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Pre-application doctoral communications: a missing dimension in research on doctoral admissions

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes a novel contribution to international doctoral education scholarship by offering a detailed examination of pre-application doctoral communications (PADC) between prospective applicants and various university staff members. While PADC is currently an under-considered phenomenon within extant research literature, the paper argues that it ought to be conceived of as an important subset of doctoral admissions practices. Given the possible gatekeeping effects of informal communication, PADC should be understood as a key avenue for addressing equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agendas in doctoral recruitment. The article is in two parts. First, we undertake a literature review to track the extent to which PADC features in the scholarly and grey literature to date and to characterise existing nomenclature and representations. Second, we draw on data from an empirical single-institution case study in a UK university with doctoral supervisors (19), doctoral programme officers (8) and directors of doctoral programmes (12), to understand how these actors engage in PADC as part of their respective roles. The paper sets out the forms PADC took, what role key stakeholders play, and prevalent topics of communication. Ultimately, the paper establishes definitional clarity around PADC and establishes its importance as a key stage of doctoral recruitment alongside formal admissions.

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Introducing pre-application doctoral communications (PADC)

The admissions stage of doctoral recruitment is an area of keen international debate. Current research on doctoral admissions encompasses debates about entry criteria (Jones et al., 2019; Posselt et al., 2019; Slay et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2019; Squire, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021); the influence of references in the application process (Young, 2005); how personal statements are read, assessed and understood (Chiu, 2015, 2016, 2019; Fernández-Gil,

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2015; Hollman et al., 2022); and studies which seek to demystify what applicants need to know about admissions priorities in various disciplines including Education (Walker, 2008, 2009) and Psychology (Littleford et al., 2018). There is also an increasing focus on enhancing equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in doctoral admissions, where researchers have begun to accumulate a multifaceted picture, focusing on gender and race (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017; Squire et al., 2018) as well as sexuality (Hsueh et al., 2021), disability (Ling et al., 2020), and body size (Burford, 2015), and the admissions opportunities of those with a criminal record (Connor & Tewksbury, 2012), among other potential axes of inequality.

While previous studies on doctoral recruitment inequalities have tended to focus on formal admissions processes (Posselt, 2016; Francis et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2019), in this article we argue that it is equally vital to understand the *pre-application* stage of doctoral admissions. Drawing on an empirical study on pre-application doctoral communications (henceforth PADC) between prospective applicants and staff at one UK university, our study sought to understand how three key stakeholders engaged in PADC with potential applicants as part of their roles. Study participants encompassed firstly, doctoral supervisors, including primary and secondary supervisors, in an institutional context where co-supervision is increasingly prevalent. Secondly, doctoral programme officers (henceforth POs), who are professional services staff working primarily in doctoral or “postgraduate research” (PGR) programme roles. Thirdly, directors of postgraduate research programmes (henceforth DPGRs), academic staff who lead PGR programmes in their departments. Our research involved a six-week diary study with 19 supervisors to track first contact with potential applicants as well as ongoing communication during the study. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight professional services staff members employed as POs and 12 academic DPGRs to better understand their PADC responsibilities.

In this article, we contend that a focused exploration of PADC is required for two reasons. First, understanding PADC will enable researchers and institutional stakeholders to better understand the extent and nature of informal contact within the wider doctoral admissions lifecycle. Second, this exploration will enable greater conceptual clarity for PADC as a key phenomenon in doctoral admissions. Overall, the article seeks to answer a fundamental research question: what is pre-application doctoral communication? The sub-questions the article pursues are: (1) who are the different stakeholders involved in PADC and how are they involved? (2) what forms does PADC commonly take? (3) what are key topics of PADC? The article begins by reviewing scholarly and grey literature¹ where PADC is considered and sets out the framework for this paper. Following the section on the study, we identify the key institutional stakeholders involved in PADC, the most common forms PADC took, and the key topics of communication. Building on previous evidence (NERC, 2021), we argue that PADC ought to be understood as an important subset of doctoral admissions and recruitment practices. Ultimately, the paper establishes greater clarity around PADC, and it lays the foundations for further work to connect PADC to wider EDI concerns in doctoral recruitment.

Tracing PADC in the doctoral admissions literature

This article aims to establish greater clarity about the key forms, stakeholders and topics of PADC. We reviewed available literature to understand the ways in which PADC is

identifiable as a topic in doctoral admissions research. As PADC does not yet have a specific commonly used term in use, a wide search strategy was utilised. Searches for scholarly literature about doctoral admissions were conducted between March-July 2022 on databases including the British Education Index, ERIC, ProQuest, Google Scholar, Project Muse and Scopus. Searches were conducted using the following terms: (1) “doctoral” OR “PhD” OR “research degree” OR “postgraduate research” OR “PGR” OR “Higher Degree Research” OR “HDR”; AND (2) “admissions” OR “recruitment” OR “application”, OR “pre-application” to identify a broad spectrum of relevant literature. In addition to the relevant material that arose from this search methodology, further relevant texts were identified by consulting the bibliographies of papers included in the review. To identify relevant grey literature, variations on the following phrase were used: “How to contact a potential PhD Supervisor” in a Google search. To warrant inclusion in the review, texts could be published in any country context, in any discipline, and there were no date restrictions placed on literature. Articles which were not published in English were excluded from consideration due to the language capabilities of analysts. The initial corpus we developed included 183 scholarly texts and 35 grey literature texts. During the grey literature search, the team also discovered a wide array of YouTube PADC advice videos and watched and discussed several of these, some of which are described below. A more comprehensive study of these advice videos has subsequently taken place (Kier-Byfield et al., 2023). We identify the presence of PADC in literature in the following ways: (i) PADC as a trace in general studies in doctoral admissions; (ii) the grey literature where PADC is more visible; and (iii) how PADC is conceived of in more PADC-focused studies.

The trace of PADC in doctoral admissions research

In existing research on doctoral admissions, PADC can be identified as an implicit phenomenon. For example, in studies about diversity in Physics in the US (Potvin et al., 2017; Chari & Potvin, 2019), “proximity or familiarity to department” is identified as a variable, which points to the relevance of previous communication (p. 5). In the case of Lachmann and colleagues’ (2020) study of doctoral admissions for Life Sciences in Germany, students who were in contact with a supervisor before applying were categorised as engaging in “informal admission” (p. 24). The notion of “informal” practices influencing admission is further illuminated in Angervall and Gustafsson’s (2016) work on “the invited” pathways in Education research in Sweden (p. 676). These studies gesture to the influence of pre-application contact without necessarily defining the specific contact or assistance involved.

PADC also appears in the EDI literature on doctoral recruitment. In a study about inclusivity in research culture and the career lifecycle between undergraduate study, postgraduate study and research careers at a UK university (King et al., 2022), the presence of opaque, relationship-based pathways to PGR degrees were identified. Participants, who were both students and staff, noted the “exclusionary” and “intimidating” nature of the institutional culture, and the importance of either having family members or other familiars who have completed a doctorate or the privilege of an “invitation” or connection via a supervisor (pp. 24–25).

Another way in which PADC arises is in passing reference to the practice of students contacting potential supervisors in studies about admissions more generally. For instance,

Hefner-Babb and Khoshlessan (2018) note that Iranian doctoral applicants search for supervisors online and then contact them “via email to find out if they could work with them” (p. 1933), and only then can their application proceed. However, in their study of US Psychology admissions, Littleford et al. (2018) concluded that contacting faculty was only of tertiary importance to admissions outcomes. These varying observations underline the necessity for further research into the nuances of PADC in specific contexts.

The presence of PADC in grey literature

In contrast to doctoral admissions research where PADC can be identified mostly as a “trace”, it is highly visible in the grey literature on admissions. There is a vast amount of grey literature centred on one key form of PADC: contacting a potential supervisor through email. A simple Google search returns an array of advice about how to draft introductory emails on websites such as *FindAPhD*, *DiscoverPhDs*, *Academic Positions* and *Motivated Academic*. There is also a wealth of advice videos on YouTube: at the time of writing, videos such as “How to Write An Email To A Professor For Graduate School Admission? (Contacting Professors)” (R3ciprocity Team, 2018) had over 46,000 views. The breadth of advice and level of engagement suggests a hunger for information from applicants. However, the information presented about PADC in these videos is often misleading as it makes unevidenced claims and is contextually specific, without acknowledging this (Kier-Byfield et al., 2023).

Further evidence of confusion around PADC is found in institutional guidance. For the benefit of applicants, there are guidance pages on many UK university websites that encourage applicants to contact potential supervisors in specific ways.² An advice text from University College London even notes that in a “recent survey 67% of staff said they receive research enquiries that do not relate to their interests ... If they do not think your enquiry is related to their research they may not have time to respond to you” (UCL Communications and Marketing, p. 1). Alternatively, for the benefit of staff stakeholders, advice in researcher development texts discusses how getting in touch with supervisors “can be a challenging task for some candidates, proving a barrier in the application process” (Nottingham Researcher Academy, p. 6). These various advice texts highlight the need for research that could isolate pre-application communication practices, identify the actors involved, and establish the implications this stage has for doctoral admissions more broadly.

Studies which take PADC as a central focus

Few studies have taken aspects of PADC as a central focus. In one instance, Milkman et al.’s (2015) US-based study examined emails sent to academic supervisors for endorsement before applicants submit formal paperwork. The study situates PADC as part of the informal “pathway” into doctoral education, as opposed to the official “gateway” points of formal application. Their findings suggest that racial and gendered discrimination is possible at the pre-application stage, but the nature of the research design means that a deeper understanding of supervisor experiences was not fully explored. In addition, Kim and Spencer-Oatey (2021a, 2021b) have investigated the ways in which South Korean applicants applying to study in the UK navigate pre-application uncertainty. First, they note that “there is a major dearth of research into their pre-arrival, application

experiences” (2021a, p. 917). Second, they observe that “background information on role relations is of great importance for relational management and communication planning in high stakes intercultural interaction”, such as seeking a supervisor; not having access to this information creates “uncertainty in less powerful persons (in this case, student applicants)” and results in reliance on online sources (2021b, p. 220). As noted in the section above, advice texts are not always reliable. More accurate knowledge about how those within institutions engage with PADC is therefore required.

This literature review has demonstrated that PADC consists of complex, varied practices in higher education (HE). While our review reveals that much of the published literature to date has emerged out of the US context, our study contributes to these debates from a different context, namely the UK. As the UK studies we have surveyed reveal, even within one national context, PADC practices and processes remain highly variable. While the studies we have surveyed have given an initial insight into some of the research questions of this paper, knowledge gaps remain about how particular institutional conditions shape pre-application practices. Missing from the existing research is a holistic picture of the daily experiences of PADC, the experiences, actions and thoughts of the higher education staff involved in receiving PADC, and the conditions which shape their responses. These lacunae are addressed in our study.

Conceptual framework

The wider project this article emerges from was guided by a micropolitical conceptual framework. Emerging out of postmodern, feminist and critical race theorisations of organisations (Ahmed, 2020; Morley, 1999), such a framework recognises that micro-level interaction (e.g. between individuals within an organisation) is a key dimension where social inequalities may be reproduced or addressed. In HE studies, this work has been developed by scholars such as Louise Morley, who notes that “exposing the minutiae of the quotidian turns our attention to the multiple points at which power is exercised” (1999, p. 4). To examine the ways in which power is relayed in and through quotidian practices, researchers of micropolitics track interactions, and the mundane processes that surround them, in fine detail. Enhancing an orientation toward structures, a micropolitical conceptual framework privileges the close analysis of organisational process and procedure and the respective roles of various players within such processes. A micropolitical framework shaped how we approached PADC as an object of inquiry and the way we collected and analysed the data (detailed below).

In order to attend to the micro-practices surrounding PADC, we first needed to define and describe the object of our inquiry which is the focus of this present article. Given our literature review did not reveal any established nomenclature, we drew together ideas from existing studies to define PADC as: *communications that potential doctoral applicants and university staff engage in prior to a potential applicant making a formal application for doctoral study* (Burford et al., 2023a). Next, in order to further understand the micro-practices of PADC, we needed to gather foundational insights about this practice by establishing some core categories of description. Based on our literature review, and in alignment with our institutional case study design (explained below) we identified three analytical categories absent from existing accounts (see Figure 1) we surveyed that were essential to achieve a fuller understanding of PADC: (1) *Who* is involved in PADC? (2) *How* (i.e. by

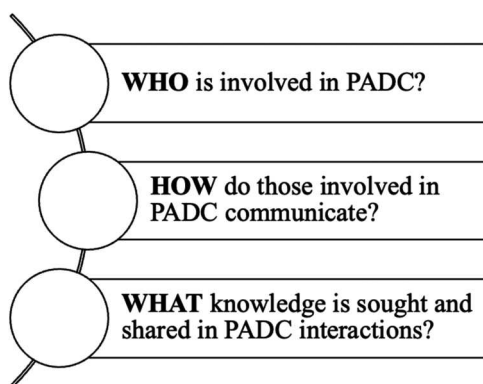


Figure 1. Three underpinning categories of description for PADC.

what mode) do those involved in PADC communicate? (3) *What* knowledge is sought and shared in PADC interactions? Across each of the three categories of description (who, how and what) we sought to provide a typology of responses generated through our data collection process.

The study

Analyses presented in this article arise from a research project titled “Opening up the Black Box of Pre-application Doctoral Communications” (Burford et al., 2023a). Funded by the Research England Enhancing Research Culture Fund, this project aimed to investigate PADC via an exploratory single-institution case study (Ornelas & Solorzano, 2004) carried out in 2022 at a research-intensive university in England. The research team³ adopted a single-institution case study approach to undertake deep investigation of a complex phenomenon within a particular real life context (Awuzie & Emuze, 2017; Yin, 1999). Our research goal was aligned with definitions of case study approaches, which seek to achieve a “deep understanding of processes and other concept variables” (Woodside, 2010, p. 1). The study was interpretative in nature, endeavouring to understand both “individual and shared social meanings” about PADC across various departments (Crowe et al., 2011, p. 6). Ethical approval for the study was granted by the institution’s Humanities and Social Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC). The institutional case study involved a multi-method approach (Schorch et al., 2015), whereby data collection was designed differently for (a) supervisor participants and (b) DPGR and PO participants, to collect data appropriate to the ways in which these stakeholders engage with PADC processes. The research methods (solicited diaries, focus group discussions, and interviews) were piloted and adapted prior to study commencement. Prior to involvement, all participants were given a short online participant information questionnaire to gather basic demographic information. In addition to these methods, in keeping with a case study approach we also undertook a review of institutional website material relevant to PADC, the findings of which are available (Dangeni et al., 2023).

As our aim in this study was to accumulate “theoretical leverage” (Posselt, 2016, p. 181) via in-depth analysis, our sampling and recruitment strategy was designed accordingly. As

Posselt (2016) notes, case study sampling involves selection decisions across two levels: (1) the case, and (2) the subjects within it. Given practical considerations of access and funding-based time constraints, a single case study institution was selected. Sampling of research participants was designed to enable an even spread across different faculties as much as possible (see Table 1).

For supervisors, the study utilised diary method (Cucu-Oancea, 2013), whereby participants kept a solicited diary produced for the purposes of research. The diary component of this study was designed in recognition of the fact that case study research usually includes direct observation of the environment of the case. While participant observation of email interaction is not possible, the diary study enabled the researchers to access PADC close to the point at which interactions unfolded. This diary instrument was designed on Qualtrics to capture supervisors' actions and reflective processes during PADC with doctoral applicants (63 domestic and international applicants represented) over a six-week period. The duration was chosen to capture significant instances of the phenomenon, based on piloting. Participants were recruited to join the study following an open call for participants via departmental channels. Recruitment of supervisors was monitored to ensure maximal diversity (e.g. in relation to gender, ethnicity, nationality and disciplinary background). Nineteen participants responded to the call and all were recruited for the study. The sample was unbalanced in relation to gender and discipline (for more on participants' demographic information see Appendix, Table A1). Among the supervisor participants who completed a diary, 14 were women (73.7%), 4 were men (21.1%), and one participant did not disclose their gender identity. All supervisor participants were invited to participate in focus group discussions (FGDs), and three FGDs were facilitated with the 11 supervisors who volunteered and were available.

For POs (8) and DPGRs⁴ (12), the study employed semi-structured interviews (via Teams). This method was chosen to enable reciprocity, space for expression and considerable freedom in sequencing (Kallio et al., 2016; Robson, 2011). The semi-structured format was a good fit for case study research (Woodside, 2010), as it enabled the interviewer to probe responses and to elicit specific details relating to PADC processes and actions, which was an important aspect of characterising the phenomenon to enable further micropolitical analysis. The interviews lasted approximately one hour, covering general

Table 1. An overview of the research design and participants.

| Participant group | Faculty | Participants | Method | Duration |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|--------------|---|--|
| Directors of PGR | Arts | 3 | Semi-structured interviews | Approx. 1 h |
| | Social Sciences | 4 | | |
| | Science | 5 | | |
| Total | | 12 | | |
| Doctoral Programme Officers | Arts | 2 | Semi-structured interviews | Approx. 1 h |
| | Social Sciences | 3 | | |
| | Science | 3 | | |
| Total | | 8 | | |
| Doctoral Supervisors | Arts | 2 | Solicited individual diaries and 3 focus groups (11 participants) | 6-week diary study Approx. 1-hour focus group |
| | Social Sciences | 15 | | |
| | Science | 2 | | |
| Total | | 19 | | |

questions relating to PGR (e.g. roles in relation to PGR admissions); PADC questions shaped by our micropolitical conceptual framework focused on interactions and processes (e.g. types, content and process for dealing with PADC); and inclusivity questions (e.g. how different applicants may understand and navigate the process). For the DPGR and PO interviews, the target sample was four pairs of DPGRs and POs per faculty, representing therefore 12 departments. 12 DPGRs agreed to participate from across the three faculties, but some of the DPGRs' corresponding POs were unavailable, so the sample includes slightly fewer POs than DPGRs. To recruit participants, a list of all DPGRs and POs was developed based on an institutional web search, and we initiated contact via email. Among the DPGRs 5 were women (45.4%), 5 were men (45.4%) and one participant did not disclose their gender identity. The PO sample included 6 women (75%) and 2 men (25%).

For this paper, semi-structured interview data (DPGRs, POs) and diary data (supervisors) were considered. In order to process the PO and DPGR interview data, audio files were transcribed verbatim. To process supervisor diary data, the Qualtrics diary forms were exported into Excel. The quantitative diary data (e.g. number of approaches) was descriptively analysed. The analysis of qualitative data across DPGRs', POs' and supervisors' accounts was manually conducted via an Excel spreadsheet, which the research team collaborated in developing. As Woodside (2010) argues, *description* in case study research is the attempt to answer "who, what, where, when and how questions" (p. 11). Our present study focuses on case description as an initial objective, using the key descriptive categories developed to guide the analysis: (1) who – stakeholders, (2) how – forms and (3) what – topics. For the purposes of this paper, the research team engaged in deductive coding (Azungah, 2018) using these descriptive categories. Different team members coded different data sets and then brought the results together in a workshop to establish connections and contrasts. While the three initial categories we used to structure our coding remained unchanged, the codes within these categories evolved across the study. Through the coding process some codes were discarded as they were not conducive to understanding a given analytic category; others were collapsed because they shared a similar underlying concept (see Appendix, Table A2).

Trustworthiness of the data collected in this study and its subsequent interpretation was based on three general criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and extended by more recent studies (Stahl & King, 2020): credibility, transferability, and dependability. Firstly, in order to promote the *credibility* of the institutional case study we used various processes of triangulation. Our triangulation practices included data triangulation (e.g. through the use of interviews, focus group discussions, and diary methods all focused on the same phenomenon) as well as investigator triangulation (e.g. multiple investigators undertook analysis, cross checked analysis and engaged in discussion). To ensure credibility, we also engaged in practices of member checking with participants (who were invited to participate in initial findings workshops to check the accuracy of our interpretations). In order to aid with *transferability* we have attempted to describe the case study context and data collection process in rich detail to aid others who may wish to consider the applicability of our findings in a different context. A third perspective informing our approach to trustworthiness was *dependability*. We engaged in practices of peer scrutiny throughout the research process, via engagement with our project advisory board who provided feedback on the research procedures and initial findings, from

engagement with critical friends invited to speak to the research team, and through processes of “reflexive auditing” (Stahl & King, 2020, p. 27) carried out during research team workshops.

Even with these measures, some limitations should be noted. Firstly, while our engagement with the research context was as prolonged as possible (e.g. six weeks for the supervisor diary), due to funding timeframes data collection for our study needed to be carried out at a time of year (April-May) which is not considered an admissions “peak period” by some departments due to funding deadlines, which often see greater volume between October-December. While conducting the diary study at multiple times of the year would have been desirable, our study still traced PADC with 63 applicants for 19 supervisors, which is a substantial number to underpin our analysis. Secondly, it is possible that participants in our study responded to the project cautiously given that they and the research team work at the same institution; to lessen the direct effect of this, data collection was conducted by the research assistant members of the team, and then anonymised; participants were therefore aware that identifiable data would not be seen by their direct colleagues. Thirdly, we chose to employ a predominantly qualitative, single-institution case study approach. We therefore make no assumptions about broad generalisability from one institutional case (Yin, 1999). Instead, we have sought to generate deep insights within a meaningful context in order to make sense of PADC. Further research at different kinds of institutions, national contexts, and using different research designs would be desirable in future studies.

Findings: conceptualising PADC – stakeholders, forms and topics

Stakeholders involved in PADC

Our first research question sought to address a crucial initial concern: who is involved in managing PADC within this institution, and to what extent is PADC a part of their roles? The following findings emerge from the perspectives of staff employed at an institution which is a member of the Russell Group consortium which includes the UK’s elite research-intensive universities. The institution is highly decentralised, with considerable devolved decision making and varied processes for managing PGR across departments. Our findings indicate that the majority of POs, DPGRs and supervisors do routinely deal with PADC. However, the amount of communication they receive varies and depends on departmental procedures: for departments that use their websites to encourage students to initially contact potential supervisors, DPGRs and POs might have less traffic. Maria (DPGR, Science) noted that she does not get questions from applicants unless they are to her as a supervisor: “I don’t see how they know that they should contact me. Again, they would contact the admissions email”. It was clear across the data that responsibility for PADC varies greatly amongst people with the same or similar role, and that different stakeholders might engage with it to different extents.

While the three participant groups involved in our study were found to be the key institutional stakeholders engaging in PADC, we did identify other institutional actors who were connected. For example, supervisors, DPGRs and POs may work together and with other role holders, including admissions coordinators, academic subject leads, and research leads who may be involved in admissions. It is also the case that some DPGRs

do not deal with admissions but have delegated this to another colleague. Whilst these further stakeholders may be more involved in other stages of admissions (e.g. after an application has been submitted), it is important to note that the line between pre- and post-application is sometimes blurred.

PADC mainly involved potential applicants contacting staff members, but there were also communications between academic staff, including between potential co-supervisors or where the DPGR referred a potential applicant to a relevant potential supervisor. It is worth mentioning that, as our literature review demonstrated, the only stakeholder recognised as being involved in PADC is the potential supervisors (e.g. Milkman et al., 2015), while our study shows the presence of multiple stakeholders in PADC.

Forms of PADC

Our second research question sought to investigate the forms of communication that are included under the umbrella of PADC. While less common, potential applicants do contact departments and supervisors through social media, telephone, by connecting at a conference, or by dropping into an office to speak with someone directly (Kier-Byfield, 2022). Amongst a variety of potential modes of communication (see also next section below), email was by far the most commonly mentioned during interviews with DPGRs and POs, and it was also emails that often led to other important PADC opportunities, such as video calls to further discuss ideas and opportunities. The most common form of PADC received by supervisors was also emails: 79.6% of initial communications recorded in the diary study were emails. This reflects the tendency for PADC to be discussed predominantly or only as emails in the literature (e.g. Hefner-Babb & Khoshlessan, 2018).

Participants in our study also noted that frequently numerous staff would receive the same email from the same potential applicant. Due to the ways in which department PADC work streams are established, some POs screen initial emails if they arrive in a resource account inbox. As Bluebell (PO, Social Sciences) notes,

We do keep a watch out for the scattergun approach [smiles] of applying where the same person would have sent five or six emails across the departments, and I do quite like being [erroneously addressed as] Professor [Bluebell] [smiles], but it's a clear indication that they really are [using] a scattergun approach and that they're not doing a thorough sort of thing, because you can clearly see I'm an administrator ... So that does help weed some people out.

It is worth highlighting that in most cases, inquiry emails do not have a single focus. Instead, an applicant may often combine multiple topics in a single email. In addition, some PADC emails contain very little detail: as Agatha (supervisor, Social Sciences) notes, "the most speculative" type of emails contain "no project plan or information, no relevance whatsoever to my research area". This finding can be related to the notion of doctoral admissions as relationship-based and opaque (King et al., 2022), with some applicants more aware than others of how to navigate the pre-application stage.

PADC topics

Although PADC often involves multiple topics covered in the same instance, through our study we were able to identify five key areas of PADC communication, which are hitherto

uncharted in the literature: (a) eligibility and entry requirements; (b) funding and scholarships; (c) identifying a supervisor; (d) application feedback; and (e) equity, diversity and inclusion issues. In the section that follows, we focus on the five topics of PADC communication that were most reported by participants.

Eligibility and entry requirements

POs receive PADC about eligibility and entry requirements, often receiving inquiries sent to departmental resource accounts and coordinating responses. Often these were routine questions for POs to answer. Adam (PO, Science) described such emails with some humour: “here’s my life story, can I apply?”. In departments where most applicants have made initial contact with supervisors, POs typically only receive questions to clarify eligibility-related information. For example, Carole (PO, Science) commonly dealt with “how to apply” inquiries, observing that “sometimes the eligibility can be confusing”, as reflected in Kim and Spencer-Oatey’s (2021a) study of advice fora on doctoral admissions. Anna (DPGR, Arts) described receiving a query about the English Language Proficiency requirements for admissions:

this is normally something that’s of course dealt with by the central admissions, but it’s true, the person had picked up that we didn’t clarify something on our website and I quickly put an extra line in on the web page and clarified what kind of band of course we are.

DPGRs also receive PADC about eligibility and entry requirements. Some DPGRs commented on the “generic” nature of eligibility emails they received (Luke, DPGR, Science). However, DPGRs also receive specific enquiries about entry requirements and eligibility. For example, David (DPGR, Science) reported getting “questions about English levels suitability” among other queries. They can also, for example, directly inform applicants if they “don’t satisfy the conditions that are set out on the web page already” (Ethan, DPGR, Science). Another form of eligibility PADC that can involve DPGRs, and which is arguably more involved than the aforementioned types, is pre-application interviews. Some departments reported a tighter PADC process. For instance, in some departments it is only once the supervisors and DPGR are “happy” that the applicant is invited “to make a formal application” (Charlotte, DPGR, Social Sciences).

Funding and scholarships

The second topic staff dealt with extensively is funding. POs across departments reported that they receive generic inquiries about funding, often alongside eligibility questions: “basically what they’re saying is, will you fund me?” (Anna, PO, Science). Applicants’ inquiries were described as “a combination of sort of where do I begin? Or how do I get funding to come and study with you?” (Kate, PO, Arts), and they were also concerned with application timeframes. As Carole (PO, Sciences) notes, interpreting funding eligibility criteria set by research councils can be confusing for prospective applicants. She shared an example she received due to changing eligibility criteria:

[In the past], the eligibility restrictions were for students [who] had to meet certain residency criteria, which they had to have lived in the UK for three years immediately prior to the start of the course. Then because of Brexit and all of those related things and the research councils have slightly changed their eligibility ... So they would email me to sort of work it out if they were eligible.

While dealing with funding-related inquiries, Rebecca (PO, Arts), who oversees the admission process and is involved in the design and construction of the PGR programmes, noticed that different applicants may require different information:

When it's overseas applicants, there's generally always a funding kind of question involved. So, it's more about financing their PhD than home applicants who would possibly inquire more about the content of the PhD.

DPGRs are also commonly involved in providing information about scholarships and funding, receiving both generic and specific queries. As Olivia (DPGR, Social Sciences) notes, applicants enquire along the lines of, "I see that you're director of PhD programmes, can you tell me what kind of funding is available?" If DPGRs are also involved in the coordination of certain research groups or doctoral training partnerships, funding queries will also relate to these funding tracks specifically. However, it was noted by Ethan (DPGR, Science), who leads on the admission process with admission coordination officers in his department, that more transparency and specificity about the available opportunities can have an influence on whether prospective applicants ultimately apply:

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.

Supervisors also receive queries about funding routes and different options that applicants are proposing to fund their studies. Whilst many of these might be straightforward, some are more particular. For example, Elise (supervisor, Social Sciences) described how being contacted about supervision can be accompanied with good funding news, as she described a "highly developed proposal" was sent to her along with the information that "the candidate had already secured a full scholarship". However, as Kit (supervisor, Social Sciences) notes, some PADC enquiries about funding can be worrying:

I was really concerned about this potential student as they want to get a bank loan to fund a PhD which is really problematic due to the uncertain nature of PhD study. I tried to stress that they should really think about a proposal and the potential benefits of this kind of study. (Kit, supervisor, Social Sciences)

Identifying potential supervisors for the proposed project

The third topic staff received inquiries about was identifying potential supervisors for a prospective applicant's proposed project. The literature only discusses supervisors as recipients of these emails, but other stakeholders also receive emails in this domain. POs from different departments received varying amounts of emails about locating supervisors. For example, Adam (PO, Science) occasionally "get[s] emails from people asking about a suitable supervisor". However, the majority of the POs did not receive many emails around identifying supervisors given that applicants are frequently encouraged to make initial contact with potential supervisors themselves first:

We kind of largely encouraged students to first contact potential supervisors and we always think that's kind of a good first port of call because they can just see what the department specialisms are, whether they think they'll be suitable, they can kind of help them formulate their research proposals, if needed (Kate, PO, Arts).

It was more common for DPGRs to receive emails regarding supervision needs, including about how to find a supervisor or asking to help find a supervisor. DPGRs can advise on both individual supervisor and applicant fit but also research strengths and culture of the department more generally at the PADC stage because of their positions. As Isabella (DPGR, Arts) notes, applicants will often “want more information about a particular aspect or they want to ask about how to find a supervisor”. Emma (DPGR, Social Sciences) went as far as to say that “the majority of emails that come in at pre-application stage are about people trying to find a supervisor for their project”. In addition, David (DPGR, Science) described getting queries about:

the fields in which people work, who they work with and then I need to think about where do I send these people. I have a sort of understanding, a map of the department in my head, and I'll send them to them.

Unsurprisingly, it was very common for supervisors to receive PADC in order to locate a supervisor. During the six-week diary data collection, the 19 supervisors received inquiries from a total of 63 potential applicants, ranging from general speculative emails regarding interest and capacity, to detailed inquiries on the application. Malik (supervisor, Social Sciences) received 14 pre-application doctoral communications with potential candidates during the six-week period and considered that “each inquiry has its distinct features”. In another example, Kit described an inquiry email which was well written and polished, and the candidate attached all relevant information aside from a proposal:

The student did not attach a proposal because he indicated he is quite open about what he might want to study within the broad area and that he would be interested in finding out more about my ongoing projects. (Kit, supervisor, Social Sciences)

Indeed, project scope and research fit were common sub-topics, and it is interesting to note the variety of approaches. Supervisors received emails from applicants with ideas that were “totally outside of even the remit of the department” (Elise, supervisor, Social Sciences); “beyond [their] expertise” (Malik, supervisor, Social Sciences); and within their “broad area of expertise” but not quite right (Kit, supervisor, Social Sciences). There were also forwarded requests from colleagues to co-supervise projects “highly relevant” to their existing research (Elise, Social Sciences), but also declined requests for co-supervision due to not being able to take on candidates with proposals that were “not strong enough” (Danielle, supervisor, Arts). However, inter-departmental PADC about locating a supervisor were not always described as easy for prospective supervisors to negotiate:

I think what this shows is how difficult it can be to have some of these pre-application communications between possible supervisors, especially when the project might benefit from input from different departments. This could be because [the university] is so tribal and department focused. It doesn't approach things as “an institution” might. (Kit, supervisor, Social Sciences)

Often, applicants tended to request an online meeting following their email to better facilitate communication. For example, Mary received an inquiry email with only an attached CV:

There was no proposal attached, but the applicant outlined an idea he wanted to discuss. I would not usually set up a call with an applicant who has not sent a proposal. However, it

was clear this was a personalised approach. We emailed to set up a date to discuss [our] PhD programme (Mary, supervisor, Social Sciences).

Application feedback

As noted in the previous section, requests for supervision are often accompanied by draft research proposals that students attach to emails. It is valuable to isolate proposal feedback as a topic that involves varying degrees of investment from PADC stakeholders. Across our dataset we did not find any POs who engaged with application feedback. On the other hand, DPGRs did engage with PADC regarding application drafts. Whether or not DPGRs engaged directly with application content varied enormously between departments, with it being more common in Arts and Social Sciences than Science due to disciplinary differences between more student-led versus more supervisor-determined projects. Some DPGRs did not see applications until after formal submission as this was primarily the responsibility of the potential supervisor. As Alex (DPGR, Science) notes, “I’ve never gotten an email, Dear PGR director”. However, some DPGRs, like Chris (DPGR, Arts), noted that colleagues might ask him “to take a look” at a proposal. He added that he routinely stresses the importance “that their prospective student’s application is as strong as it possibly can be ... once it’s submitted, there’s very little that we can do more beyond that”. The variation in DPGR involvement in this element of PADC points to potential inequalities depending on the departmental norms and processes.

The findings from supervisors’ diaries show that supervisors engage with research proposals as a form of PADC and give feedback, ranging from brief to detailed. For instance, Malik (supervisor, Social Sciences) received a “highly developed draft proposal” from an internal candidate, and he subsequently “provided detailed feedback to help the candidate to improve the proposal further. He acknowledged my email and said he will work on the proposal further”. He also received a proposal forwarded by a colleague, but it was “poorly structured and showed no familiarity with the relevant literature. I replied to the applicant noting the need to improve the proposal and suggested he should apply to some other universities”. While the literature to date has discussed contact with supervisors before admissions in perfunctory terms, our study demonstrates the intricacies of these interactions.

Equity, diversity and inclusion

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) was another recurring theme of PADC, which is an important finding in relation to the broader concern in the doctoral admissions literature about inclusivity. The majority of POs in our study shared that they monitor and update public-facing departmental webpages relating to PGR with EDI concerns in mind. For example, Carole (PO, Science) noted she needs to deal with inquires on the clarity of the webpage presence and make sure potential applicants can “more readily access policies on certain things”. POs and DPGRs also receive practical queries, for example concerning disability. Stewart (PO, Social Sciences) shared a specific example he received: “I had a recent one where somebody says, ‘I’m in a wheelchair and also have a colostomy bag. And I would need an office that has privacy ... Can you accommodate that or not?’” Further important queries that were described included the potential for “distance” or

“part-time” arrangements (Emma, DPGR, Social Sciences) which may be requested due to prospective applicants’ care commitments. It is also possible for supervisors to receive complex accessibility enquiries. For example, Agatha (supervisor, Social Sciences) described being contacted by a student who had been “subject to disability discrimination and bullying from their supervisors/institution” and was looking to transfer to a different institution and supervisor. In the case of supervisors receiving such queries, the stakes are higher; they are often not just replying about practical possibilities but being sought out for their support and advocacy.

Discussion: conceptualising PADC

The findings of our study enable us to offer a novel conceptualisation of PADC, identifying the stakeholders involved, the forms pre-application communication takes, and the key topics of such communication (see Table 2). In terms of stakeholders, our study identified three key institutional players, namely POs, DPGRs and supervisors, going beyond the habitual association between the supervisor and PADC in the literature. Our micro-political orientation also led us to learn about some more peripheral institutional actors, such as admissions coordinators, academic subject leads and research leads in PADC. While not having a large role with PADC, these actors are often more involved in other admissions stages. Our findings demonstrate that POs, DPGRs and supervisors all deal with PADC, but to different extents. They also illustrate that, while PADC was mainly from potential applicants to university staff, it also included communication between staff (e.g. one supervisor referring a potential applicant to another, or a DPGR referring a message to a potential supervisor), another aspect of PADC that is largely absent from the existing research.

In terms of forms of PADC, we found that email is by far the most common mode of communication, as also seen in the literature, and email was often the catalyst to other forms of contact (e.g. video calls). However, there are other modes of communication which are rarer, including contact via social media, conferences, dropping into offices or via telephone. Our study also found that PADC is often directed to several different recipients, sometimes copied in and other times the same email is simply sent to different recipients. Emails were highly variable in terms of detail and length and often addressed multiple topics at once.

Regarding the key topics of PADC, we identified 5 key areas of focus which have hitherto been uncharted: (1) eligibility, (2) funding and scholarships, (3) identifying

Table 2. A definition of pre-application doctoral communications.

| Institutional stakeholders | Forms of PADC | Prevalent topics of PADC |
|--|--|---|
| <p><i>Key stakeholders</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PGR programme officers • PGR programme directors • Supervisors | <p><i>Primary form</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eligibility requirements • Funding and scholarships • Identifying supervisors • Application feedback • EDI considerations |
| <p><i>Other stakeholders</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Admissions coordinators • Academic subject leads • Research leads | <p><i>Other forms</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Office visits • Social media approaches • Conference contact • Phone call | |

potential supervisors, (4) application feedback and (5) equity, diversity and inclusion. Regarding eligibility, both POs and DPGRs received eligibility inquiries, however supervisors received these inquiries less commonly. *Eligibility* queries focused on entry conditions, visa queries, questions about home/abroad status, and English language requirements. *Funding and scholarships* were another key topic. POs tended to receive generic queries about funding whereas DPGRs received both generic and more specific funding queries. Supervisors in our study received questions about funding routes and different options through which applicants proposed to fund their studies (e.g. the scholarships they desired or secured, and self-funding). When it came to the topic of *identifying potential supervisors*, supervisors themselves received much PADC regarding their willingness to work with a student, including generic and brief inquiries as well as detailed and personalised ones. Supervisors received different PADC relating to the fit between supervisor and topic, ranging from expressing flexibility to expressing a specific chosen topic. Supervisors also received PADC from this topic from other supervisors and DPGRs including in other departments, where a supervisor was being sought for a potential applicant. Perhaps unsurprisingly, POs received fewer of these PADC. DPGRs received some PADC about this topic, including how to find a supervisor or asking to help find a supervisor for a particular project. *Application feedback* was another key topic of PADC. Our findings revealed that, while POs did not provide feedback on applications, some DPGRs engaged with proposals before formal applications were made, sometimes at the request of prospective supervisors. Supervisors were frequently contacted about application feedback, and often gave guidance ranging from the brief to the highly detailed and over multiple iterations. PADC about *EDI considerations* was a topic which could be directed at multiple stakeholders. However, it was mostly focused on questions of access (e.g. in terms of physical accommodations or variations in study load due to care responsibilities).

It is our hope that the conceptualisation we have offered will be of use to future doctoral education researchers and those who manage these institutional processes, who will now have empirically grounded description of PADC practices surrounding doctoral admissions.

Conclusion

Our paper began with the understanding that PADC is an uneven domain of knowledge in the field of doctoral education. On the one hand, there is a significant volume of public advice produced to guide prospective applicants through this confusing and somewhat high-stakes process; on the other hand, PADC has received relatively little scholarly attention. To address this lacuna in the doctoral admissions literature, our article offers an account of PADC as a micro-political phenomenon in HE: what PADC is, the forms it takes, who is involved and its key topics. The article demonstrates that PADC can be conceived of as a specific stage within the overall doctoral admissions process, but that it is also a multifaceted and complex process that involves multiple stakeholders and varies greatly across disciplines, programmes and individuals. By empirically studying the micro details of PADC, this paper makes an important contribution to doctoral admissions research. It encourages doctoral education researchers to expand their notions of doctoral admissions to encompass the pre-application stage and to explore the ways in which

power inequalities may play out in PADC. We hope this initial conceptualisation provides a useful platform for future researchers to think from.

The audience for this paper is not limited to doctoral education researchers. Another purpose of offering this conceptualisation of PADC is to inform institutional stakeholders of its importance, as well as policymakers who have a stake in doctoral admissions and the future of the research and development workforce. The findings of this paper may encourage such stakeholders to pay greater attention to PADC and engage colleagues in further discussion about its implications. As a result of this project, we have developed a series of recommendation briefings for stakeholders involved in PADC including doctoral supervisors (Burford et al., 2022a), those working on PGR management and administration at the institutional and department levels (Burford et al., 2022b), and doctoral applicants and the people who support them (Burford et al., 2023b). There are numerous implications for these stakeholders when the dimensions of PADC are fully recognised. These include the possibility to develop more intentional pre-application communication strategies (e.g. creating a pre-application form or holding online opportunities for potential applicants to meet staff and students), and for departments to formalise systems and roles in relation to PADC (e.g. consulting with students and staff about current processes, developing agreed timeframes and procedures and disseminating these clearly). Equally, supervisors can develop clearer systems for managing pre-application communications they receive (e.g. via creating dedicated inbox folders or by developing email templates for common queries). Both supervisors and other members of departments may benefit from increased information and induction about institutional processes around doctoral admissions as well as opportunities for professional development and reflection (e.g. with regard to assessing applications and proposals, reflecting on motivations for encouraging potential applicants to apply or not) to ensure that PADC fits into broader discussions and practices relating to inclusivity in doctoral admissions. Both supervisors and other members of departments could also usefully consider the clarity of existing webpage information (e.g. at the department level by consulting with relevant staff and students and auditing webpages for accessibility; supervisors can update their staff profile webpages with consistent information on their supervision interests and capacity to take on new students). Interested readers can access the project briefings to engage with these implications in greater depth (www.warwick.ac.uk/padc).

While this paper offers an important platform to understand PADC, there are numerous avenues for further research, including the intricacies of different stakeholder practices, the PADC experiences of PGR applicants, and comparative research of PADC across UK institutions and national contexts. Overall, we hope that our paper encourages researchers and key stakeholders involved in doctoral admissions to think more about PADC, considering it an essential part of admissions and recruitment.

Notes

1. Grey literature encompasses information other than that produced or distributed by commercial scholarly publishers.
2. In conducting our review for this study, we found such pages at institutions including: Imperial College London, The University of Edinburgh, University of Sussex, King's College London, University of Nottingham and University of Manchester.

3. The research team included two academics with research expertise in doctoral education and the academic profession, one of whom was also a Director of PGR at the time of the study. The questions for the study emerged out of practice-oriented questions about how to manage PADC and evaluate such communications in the light of EDI considerations. The other three researchers on this team were ECRs (one still a doctoral student) at the time of the study, each of whom undertakes higher education research.
4. It is important to note that most DPGRs are also supervisors. Due to our interest in sketching out the parameters of the different roles of PO, DPGR and supervisor and how these titles and responsibilities compare, in this paper's analysis we aim to differentiate which role a participant is speaking from.

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Ethical approval

All participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study, and the study was approved by HSSREC the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Warwick.

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Appendix A

Table A1. An overview of participants' profile.

| Roles | Participant's pseudonym | Gender | Ethnicity |
|-------|-------------------------|--------|------------|
| DPGR | Isabella | Woman | Not stated |
| | Charlotte | Woman | White |
| | Emma | Woman | White |
| | Olivia | Woman | White |
| | Marc | Man | White |
| | Chris | Man | White |
| | | | |

(Continued)

Continued.

| Roles | Participant's pseudonym | Gender | Ethnicity |
|------------|-------------------------|------------|---------------|
| POs | Anna | Woman | Not stated |
| | Maria | Woman | White |
| | Luke | Man | Asian |
| | David | Man | White |
| | Alex | Man | White |
| | Ethan | Man | White |
| | Carole | Woman | White |
| | Fiona | Woman | White |
| | Anna | Woman | White |
| | Kate | Woman | White |
| | Adam | Man | White |
| | Bluebell | Woman | White |
| | Rebecca | Woman | White |
| | Stewart | Man | White |
| Supervisor | Danielle | Woman | Mixed |
| | Gloria | Woman | Asian |
| | Alexina | Woman | Mixed |
| | Dippy | Man | White |
| | Agatha | Woman | Mixed |
| | Elise | Woman | White |
| | Julie | Woman | White |
| | Kit | Man | White |
| | Liz | Woman | Mixed |
| | Louis | Man | White |
| | Lucie | Woman | White |
| | Malik | Man | Mixed |
| | Marina | Woman | Black African |
| | Mary | Not stated | White |
| Paula | Woman | White | |
| Roberta | Woman | Mixed | |
| Sarah | Woman | White | |
| Stephanie | Woman | Mixed | |
| Sunny | Woman | White | |

Table A2. An overview of initial codes.

| Initial codes for topics of PADC | Initial codes for types of PADC | Initial codes for PADC stakeholders |
|--|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Scholarships or funding | Email | PGR programme directors |
| Seeking supervision | Conference contact | Admissions tutor |
| Research interests | Previous student | PGR programme officers |
| Visa information | Office visit | Supervisors |
| Feedback on a proposal | Phone call | Academic Leads |
| Access issues | Social media | Doctoral training programme staff |
| Grades and entry requirements | | |
| Paid teaching opportunities and related finance issues | | |
| Application timeframes | | |
| Internal communication between supervisors | | |
| Doctorate by publication | | |
| Doctoral community | | |