

Losing talent in research careers from the very first contact?

An exploratory study of pre-application communications in doctoral admissions at University of Warwick

Project Team

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Illustration by Yara Aboasfour

Outline

- ▶ Introduction of PADC
- ▶ Research Design
- ▶ Key findings
- ▶ Resources




Pre-application as a 'gatekeeping' moment

- ▶ This session emerges from a study at University of Warwick which focused on one neglected element of the doctoral admissions process: **pre-application communications**.
- ▶ PADC defined as: *communications that potential doctoral applicants may have with university staff prior to making a formal application to study.*
- ▶ For prospective doctoral applicants from **underserved communities**, the doctoral application process may be bewildering and difficult to navigate.
- ▶ Equally, respondents to inquiries may make varied and unregulated judgements, perhaps giving limited thought to their gatekeeping function.

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)



PADC Project objectives

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
- Evaluate the extent to which Warwick webpages describe the pre-application stage
- Identify changes at institutional and department levels to create a more transparent and inclusive doctoral admissions process
- Produce a suite of professional development opportunities and resources



Illustration by Dr Kate Carruthers Thomas

Early Findings

Literature Review – overview

- ▶ Relatively little research on the pre-application stage internationally.
- ▶ 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.
- ▶ Grey literature, e.g. YouTube videos, advice pages and guidance from other UK institutions.

Web Review – overview

- ▶ Looking at Warwick departmental and central web information
- ▶ 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, decision-making process and EDI-related guidance and information have been rarely found.



Data Collection

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

Findings: Stakeholder 1 & 2 - Directors of Postgraduate Research and Programme Officers

- ▶ 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?
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Findings: Stakeholder 3 – Supervisors

- ▶ 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 it shapes 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

- ▶ **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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Research output

- ▶ Recommendations Briefing for HE Institutions and Academic Departments
 - Develop pre-application communication strategies
 - Enhance professional development, training and reflective practice
 - Develop clear webpage information
- ▶ Recommendations Briefing for Doctoral Supervisors
 - Managing pre-application doctoral communications
 - Responding to pre-application doctoral communications
 - Reflecting on pre-application doctoral communications

Access project briefings:



Thank you!

Where to find out more:

- ▶ 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
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