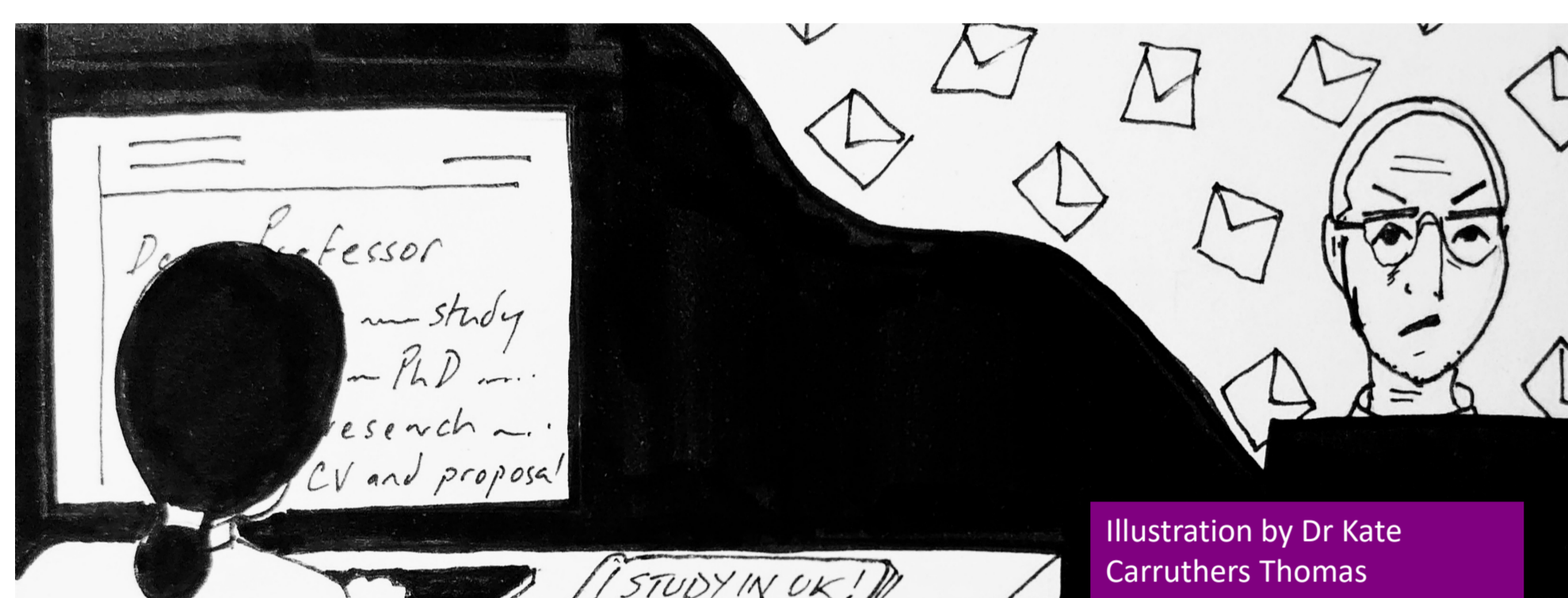


Searching for a Supervisor: Minoritised Applicants & Pathways to Doctoral Study

Sophia Kier-Byfield, James Burford, Emily Henderson
Department of Education Studies

INTRODUCTION

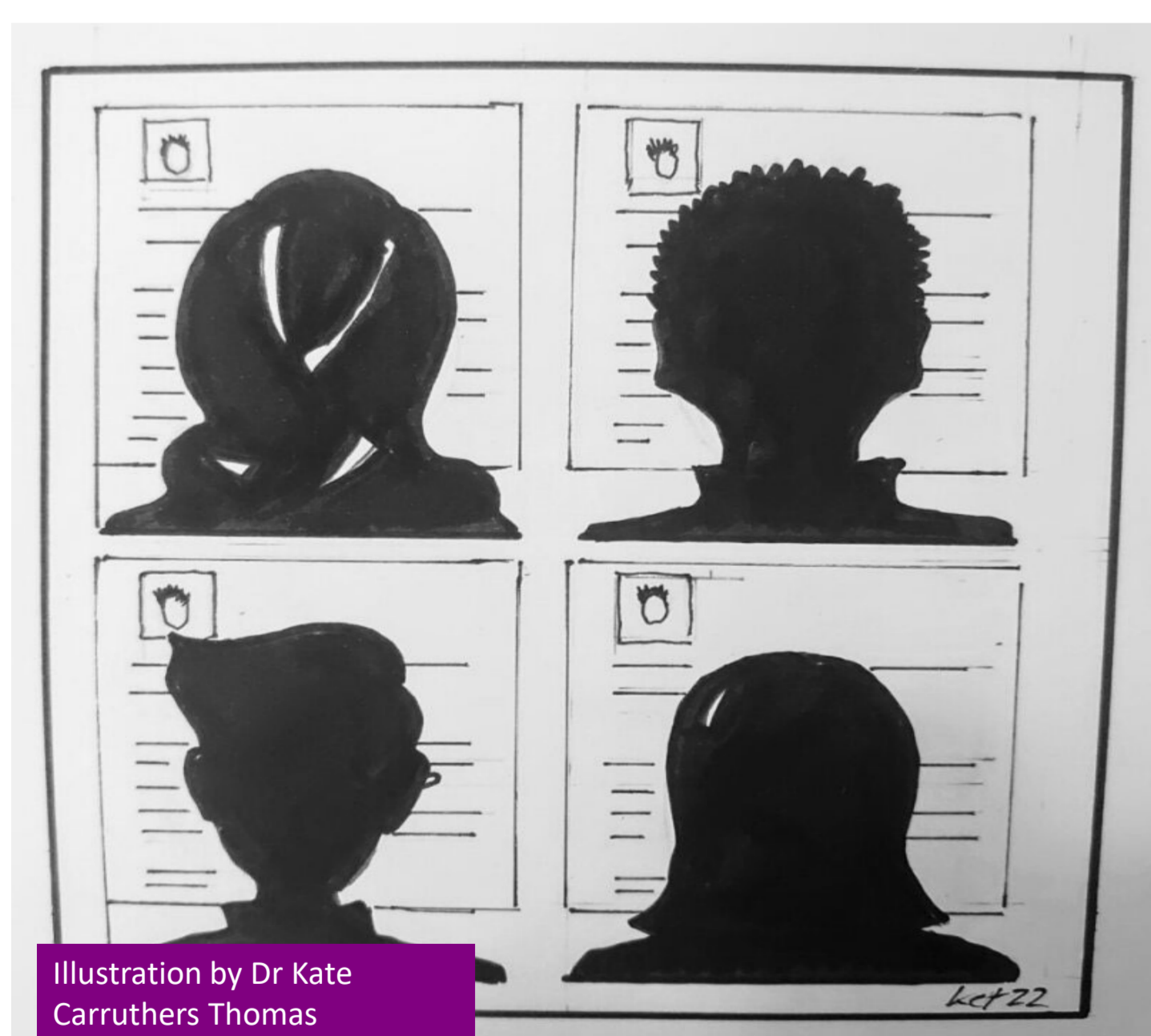
Searching for a supervisor is central to pre-application doctoral communications (PADC) and can be unregulated and challenging to navigate (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2014). This is especially the case for those from underrepresented groups (Milkman et al., 2018, Kim & Spencer-Oatey, 2021). Enhancing inclusion in doctoral study is essential to diversifying the researcher workforce and knowledge production. Identifying a supportive supervisor is a key step in the overall process. This project examined the phenomenon of searching for a supervisor from the perspective of under-represented Warwick students to determine the barriers and enabling factors on the pathway to doctoral study.



STUDY AIMS

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.
2. To identify recommendations for change based on these findings.

Research question: How do doctoral applicants from minoritised backgrounds navigate the process of finding a doctoral supervisor?



REFERENCES

- Kim, K. H., & Spencer-Oatey, H. (2021). Enhancing the recruitment of postgraduate researchers from diverse countries: Managing the application process. *Higher Education*, 82(5), 917–935. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00681-z>
- Mellors-Bourne, R., Metcalfe, J., Pearce, E., & Hooley, T. (2014). *Understanding the recruitment and selection of postgraduate researchers by English higher education institutions*. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/46170827.pdf>
- Milkman, K. L., Akinola, M., & Chugh, D. (2015). What happens before? A field experiment exploring how pay and representation differentially shape bias on the pathway into organizations. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 100(6), 1678. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000022>

METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a series of projects about Pre-Application Doctoral Communications, supported by the Enhancing Research Culture Fund. To compliment existing work on the practices and attitudes of Warwick staff, this project focused on the experiences and views of doctoral candidates. Semi-structured interviews (15) with a narrative orientation were undertaken with students across all Warwick faculties who identified as minoritised in complex, intersectional ways. Interviews were then analysed thematically to identify key insights into which people and structures supported or prevented connections with supervisors and eventually applications. The study received full ethical approval from the University of Warwick Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethical Committee.



FINDINGS

Enabling factors:

- Peer support from others going through the process.
- Family background, e.g. encouragement from family, previous experience of the UK system or academia in other contexts.
- Support from familiar academic staff or potential supervisors who are receptive to enquiries.
- Online resources where others share their experiences.
- Early exposure to research can aid in developing skills and gaining contact with potential future supervisors.
- Clear PADC and application information, such as easy-to-navigate websites, contact information and research interests.

Barriers:

- Incorrect advice from institutional staff about, e.g., application timeframes and potential supervisors that were difficult to communicate with.
- Restricted access to online information, such as opportunities or staff credentials being behind an institutional log-in portal.
- Limited awareness of EDI among academics and a lack of representation of minority staff members and epistemological approaches.

EDI IMPLICATIONS

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

FURTHER RESOURCES

For briefings, recommendations and the project report, please visit our project website:
www.warwick.ac.uk/padc

Acknowledgments: The team would like to thank the Warwick Enhancing Research Culture Fund, the project's Advisory Board, the Warwick Doctoral College and Academic Development Centre, and our intern Annum Mahmood.