

# Pre-application Doctoral Communications: A Site of Affect in Higher Education

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 **#PADC\_project**

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

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**WARWICK**  
THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

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Illustration by Yara Aboasfour

# Project Team

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Thomas



# Project advisory board

- ▶ Membership of the advisory board is comprised of key stakeholders in the PGR administration and doctoral supervision space at Warwick, as well as representatives drawn widely from across the University: one each of DPGR, PO, supervisor and PGR student.
  - ▶ **Dr Olympia Palikara** – Advisory Board Chair. Co-Director of PGR, Department of Education Studies
  - ▶ **Youn Affagee** - PGR student, Warwick Manufacturing Group.
  - ▶ **Dr Deborah Biggerstaff** - Supervisor, Medical School
  - ▶ **Dr Dan Branch** – Academic Director of the Doctoral College, Chair of the Board of Graduate Studies.
  - ▶ **Dr Ross Forman** – Director of PGR, English.
  - ▶ **Dr Letizia Gramaglia** – Director of WIHEA/Head of ADC
  - ▶ **Rhiannon Martyn** – Head of the Doctoral College
  - ▶ **Janet Smith** – PGR Programme Officer, Sociology.
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# Proposed Session Outline

## **Presentation - 35 min**

- Introduction to the concept/practice of PADC
- The PADC study Phase 1: Staff judgements about PADC
  - Initial findings (work very much in progress!)
- The PADC study phase 2: Searching for a Supervisor.

## **Discussion of study - 10 min**

- Break -

## **Presentation of data fragments and group discussion - 45 min**



# What are pre-admissions doctoral communications (PADC)?

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

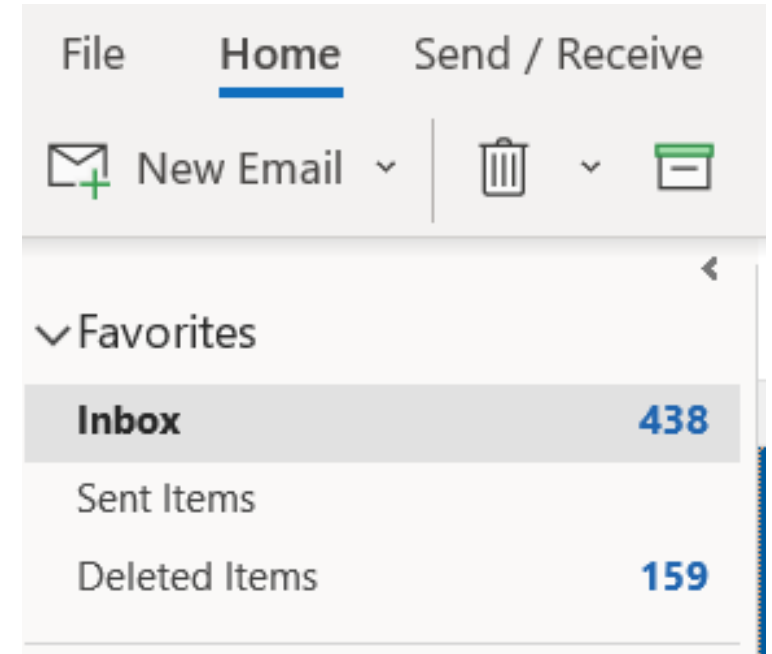


Illustration by Dr Kate Carruthers Thomas

- 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)
- Near ubiquitous in some disciplines in the UK (especially in social sciences and humanities), unheard of in others.

# 'I have an uneasy feeling about this': Project origins

- ▶ Project emerged out of one team members own uneasy feelings about receiving/responding to email enquiries from potential applicants, and another team member's leadership role directing a PhD programme.
  - JB arrived to a new role in a new country - sought advice from EH (DPGR) on how to manage/make judgments about responding to PADC in a context where there are few available places and many potential applicants.
- ▶ In December 2021, EH organised a fact-finding consultation with supervisors which exposed that many academics process requests without consideration of EDI (see also Squire, 2020), and revealed an appetite for guidance on applying EDI principles within pre-application processes.
- Developed a project proposal for research culture funding titled **Opening up the Black Box of Pre-application Doctoral Communications**



# Broader context: Diversity and the researcher workforce

- ▶ Limited diversity of the researcher workforce is a site of 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 (e.g. 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

- ▶ 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 admissions 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

- ▶ Our study focuses 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.



# Our project research objectives: PADC at Warwick

- ▶ Taking a whole-institution approach out project 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 Doctoral College/departmental **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.
- ▶ To **produce a suite of professional development opportunities** that facilitate the implementation of these changes.
- ▶ To fill a gap in current research on PADC: little known about how various institutional players think about ethics involved in PADC and what it might mean to make inclusivity-aligned judgements.



A note on Warwick: Russell Group research-intensive university. Context of high numbers of applications for doctoral study.

# PADC project activities in brief

- ▶ **Phase 1** (February 2022): Project set-up activities
- ▶ **Phase 2** (March-April 2022): Literature review; webpage review; ethics application & data collection; data processing and preliminary analysis
- ▶ **Phase 3** (May 2022): Initial data analysis; development of outputs and illustrations (for 2 briefing documents and 2 sets of workshop materials)
- ▶ **Phase 4** (June-July 2022): Workshop for supervisors (c. 11) and briefing session for DPGRs and POs (c. 19) , project wrap-up
- ▶ **Beyond project:** Academic outputs

## Project outputs to date

- ▶ 2 briefing documents and 1 set of open-access workshop materials.
- ▶ Blogpost:
  - *Pre-application doctoral communications and gatekeeping in the academic profession*
- ▶ Conference dissemination:
  - Warwick Social Inclusion (30 min presentation)
  - UK Council for Graduate Education (1 hr workshop)
  - Researcher Education and Development Scholarship Conference (15 min presentation)
  - Society for Research into Higher Education (20 min presentation)

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

# Early Findings

## 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 (Kim and Spencer-Oatey, 2020)
- ▶ A clear link is emerging between EDI concerns and pre-application communications. (Milkman et al., 2015)
- ▶ The review recognised the wealth of grey literature on pre-application communications, such as YouTube videos, advice pages and guidance from other UK institutions.

## Web Review – overview

- ▶ Looked at PGR programme information, PGR admissions deadlines, details of relevant contacts, research proposal drafting guidance, advice on seeking relevant funding and scholarships.
- ▶ Good practices 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.
- ▶ Overall impression of highly variable practices institution-wide.



# Participants and methods

## 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
- All 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
- All participants drawn from across Warwick faculties

# Early Impressions

## Stakeholders 1 & 2: Directors of PGR and Programme Officers

- ▶ The role of **Director of PGR** varies in terms of involvement in gatekeeping (heavy/minimal oversight; other roles: admissions tutors or academic leads; relying heavily on supervisor endorsement rather than process)
- ▶ 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 often a site of confusion for staff and applicants
- ▶ Broadly, POs and DPGRs often emphasised their '**equal**' treatment of applicants – limited consideration of differentiated needs for information and communication.
- ▶ **Minimal conversations** about widening participation amongst '**non-traditional**' domestic students – focus largely on international students



Illustration by Dr Kate Carruthers Thomas

## Stakeholders 1: Directors of PGR as Supervisors

- ▶ Some DPGRs could not separate their management role from that of their supervisory role in terms of PADC
  - E.g., they might not get communications addressed to them as DPGR but would as supervisors
  - Could their approach to handling personal comms influence dept. policies?



Illustration by Dr Kate Carruthers Thomas

# Early Impressions

## Stakeholder 3: Supervisors

- ▶ 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/agents 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?





# Supervisor Findings – routes and actions

## Routes of PADC for supervisors

- As expected, the most common communication form is **email from potential applicants** (73.8% of applicants).
- The **referral of potential applicants from directors of doctoral programmes or programme administrators** (23.1% of applicants) was the second most common form.

## Actions taken by supervisors receiving PADC

- For 32.2% of the applicants, **supervisors initiated next steps** (e.g., asking for a proposal or requesting a meeting).
- In several cases, **supervisors delayed replying** for at least a week (28.8% applicants), which was explained as being due to, for instance, levels of busyness or uncertainty about next actions.
- For 30.5% of applicants, the **supervisor replied to decline interest** in proceeding further.

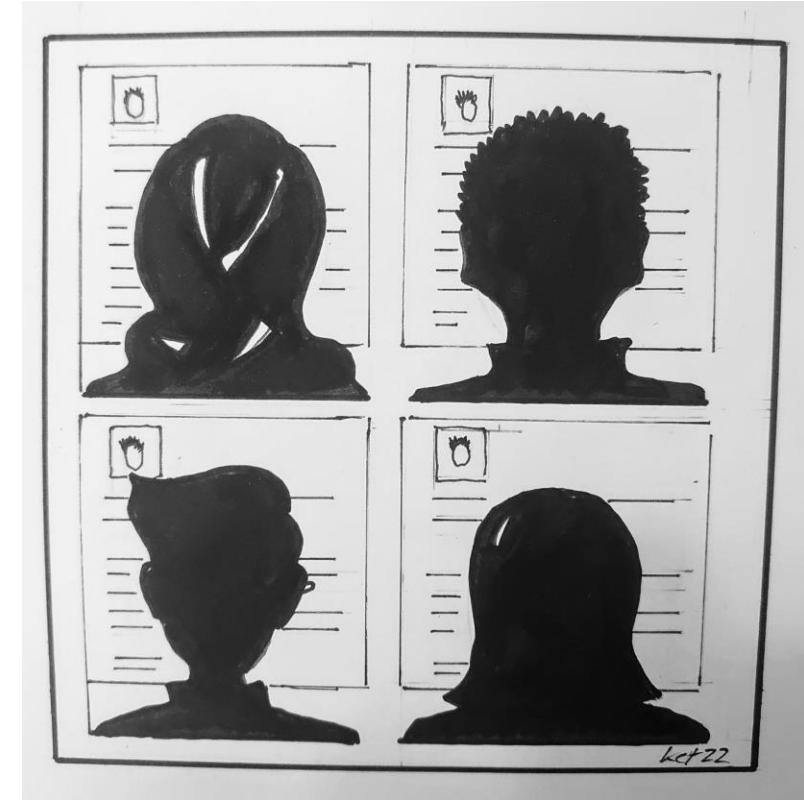


Illustration by Dr Kate Carruthers Thomas

# Supervisor Findings – routes and actions – an applicant's PADC journey

Week 1

25 April

Week 2

2 May

Week 3

9 May

Week 4

16 May

Week 5

23 May

Week 6

30 May

Julie contacted supervisor via email

Sunny replied with feedback


Julie replied to reflect on feedback


Julie contacted again for further feedback

Sunny replied suggesting meeting virtually to avoid confusion

Julie sent back to agree

Sunny replied suggesting time the following week

 Supervisor

 Doctoral applicant

# Supervisor Findings – routes and actions – supervisor profile

Gloria (woman): early-career academic, Faculty of Arts

- ▶ During Gloria's participation in the study for 6 weeks, she was involved in email and video communications with 5 potential applicants.
- ▶ Gloria does not have any personal system or practice in dealing with potential applicants' approaches.
- ▶ Her responses were rather based on departmental standard email texts provided by the department.
- ▶ She declined all potential applicants for the lack of relevance of applicants' topics, 'undesirable' email style, applicants' PG and UG grades, and recruitment capacity.



# Supervisor Findings - reflections

Supervisors' reflections on their actions:

The data produce a picture of an ideal applicant against which these communications are measured...

## The ideal applicant sends an email that...

- is neither too long nor too short,
- in advanced and consistent English,
- identifying a clear topic relevant to the supervisor's interests but showing evidence of independent thinking,
- mentioning previous high-quality academic credentials and experience,
- demonstrating an understanding of what a doctorate involves.

"It was a good email and the applicant communicated well in terms of knowledge and interests to pursue a PhD"

*(Carol, Social Sciences, Diary form 1, w/c 2nd May 2022)*

# Discussion

- In order to understand doctoral admissions from an inclusivity perspective, it is necessary to explore the role of supervisors, DPGRs and POs in pre-application communications.
- This is an important admissions stage where **many applicants are deterred from even submitting an application.**
- There is variation in the role of the supervisor across national contexts and institutional configurations, but the results of our study show that **supervisors struggle to manage all the emails they receive from applicants** and that **they have strong expectations of pre-application communications which may be exclusionary for students who cannot access support.**
- PADC was often viewed as an ordinary, routine, and unremarkable part of work for most participants. However, some carried significant guilt or shame (e.g. at unanswered emails, disappointed applicants) or associated this practice with overwhelm (e.g. too many emails to keep up).



# Some cross-cutting themes – across stakeholders

- **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'
  - Striking a balance of personalisation but not 'fake'
  - 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 for student/discipline/minoritised community member
- What appears to be **at stake for these decisions**:
  - Time investment, emotional investment, intellectual investment, political investments.

# Early impressions

## Stakeholder 4:

### Disadvantaged applicant groups?

- ▶ Overseas or displaced vs home
- ▶ External vs current students
- ▶ Mature vs recent graduates
- ▶ First generation vs family with HE 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**

# PADC Phase 2 – Searching for a Supervisor

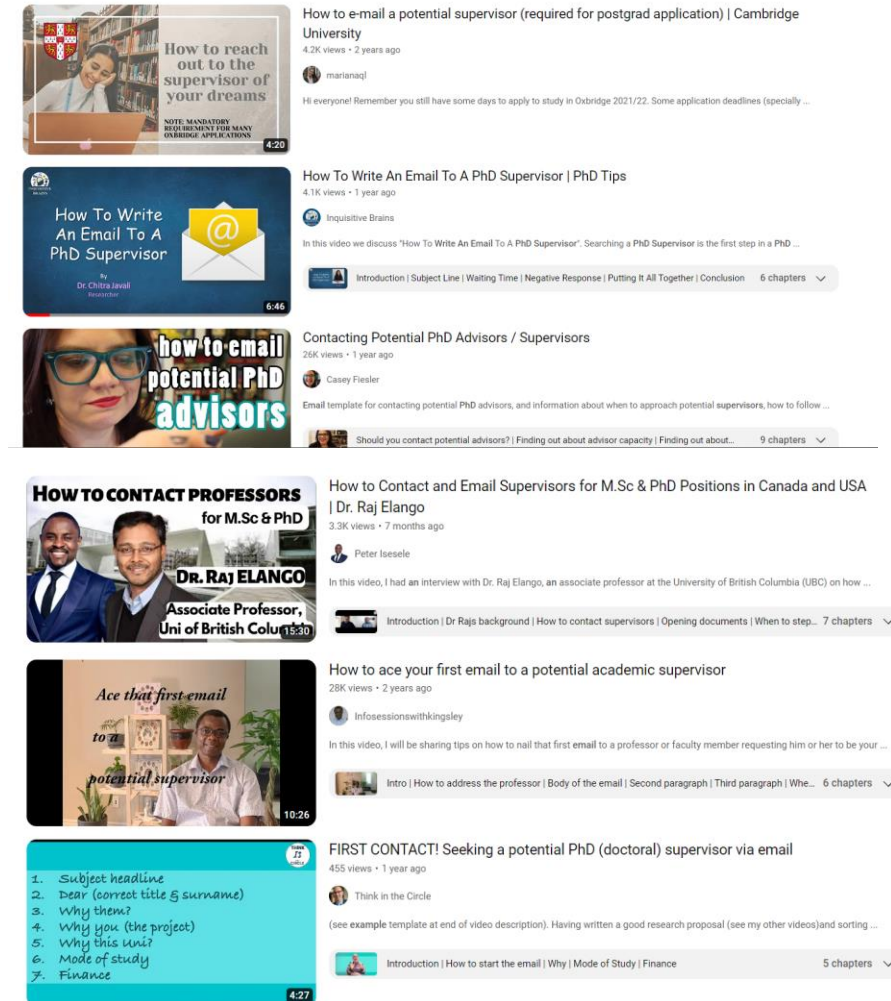
- A key finding of PADC1 was that doctoral supervisors struggle to manage the sheer number of approaches they receive from potential applicants, which leads to a sifting of potential applicants according to those who have more or less access to support and advice.
- This revealed the need to explore the connection between supervisors receiving PADC and applicants seeking supervisors
- Specifically focused on how students navigate the process of searching for a supervisor, our follow-up project (PADC2) aims to develop resources to make the process more transparent and thus assist students from underrepresented groups to navigate toward potential supervisors with greater confidence
- Project runs from Dec 2022-July 31 2023.





# Project objectives

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 extra-institutional video resources* which inform students about how to approach a supervisor, both at the institutional level and more widely across the UK.
3. To *create a video resource* which seeks to demystify the process of finding a supervisor which takes applicants from underrepresented groups as its primary target audience. This video resource will bring together findings from PADC1, findings of the empirical research and video review from PADC2.
4. To use the findings from the empirical research to further develop the PADC1 pilot workshops, and to *deliver PADC workshops to supervisors, DPGRs and POs* across Warwick faculties.



**Break :)**



# Data Example 1: Olivia – DPGR in Social Science

Umm, so that can feel a little bit stressful and then this sense that there is a you know a different assessment for each person, a different response for each person. There's quite a lot of labour, but it's quite a lot of particular type of labour. I am very conscious of the fact that when people write and they communicate with us and say I'd like to do a PhD in your department, that that is a really big deal, you know? Like, and I do remember very keenly my own kind of how it was for me before I started a PhD and reaching out to supervisors and pressing the button on that email and asking, you know, would you be interested in my PhD?

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 you in. So I, you know, I think it's quite complex work actually that I don't always feel completely 100 % happy about because its difficult work, but I'm not sure that I'm what the policy response to be to that would be. It's not something I could easy solution to, which is why I've kind of just lived with this sense of, um, quite difficult labour.



# Data Example 2: Alex - DPR in Science

Well, again, they come from all over the world, from students. The vast majority of these emails are just addressed generically. And they have, you know, they state, you know, like what they are from, you know, like how, you know, like what they are interested in. And then they want to pursue a PhD. And so the way that I read them, so maybe I spend less than a minute and I look, you know like their research interests and most of them, you know, like if or once I see that, you know, like they're not in my area, I just, you know like, I sometimes, I delete them or sometimes I don't know, I just leave them in my inbox. Umm, if I identify, you know, like by, you know, scrutinizing this email very quickly that, you know, like some keywords that, you know, like they are interested in my own research areas.

Then I look further, yeah. So I just opened the CV. And then I look, you know, like where they come from. I mean the university. And the grades. Yeah, and again, if I am sceptical about either the university, what I see that the grades are below, then again, I just don't pursue it further. (...) Once you know like sort of end, it happens several times. You know like once you know like I'm confident that there is some potential, then I get in touch with them.



# Data Example 3: Bluebell – PO in Social Science

You wouldn't know with the single-liners because they don't provide any information about it. And obviously most people use a Gmail or a Hotmail, that's gonna show my age, isn't it? (laughs) So it's sort of like, you can't really tell. I mean, you tend to know when people have, you could recognize that it's like different styles from like the Far East of China and Japan sort of, like, very reverent and stuff. Other cultures could be more direct. I don't have a problem with any of those styles and accept those, and it wouldn't judge anyone on those. It's about the quality of what is written in those and obviously, if someone says, even if they sent quite a wordy one and there's a lot of errors, sort of English, whether it be grammatical or spelling (...) We are the department of (anonymized SS disciplines). You need a 7 IELTS. Uh and you need that seven in writing so (smiles) so, might make a judgment call on it, or probably wait for an academic to come, an experienced supervisor who just happened to pass and just say, what do you think are the likelihood is no.


Because again, it's like you wouldn't submit a job application without sort of checking. It's like your first impression on the department. And with all the facilities available online to be able to do checking and what not that we try and keep the undergraduates from using during their online exams. It's yeah, it's due care and attention and it's you're not giving a good impression.



# Example 4: Elise – Supervisor Profile

Elise had nine communications via email with potential doctoral applicants during the study. For seven out of these nine communications, Elise tended to delay her response to applicants because of her busyness and lacking time to reply, and because of her student recruitment capacity as she had already recruited a student for the following academic year. Delaying response was an ethical issue for Elise causing her to “feel quite guilty” (diary, w/c 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2022) for keeping applicants awaiting a response from her. Responding to potential applicants for Elise was “an admin task to add to all other admin tasks” by going through her prospective students’ folder to “deal with them all at once” (diary, w/c 25<sup>th</sup> April 2022). The remaining two communications included an immediate decline for potential supervision coupled with forwarding applicants’ approaches to other colleagues in the department, particularly colleagues with fewer students. Declining supervision by Elise was based on her evaluation criteria of the quality of the applicants’ proposals, the relevance of these proposals to her research interests, and the content and style of their email messages, such as being “long and rather arduous” (diary, w/c 25<sup>th</sup> April 2022) and lacking precision.

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# Data Example 5: The advice video genre



PhD application mistakes and top tips!

16K views • 1 year ago



Andy Stapleton

In this video, I talk about all of the PhD application mistakes and tips so that your application stands head and shoulders above ...



the three biggest mistakes | why you? | why them? | why now? | general mistakes and tips | summary 6 chapters ▾



**Thank you!**

