (2023). *Pre-Application Doctoral Communications (PADC) Projects: Final Report*. Coventry: Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick. Available at: <https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/178943/>

**Briefing 1:** Burford, J., Henderson, E. F., Akkad, A., Dangeni, & Kier-Byfield, S. (2022) *The role of the institution in pre-application doctoral communications: project brief*. Coventry: Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick. <https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/169426/>

**Briefing 2:** Burford, J., Henderson, E. F., Akkad, A., Dangeni, & Kier-Byfield, S. (2022) *The role of the supervisor in pre-application doctoral communications: project brief*. Coventry: Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick. <https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/169425/>

**Briefing 3:** Burford, J., Henderson, E. F., Kier-Byfield, S., Akkad, A., Dangeni, Mansuy, J. (2023). *Potential Doctoral Applicants and those Working with them in Pre-application Doctoral Communications: Project Briefing*. Coventry: Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick. <https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/179604/>

**Professional development activity kit:** Burford, J., Henderson, E. F., Akkad, A., Dangeni, & Kier-Byfield, S. (2022) *Pre-admissions doctoral communications: professional development activity kit for working with PGR supervisors*. Coventry: Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick. <https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/170733/>

**Project team's advice video:** Burford, J., Henderson, E. F., Kier-Byfield, S. (2023). Searching for and approaching a doctoral supervisor [video resource]. Available at: [www.warwick.ac.uk/padc](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc)

### Published blog posts

Kier-Byfield, S. (2022, July 13) *Pre-application doctoral communications and gatekeeping in the academic profession*. HE Education Research Census. <https://edu-research.uk/2022/07/13/pre-application-doctoral-communications-and-gatekeeping-in-the-academic-profession/>

Dangeni, Burford, J., & Kier-Byfield, S. (2023, June 9) *Make the tacit explicit: how to improve information on university webpages for potential doctoral applicants*. SRHE Blog. <https://srheblog.com/2023/06/09/make-the-tacit-explicit-how-to-improve-information-on-university-webpages-for-potential-doctoral-applicants/>

### Presentations

**Institute of Advanced Studies International Advisory Committee Poster Session, University of Warwick, 31 August 2023:** 'Searching for a Supervisor: Minoritised Applicants and Pathways to Doctoral Study'

**European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI) conference, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and the University of Macedonia (Greece), 22-26 August 2023:** 'Pre-application Doctoral Communications: A Participatory Workshop Exploring Institutional Gatekeeping in Doctoral Programme Admissions'

**Redefining cultures of excellence: Modelling change in research(er) agendas symposium, Nottingham Trent, 28 June 2023:** 'Pre-application Doctoral Communications: Exploring Institutional Gatekeeping in Doctoral Programme Admissions'

**PADC Staff Development Workshop: Education Studies, University of Warwick, 14 June, 2023:** 'Supervisor Development Workshop'

**EARLI SIG 24 (Researcher Education and Careers), Online, 6 June 2023:** 'Pre-application Doctoral Communications: Exploring Institutional Gatekeeping in Doctoral Programme Admissions'

**Research Staff Forum Spring Seminar, Online, 14 February 2023:** 'Pre-Application Doctoral Communications: Implications for Research Staff at Warwick'

**Transcontinental Lab: Affect and Higher Education, Online, 12 January 2023:** 'Pre-Application Doctoral Communications: A Site of Affect in Higher Education'

**SRHE Annual Conference: Mobilities in Higher Education, Society for Research into Higher Education, Online, 5-9 December 2022:** "'It was a good email": Pre-application communications in doctoral student recruitment and the role of the potential supervisor'

**Researcher Education and Development Scholarship (REDS) international conference, University of Leeds, 12 October, 2022:** 'Losing talent in research careers from the very first contact? An exploratory study of pre-application communications in doctoral admissions at University of Warwick'

**Warwick Islamic Education Summer School, University of Warwick, 27 September, 2022:** 'Pre-application communications: Illuminating an often-hidden aspect of doctoral education'

**PADC Staff Development Briefing: Directors of PGR and Programme Officers, University of Warwick, 13 July, 2022** (interactive professional development activity)

**PADC Staff Development Workshop: Supervisors, University of Warwick, 13 July, 2022** (interactive professional development activity)

**UKCGE Annual Conference: Innovations and developments in postgraduate education, University of Birmingham, 30 June-1 July, 2022:** 'Pre-application Doctoral Communications: A Participatory workshop Exploring Institutional Gatekeeping in Doctoral Programme Admissions'.

**Warwick Inclusion Conference, University of Warwick, 16 June, 2022:** 'Exploring pre-application communications as an equity issue in doctoral education'

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Advisory Board (AB) Membership

*Note: all roles and titles correct at the time of publication.*

<b>Name and role</b>	<b>AB PADC 1</b>	<b>AB PADC 2</b>
<b>Prof Olympia Palikara</b> – AB Chair. Co-Director of PGR, Department of Education Studies.	√	√
<b>Youn Affejee</b> - PGR student, WMG.	√	√
<b>Dr Deborah Biggerstaff</b> - Supervisor, Warwick Medical School	√	√
<b>Prof Dan Branch</b> – Academic Director of the Doctoral College, Chair of the Board of Graduate Studies.	√	√
<b>Dr Ross Forman</b> – Director of PGR, English.	√	√
<b>Prof Letizia Gramaglia</b> – Director of WIHEA/Head of ADC	√	√
<b>Rhiannon Martyn</b> – Head of the Doctoral College	√	√
<b>Janet Smith</b> – PGR Programme Officer, Sociology	√	
<b>Michele Underwood</b> – Researcher Development Manager		√
<b>Idil Ismail</b> – Network for Ethnic Minority Postgrads		√
<b>Mauricio Palma-Gutiérrez</b> – Borders, Race, Ethnicity and Migration Network		√
<b>dipbuk panchal</b> – Network for Ethnic Minority Postgrads		√

### Appendix 2: Literature Review Methodology

#### Search terms

As the research topic in question (pre-application doctoral communications) did not before this project have a specific, widely used term, the initial database search utilised the terms 'doctoral admissions' and 'PhD recruitment' to identify a broad spectrum of relevant literature. These terms were open enough to also return literature on EDI.

The following search string was then developed to enhance and extend the search process:

*Doctoral OR PhD OR research degree OR Post-graduate research or HDR or Higher degree research*

*AND*

*Admissions OR recruitment OR application OR pre-application*

Where the search string yielded too many inaccurate results, the search was modified to only include:

*doctoral OR PhD AND admissions*

To identify relevant grey literature, the following phrase was used:

*"How to contact a potential PhD supervisor"*

### Websites searched

Databases for peer-reviewed publications: British Education Index, ERIC, ProQuest, Google Scholar, Project Muse, SCOPUS

For grey literature: Google and YouTube

### Inclusion and exclusion criteria for literature

<b>Include</b>	<b>Exclude</b>
Studies focusing on the pre-application, application and admissions processes for doctoral study	Studies which focus on other aspects of doctoral experience or higher education governance, or on admissions for other levels of study
Studies focused on improving access and EDI in the pre-application, application and admissions processes for doctoral study	Studies focused on improving access and EDI in other parts of higher education
Grey literature and reports which offer insight into the pre-application, application and admissions process/experience and/or EDI related to doctoral study	Material which does not offer insight into the pre-application, application and admissions process and/or EDI related to doctoral study
Studies published based on any country	N/A
Studies published in any discipline	N/A
Studies published in any year	N/A
Articles published in English	Articles not written in English

In addition to reviewing the relevant material that arose from this search methodology, further relevant materials were identified by consulting the references lists of papers identified from the search, by following recommendations from colleagues and consulting texts that came to our attention at conferences.

### Appendix 3: YouTube video search criteria

<b>Include</b>	<b>Exclude</b>
Videos with views over 100 views	Videos with views under 100 views
Videos in English	Videos in other languages
Videos giving advice about how to identify and contact a supervisor	Videos about other aspects of the doctoral application process
Videos no more than 10 years old	Videos posted more than 10 years ago

## Appendix 4: Participant information tables

*Note: Self-identified ethnicities listed on the participant information were grouped into broader categories to correlate with the UK government's census ethnicity categories to create consistency and lower chances of identification. Self-identified genders were only categorised differently in the case of the doctoral student participants, were 'gender non-confirming' was chosen to represent a range of gender fluid or non-binary identities.*

**Table A: DPGRs**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Isabella	Social Sciences	Not stated	Woman
Charlotte	Social Sciences	White	Woman
Emma	Social Sciences	White	Woman
Olivia	Social Sciences	White	Woman
Marc	Social Sciences	White	Man
Chris	Arts	White	Man
Anna	Arts	Not stated	Not stated
Maria	Science	White	Woman
Luke	Science	Indian	Man
David	Science	White	Man
Alex	Science	White	Man
Ethan	Science	White	Man

*Note: nationality is not displayed for these participants due to risk of identification.*

**Table B: POs**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Bluebell	Social Science	White	Female
Fiona	Social Science	White	Female
Stewart	Social Science	White	Male
Kate	Arts	White	Female
Rebecca	Arts	White	Female
Anna	Science	White	Female
Carole	Science	White	Female
Adam	Science	White	Male

*Note: nationality is not displayed for these participants due to risk of identification.*

**Table C: Supervisors (diary participants)**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Gloria	Arts	Asian	Woman
Danielle	Arts	Mixed	Woman
Alexina	Science	Mixed	Woman
Dippy	Science	White	Man
Louis	Social Sciences	White	Man
Elise	Social Sciences	White	Woman
Mary	Social Sciences	White	Not stated
Paula	Social Sciences	White	Woman
Kit	Social Sciences	White	Man
Sunny	Social Sciences	White	Woman
Sarah	Social Sciences	White	Woman
Julie	Social Sciences	White	Woman
Agatha	Social Sciences	Mixed	Woman
Stephanie	Social Sciences	Mixed	Woman
Roberta	Social Sciences	Mixed	Woman
Lucie	Social Sciences	White	Woman
Malik	Social Sciences	Mixed	Man
Liz	Social Sciences	Mixed	Woman
Marina	Social Sciences	Black African	Woman

*Note: nationality is not displayed for these participants due to risk of identification.*

**Table D: Supervisors (FGD participants)**

*Note: In order to protect the anonymity of the supervisors involved in both the FGD and diary elements of the study, no demographic information is provided for FGD participants so that their diary data could remain anonymous. Below is a table detailing only the participant identifier of participants and the groups that they were in.*

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Participant</b>
Focus Group 1	FGD1P1
Focus Group 1	FGD1P2
Focus Group 1	FGD1P3
Focus Group 2	FGD2P1
Focus Group 2	FGD2P2
Focus Group 2	FGD2P3
Focus Group 2	FGD2P4

Focus Group 3	FGD3P1
Focus Group 3	FGD3P2
Focus Group 3	FGD3P3
Focus Group 3	FGD3P4

Table E: Doctoral students (interview participants)

Pseudonym	Faculty	Ethnicity	Gender & pronouns	Self-Identified Minority(ies)
Sophia	Arts	White	Non-binary woman (she/they)	Disability, sexuality, gender identity
Lakeside	Arts	Mixed	Woman (she/they)	Sexuality, gender identity, neurodivergence
Sameer	Arts	Indian	Man (he/him)	Sexuality, Global South
Sparrow	Arts	White	Woman (she/her)	Disability, National minority
Simon	Arts	White	Man (he/him)	Disability, working-class background, first-in-family to uni, estranged from family, sexuality
Lewis	Science	White	Man (he/him)	First-in-family to university, sexuality
Gale	Science	White	Woman (she/her)	Class, socioeconomic status, first-in-family to university
Lily	Science	Arab	Woman (she/her)	Scholar at risk
Harvinder	Science	Indian	Man (he/him)	Disability and race
La	Science	Asian	Man (he/him)	Scholar at risk
Hayden	Social Science	White	Man (he/him)	Disability, care responsibilities, first-in-family to university
Sabrina	Social Science	Black African	Woman (she/her)	Race, class, religion, socio-economic status, first-in-family to university
Betty	Social Sciences	Arab	Woman (she/her)	Mature with children, working class, first-in-family to university, national minority
Zach	Social Sciences	White	Non-binary (they/them)	Gender identity, sexuality, neurodivergent
Hamdi	Social Sciences	Arab	Man (he/him)	Global South, indigenous community

## Appendix 5: The Role of the institution in Pre-Application Doctoral Communications: Project Briefing

Note: the pdf versions of project documents can be downloaded from [www.warwick.ac.uk/padc](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc)

### 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

WARWICK  
THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

#### 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

#### 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.  
Principal Investigator: Dr James Burford  
Co-Investigator: Dr Emily F. Henderson  
Research Assistants: Ahmad Akkad, Dr Dangi, Dr Sophia Kier-Byfield  
Project webpage: [www.warwick.ac.uk/padc](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc)  
Contact email: [james.burford@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:james.burford@warwick.ac.uk)

#### 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.

"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)

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## 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](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc)

### To cite this brief:

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## Appendix 6: The Role of the Supervisor in Pre-Application Doctoral Communications: Project Briefing

Note: the pdf versions of project documents can be downloaded from [www.warwick.ac.uk/padc](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc)

### 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




**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.

**What did the research involve?**

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**Contact email:** [james.burford@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:james.burford@warwick.ac.uk)

**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.

"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)

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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](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc)

#### To cite this brief:

Burford, J., Henderson, E. F., Akkad, A., Dangeni, Kier-Byfield, S. (2022). The Role of the Supervisor in Pre-Application Doctoral Communications: Project Brief. Coventry: Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick. Available at: [www.warwick.ac.uk/padc](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc)

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## Appendix 7: The Importance of Pre-Application Doctoral Communications for Applicants: Project Briefing

Note: the pdf versions of project documents can be downloaded from [www.warwick.ac.uk/padc](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc)

### THE IMPORTANCE OF PRE-APPLICATION DOCTORAL COMMUNICATIONS FOR APPLICANTS: PROJECT BRIEFING

*A briefing for potential doctoral applicants and those working with them (e.g., mentors, personal tutors, researcher developers) based on the projects 'Opening up the Black Box of Pre-Application Doctoral Communications' and 'Searching for a Supervisor: Demystifying Pre-Application Doctoral Communications', funded by the Research England Enhancing Research Culture Fund.*

#### What are pre-application doctoral communications?

Before applying for doctoral study, applicants often contact potential supervisors, departments, doctoral programme directors and administrators in target institutions. This often takes the form of an email but may also include staff referring potential applicants to each other, approaches on social media, or in-person meetings.

For applicants, the most common aspect of pre-application doctoral communications is emailing a potential supervisor asking to work with them. Other aspects include contacting administrative staff to ask about eligibility, admissions processes, funding, and how to approach a supervisor.

"I was super nervous about reaching out [to a supervisor]. I made my partner read the emails that I sent." (Lakeside, PhD student, Arts)

"[My friend] discussed with PhD students and she told me, you know, 'It is possible, it seems possible'. She told me this sentence. And I stuck to it." (Betty, PhD student, Social Sciences)





Illustration by Yara Aboasfour



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#### What did our research projects involve?

- Literature review** on doctoral admissions.
- Webpage analysis** of doctoral admissions material on departmental webpages at Warwick University.
- Data collection** across Warwick faculties:
  - semi-structured interviews with Doctoral Programme Directors and Programme Officers,
  - solicited diaries with doctoral supervisors followed by focus group discussions.
  - semi-structured interviews with doctoral students from minoritised backgrounds.
- Video corpus study** of YouTube advice videos for doctoral applicants.

#### Why should applicants, and those supporting them with their applications, think about pre-application doctoral communications?

Initial communications with a supervisor or an institution form a key stage in gaining entry to a doctoral programme. These communications help an applicant to determine whether they are applying to the right programme/s, and in some cases locating a supervisor before applying is helpful or even required. At the same time, the process of approaching an institution or a potential supervisor can be difficult to navigate, especially for applicants who do not have a history of doctoral education in their families or personal networks.

The research revealed that the content, style and nature of pre-application communications can impact the ways in which supervisors respond to these emails, especially when supervisors are busy and receive many such emails. The briefing therefore offers guidance to support applicants with planning and engaging in pre-application communications.

The research also revealed that, particularly for applicants who do not have direct experience in their networks to call on, the process of applying for a doctoral degree can feel bewildering. The briefing offers suggestions based on the lived experiences of doctoral students from minoritised groups as to how support can be located for applicants in this situation.

The briefing is accompanied by an advice video produced by the project team [www.Warwick.ac.uk/padc](http://www.Warwick.ac.uk/padc)

**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.**

**Principal Investigator:** Dr James Burford  
**Co-Investigator:** Dr Emily F. Henderson  
**Research Assistants:** Dr Ahmad Akkad, Dr Dangeni, Dr Sophia Kier-Byfield

**Project webpage:** [www.warwick.ac.uk/padc](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc)  
**Contact email:** [james.burford@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:james.burford@warwick.ac.uk)

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## Recommendations for applicants and those supporting them

*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.*

### Finding an institution and funding opportunities

- Visit institutions where possible (including virtually) and speak with staff or students online.
- Read the eligibility information on institution/department webpages before sending an inquiry.
- Consider the location of the institution – where would you be happy living and working?
- Contact the department if needed to learn more about the funding process and your eligibility.
- Search for doctoral funding opportunities on social media, departmental websites, job posting platforms, and across any relevant personal/professional networks.
- Consider looking for and applying to a pre-established project that has funding attached (this is most common in STEM but also exists across disciplines).
- For contacts and advice on the process, reach out to teaching staff from your previous studies.

### Searching for a supervisor

- Look carefully at the web profile of a potential supervisor to ensure a research topic/area match.
- If you cannot locate a potential supervisor for your area, consider contacting the listed departmental contact for advice.
- Consider your supervisor choice holistically; think about the balance between topic expertise and their approach to/understanding of any specific needs you may have.
- Discuss your potential doctoral project and target supervisor/department/institution with others before making contact, including: friends, family, relevant people in your network, previous tutors.

### Contacting a potential supervisor and next steps

- Write a concise email, with a brief summary on your personal and academic background, and address the email personally to the potential supervisor (it is safest to use title + surname).
- Make your request for assistance clear in the email so staff know what you are asking for.
- Provide as much detail on your proposed topic of study as you can and attach a draft proposal.
- Make a clear and genuine connection to a supervisor's publications/research interests.
- If relevant, share any barriers you face related to the doctoral application process.
- Aim to make contact in plenty of time (a few months if possible) before the deadline.
- Consider following up if you do not hear back after a week.
- Cultural differences may arise during the communication process – remember you can always ask for clarification.
- Avoid contacting multiple academics within one department/institution simultaneously.
- If you are applying to multiple institutions, check that your proposal and email do not accidentally mention the other institutions you are applying to.
- Be open to working on revising/modifying your topic/proposal and inform your potential supervisor/s about your progress/developments.
- Respond to contacted supervisors in a timely manner and be considerate of their time and efforts when communicating with you.
- Do not be afraid to request a meeting (in person or online) to talk further about your ideas or the proposal.
- In general, if you are unsure of something, ask questions.

#### Resources accompanying this brief:

- Advice video for applicants
  - Final project report
  - Briefings for institutions
  - Briefing for supervisors
  - Professional development workshop activity kit
- Available at: [www.warwick.ac.uk/padc](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc)

#### To cite this brief:

Burford, J., Henderson, E. F., Kier-Byfield, S., Akkad, A., Dangi, Mansuy, J. (2023). The Importance of Pre-application Communications for Applicants: Project Briefing. Coventry: Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick. Available at: [www.warwick.ac.uk/padc](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc)



Project Briefing prepared with support from Active4Research Ltd.

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## Appendix 8: Pre-Admission Doctoral Communications: Professional Development Activity Kit for Working with PGR Supervisors

Note: the pdf versions of project documents can be downloaded from [www.warwick.ac.uk/padc](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc)



### PRE-ADMISSIONS DOCTORAL COMMUNICATIONS: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY KIT FOR WORKING WITH PGR SUPERVISORS

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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.

Principal Investigator: Dr James Burford, Co-Investigator: Dr Emily F. Henderson

Research Assistants: Ahmad Akkad, Dr Dageni, Dr Sophia Kier-Byfield

Project webpage: [www.warwick.ac.uk/padc](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc) Contact email: [james.burford@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:james.burford@warwick.ac.uk)

As part of the 2022 project 'Opening up the Black Box of Pre-application Doctoral Communications' ([www.warwick.ac.uk/padc](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc)) based in the Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick and funded by the Research England Enhancing Research Culture Fund), the project team<sup>1</sup> has developed the following workshop activities that are freely available for colleagues in the higher education sector to use in professional development sessions with Post-Graduate Research Degree supervisors.

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 from other colleagues, approaches on social media, or in-person meetings. This area of doctoral admissions is important because it lies outside of formal institutional processes and is therefore relatively unregulated. Equally, because of the many emails circulating from prospective applicants, supervisors are often making quick judgements about applicants based on indicative cues and personal judgement. Please see our project briefings for [HE institutions and Academic Departments](#) and [Doctoral Supervisors](#).

These resources have been developed in line with the following aims:

1. To raise awareness about pre-application communications as an important area for supervisors to consider as part of the wider doctoral candidate lifecycle.
2. To get supervisors into conversation with other supervisors about how they manage the pre-application communications they receive and how they make judgements as to whether or not to screen out potential applicants at the pre-application stage.
3. To encourage reflection about equity, diversity and inclusion in relation to pre-application doctoral communications.

These activities could be used by:

- Directors of doctoral programmes who wish to conduct continuing professional development with supervisors in their departments.
- Researcher developers/academic developers in workshops with supervisors.
- Groups of supervisors who have developed a community of practice.

Versions of these activities have been successfully piloted in workshops at the University of Warwick and at the 2022 Council of Graduate Education Conference with doctoral supervisors to help them to think about their role in managing and making judgements about pre-application communications with potential doctoral applicants.

We would suggest allowing for a 20-minute discussion in small groups for each activity, to be followed by a wider discussion. In the pilot workshops, different groups worked on different activities and then reported back to the wider group.

If you have used these resources, we would love to hear from you! If you have any questions or feedback to pass on about these resources, please contact [james.burford@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:james.burford@warwick.ac.uk)

#### To cite this resource

Burford, J., Henderson, E. F., Akkad, A., Dageni, Kier-Byfield, S. (2022). Pre-admissions Doctoral Communications: Professional Development Activity Kit for Working with PGR Supervisors. Coventry: Department of Education Studies, University of Warwick. Available at: [www.warwick.ac.uk/padc](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/padc)

### Activity 1: Making judgements about emails

- Read the following sample emails (these are fictional emails but closely based on real life examples) and imagine you are a potential doctoral supervisor receiving these emails
- Make a note of things that feel familiar, alien, positive, neutral or negative in both emails
- Think about how you envisage the sender of these emails and how you might feel about receiving the emails

#### SAMPLE EMAIL 1

From: [dodgylookingemail@personalemail.com](mailto:dodgylookingemail@personalemail.com)

To: You

Dear. [your first name]

I have always been interested in completing my PhD and I saw this as an opportunity, I have a masters degree(in XXX discipline) as well as 23 years worth of [relevant professional] experience, I searched about your programs in [your department], and I would like to continue my higher studies as I have full financial support from my government, and I would like if you tell me everything related to the terms of the program.

Sincerely,

[Applicant's first name]

#### SAMPLE EMAIL 2

From: [name.name@university.edu.country](mailto:name.name@university.edu.country)

To: you

Dear [correct title + your surname]

I hope this email finds you well.

My name is [full name], and I have completed my postgraduate study in [your discipline] with distinction at [University] of [country]. Currently, I am working as a [relevant professional to your discipline] at [a relevant and prestigious organisation]. Before that, I gained [relevant professional experience] for 3 years, including as a volunteer in [Global South country].

Your research interests in [specific, accurate keywords mentioned], greatly align with my interests. May I please inquire whether you are interested in taking future PhD students? If so, I am keen on applying to your study group!

In my current professional role, I am working [in a role that directly links to a potential PhD study]. I would like to apply for PhD study to further the development of research in this field and specifically would like to focus on [specific, relevant issue]. I have seen from your previous research that you have expertise in [specific theory and/or methodology]. I used this approach in my Master's work, and I would be interested in working with you on this to further this area of work.

I have already begun preparatory work for my PhD study, including preparing a detailed research proposal (see attached), and have presented on my Master's work at [reputable-sounding conference].

My Curriculum Vitae has been attached along for your kind perusal. Should you require any more information, I would be very glad to provide it.

Thank you for your kind consideration and looking forward to hearing back from you.

Best regards,

[Full name]

#### Discuss the following

- Does Sample email 1 feel familiar? Why/ why not?
- Does Sample email 2 feel familiar? Why/why not?
- What kind of responses/actions would follow on from these emails? Would you reply?
- What kinds of similar emails do you receive, if any? Are there any processes in place for dealing with these communications?
- Do you think there are any particular groups of students who may be disadvantaged by the current pre-applications communications processes (or lack of formal processes)?

**Be ready to feed back to the whole group and to come up with some recommendations for practice.**

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## Activity 2: Making judgements about pre-application communications

### Instructions

- Read the following scenarios, which are based on real-life experiences
- Think about the questions at the bottom
- Share with your group and discuss

#### Scenario 1:

- A current Masters student 'pops in' to your office to discuss doing a PhD with you.
- They have excellent grades and would be a promising scholarship candidate.
- Their topic is not particularly related to your own expertise, and you have very limited capacity as you now supervise many students.

#### Scenario 2:

- A student from a country where there is currently conflict contacts you and asks you to supervise them.
- Their email is rather long, setting out the challenges they are facing in their life and their need to escape their current situation.
- Their topic is promising, but their proposal has insufficient references to literature and an unconventional structure.

### Questions

1. How would you act? Do you have a system for managing this kind of pre-admissions communication? (e.g., an inbox folder, an excel file)
2. What is the process involved in deciding on this applicant's communication? What would be the basis for your decision?
3. Are there any possible equity, diversity, and inclusion implications that you can discern?

## Activity 3: Checking your own institutional webpage

### Instructions

- Go to your own institutional personal profile webpage.
- Scan your profile webpage to check what current information is included, if any, about your supervision interests and capacity and/or current or completed doctoral students.
- Share what you noticed with your group.
- Discuss what changes you could make to your own institutional profile webpage to make what you are seeking from potential applicants clearer. Are there any institutional/system limitations for making these changes – if so, can these be overcome?

### Evaluating the training/development session

If the activities are used in a supervisor development session, it may be helpful to provide an evaluation questionnaire. The piloted sessions used a short paper questionnaire (which could also take the form of an online questionnaire), which was provided at the start of the session for some pre-workshop comments and then also included questions to complete at the end of the session. The questions included:

- Before the workshop:
  - Why are you interested in attending this workshop? What are you hoping to gain?
- At the end of the workshop:
  - What did you learn from today's workshop?
  - What future actions/practices would you like to take following on from today's workshop?