

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

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

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As part of the 2022 project ‘Opening up the Black Box of Pre-application Doctoral Communications’ (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 team¹ 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

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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

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

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.

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?