

# Pre-application communications: Illuminating an often-hidden aspect of doctoral education

## Project Team

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

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Illustration by Yara Aboasfour

# But first: what are pre-admissions doctoral communications (PADC)? (JB)

PADC defined as: *communications that potential doctoral applicants may have with university staff prior to making a formal application to study.*



Illustration by Dr Kate Carruthers Thomas

- Often emails from applicants to supervisors, Programme Officers (POs) or Directors of Postgraduate Research (DPGRs)
- May include other forms too – video/phone calls, dropping by, approaches on social media, at conferences)
- May be forwarded communications within departments (e.g. from DPGR to supervisor)

# Structure (JB)

- ▶ Introduction of PADDC (30 min)
  - Importance of pre-admissions communications
  - Dept's role in this
- ▶ Q & A (10 min)



# Diversity and the researcher workforce (JB)

- ▶ Limited diversity of the researcher workforce is a national concern.
- ▶ Doctoral education is integral to researcher training, often the 'gateway'.
- ▶ Wealth of research on challenges facing minoritised doctoral students in the UK – including women, black minority ethnic (BME) groups, and students living with a disability (Mattocks & Briscoe-Palmer, 2016)

*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 (p. 14)*

R&D People and Culture Strategy

People at the heart of R&D



# EDI and doctoral admissions (JB)

- ▶ Doctoral admissions: a key point of intervention to develop a more equitable, inclusive, and diverse research workforce.
- ▶ Much EDI and doctoral admissions scholarship has a particular focus on exclusionary nature of admissions criteria (Mountford et al., 2007; Potvin et al., 2017; Cano et al., 2018; Ghost et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2019; Squire, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021).
- ▶ Further studies on how academic staff identities influence decision-making (Squire 2020)
- ▶ Many studies are US-focused, discipline-specific, few take an institutional approach.

As Julie Posselt 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* (2014, p. 482).



# Pre-application as a 'gatekeeping' moment (JB)

- ▶ This session emerges from a study which focused on one neglected element of the doctoral admissions process: **pre-application communications**.
- ▶ For prospective doctoral applicants from underserved communities, the doctoral application process may be bewildering and difficult to navigate (see wealth of advice texts – YouTube videos, blog posts).
- ▶ Equally, respondents to inquiries may make snap judgements, perhaps giving limited thought to their gatekeeping function.



# PADC Project objectives (JB)

- ▶ Taking a whole-institution approach, the project has sought:
    - To understand how supervisors, DPGRs, and POs 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 talent.
    - To evaluate the extent to which Warwick webpages on PGR admissions transparently describe the pre-application stage.
    - To identify changes 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.
    - To produce a suite of professional development opportunities and resources that facilitate the implementation of these changes.
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# Project timeline (JB)

- ▶ Phase 1 (February 2022): project set-up activities
  - ▶ Phase 2 (March-April 2022): literature review; analysis of webpages; Advisory Board; ethics application; data collection; data processing and preliminary analysis
  - ▶ Phase 3 (May 2022): data analysis; development of outputs; Advisory Board email consultation
  - ▶ Phase 4 (June-July 2022): workshop and briefing session, project wrap-up; final report; Advisory Board
  - ▶ Beyond project: academic outputs
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# Data Collection (AA)

## Multi-method design

### Semi-structured interviews

#### Design

- 1-hour semi-structured interviews
- focus on i) the role in relation to postgraduate research, ii) the role in pre-application stage of doctoral admissions, iii) inclusivity practices

#### Participants

- **12 DPGRs, 8 doctoral programme officers**
- Participants drawn from across Warwick faculties

### Solicited diaries & FGDs

#### Design

- Solicited diary forms with questions/prompts
- 6 weeks
- Online forms via Qualtrics
- Follow up FGDs

#### Participants

- **19 doctoral supervisors in diary study**
- **60 applicants represented**
- **3 focus groups with total of 11 supervisors**
- Participants drawn from across Warwick faculties

# Project dissemination (AA)

- ▶ Twitter hashtag #PADC\_project
- ▶ Project website: <https://warwick.ac.uk/padc>
- ▶ Blog posts
  - For BERA-funded project "The State of the Discipline"
  - Other blog venues in consideration: The Conversation, SRHE blog, Supervising PhDs blog
- ▶ Conference dissemination:
  - Warwick Social Inclusion (30 min presentation)
  - UK Council for Graduate Education (1 hr workshop)
  - Researcher Education and Development Scholarship Conference (accepted)
  - Society for Research into Higher Education (accepted)



"Not enough folks are talking about these issues - very grateful for the project"  
*(Feedback from CGE workshop participant)*

# Research output development (AA)

- ▶ Briefings
- ▶ Staff development workshops
  - 19 DPGR/POs signed up
  - 11 supervisors signed up
- ▶ Illustrations
- ▶ Report
- ▶ Scholarly publications

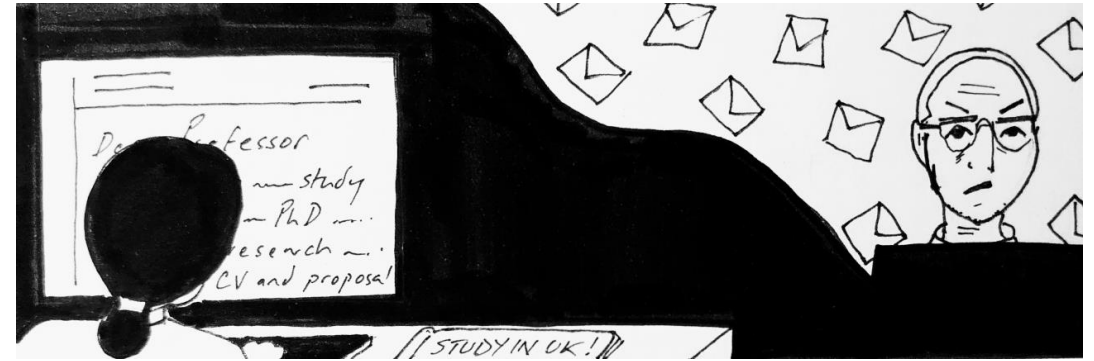


Illustration by Kate Carruthers Thomas

# Early Findings (JB)

## Literature Review – overview


- ▶ Doctoral admissions is a broad field of enquiry (mostly from the US context); relatively little research has been carried out on the pre-application stage internationally.
- ▶ This stage of admissions is often a source of great unease for applicants; the contact that takes place between applicants and institutions is important for applicants' sense of security and for the making and acceptance of offers.
- ▶ A clear link is emerging between EDI concerns and pre-application communications.
- ▶ The review is also recognising the wealth of grey literature on pre-application communications, such as YouTube videos, advice pages and guidance from other UK institutions.

## Web Review – overview

- ▶ The web review looks at Warwick departmental and central web information: PGR programme information, PGR admissions deadlines, details of relevant contacts, research proposal drafting guidance, advice on seeking relevant funding and scholarships.
- ▶ Good practices have been identified in several departments:
  - clearly explained scholarship details and application procedures
  - explicit guidance for applicants to prepare/draft research proposals
  - a 'research degree application checklist' with essential steps and guidance for applicants prior to their formal application.
- ▶ However, information on the decision-making process and EDI-related guidance and information have been rarely found on webpages across departments.
- ▶ Gaining an understanding of how Warwick's web information varies across departments has contributed to our holistic picture of the variance of processes for pre-application communication at the university.



# Early Findings: Stakeholder 1 & 2 - Directors of Postgraduate Research and Programme Officers (AA)

- ▶ The role of **Director of PGR** varies in terms of involvement in gatekeeping (heavy/minimal oversight; other roles involved: admissions tutors or academic leads; relying heavily on supervisor endorsement)
  - ▶ The role of **Programme Officer** varies in terms of gatekeeping, e.g., filtering suitable applicants, sending rejection emails, deciding when to pass something on
  - ▶ POs and DPGRs want to make **more inclusive websites**; websites are a site of confusion for applicants
  - ▶ Broadly, POs and DPGRs often discussed '**equal**' treatment - applicants with differentiated information/communication needs?
  - ▶ **Minimal conversations** about widening participation amongst **non-traditional students** – the focus being largely on international students.
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# Early Findings: Stakeholder 3 – Supervisors (AA)

- ▶ What actions do supervisors take?
    - Replying to applicants
    - Delay replying
    - Forward on (passing the burden)
    - Establishing a feedback/interaction with applicants
  - ▶ Some understand PADC **as a site of gatekeeping** and want to know how to enact EDI principles at this stage.
  - ▶ Some are not sure **how to think in nuanced ways** about applicants who may require additional support (e.g. scholars at risk).
  - ▶ Some worry that some applicants' communications might be **privileged** (e.g., access to library resources/peers/networks to prepare proposals).
  - ▶ **Recruitment capacity/workload an issue**: how does it shape supervisor inclination to engage with 'polished' communication over students who may need more support, and therefore enact gatekeeping?
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# Some cross-cutting themes – across stakeholders (AA)

- ▶ **PADC are evaluated based on criteria** (often informal, by different people at different times)
    - Style, language, and length of email
    - Qualities like 'seriousness' and 'politeness'
    - Judgement on the quality of any attached proposal
    - As assessment of the applicant's expertise and background
    - Research topic and 'fit' with supervisor
    - The 'sparkle' of an email/proposal
    - Social justice considerations
    - Funding intentions
  - **Underlying principles** for making decisions:
    - Distinctions between professional v academic judgement – but sometimes blurry.
    - Supervisor autonomy
    - Competing time pressure
    - Capacity to recruit students
    - Department priorities
    - Enactment of care
  - What appears to be **at stake for these decisions**:
    - Time investment, emotional investment, intellectual investment.
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# Disadvantaged groups? (AA)

- ▶ Overseas vs home
- ▶ External vs current students
- ▶ Mature vs recent graduates (disadvantage can go both ways)
- ▶ First generation vs highly educated background

Currently enrolled students were described as 'already really familiar with the staff...just really comfortable going and talking to them about applications' other students are seen as 'stabbing in the dark' (Programme officer)

The majority of the data suggests that pre-application communication is of great importance to the progression of an application and is a site of gatekeeping



# Where to find out more (JB)

- ▶ Look at our website here & share our outputs! <https://warwick.ac.uk/padc>
- ▶ Follow along with the convo on Twitter using the hashtag **#PADC\_project**
- ▶ Follow us on Twitter:  
@EmilyFrascatore @AhmadAkkad\_  
@Dangeni\_ @jiaburford



**Thank you!**

