'It was a good email': Pre-application communications in doctoral student recruitment and the role of the potential supervisor

Project Team

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Project website: **https://warwick.ac.uk/padc**

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Illustration by Yara Aboasfour

Outline

- Introduction to PADC and the role of the supervisor
- The PADC study
- Key findings and discussion
- 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 doctoral 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 (supervisors, administrators…) 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)

The role of the supervisor in PADC

▶ From the construction of 'the supervisor' in literature alluding to PADC, the supervisor that responds to pre-application approaches is **frequently obscured as a human subject – instead the supervisor is constructed as an abstract entity or a subject without feelings or principles**.

▶ Milkman and colleagues' (2015) audit study of professors in the US discussed supervisors' response rates to emails from potential applicants but **did not examine why supervisors responded to emails or not**.

▶ A study of email correspondence between potential supervisors and applicants (Sabet et al., 2021) discussed language used, taking the emails as texts **without exploring the experiences of the supervisors writing the emails**.

▶ Another study explored a discussion forum for doctoral applicants (Kim & Spencer-Oatey, 2021) where, again, **supervisors were constructed as an external presence rather than an active player**.

This study adds to existing studies of doctoral admissions by putting PADC on the map and, in this paper, exploring the role and experiences of supervisors who participate in pre-application doctoral communications.

Illustration by Dr Kate Carruthers Thomas

PADC Study design

Multi-method design; institutional case study	
Semi-structured interviews	Solicited diaries & FGDs

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 1 – 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.
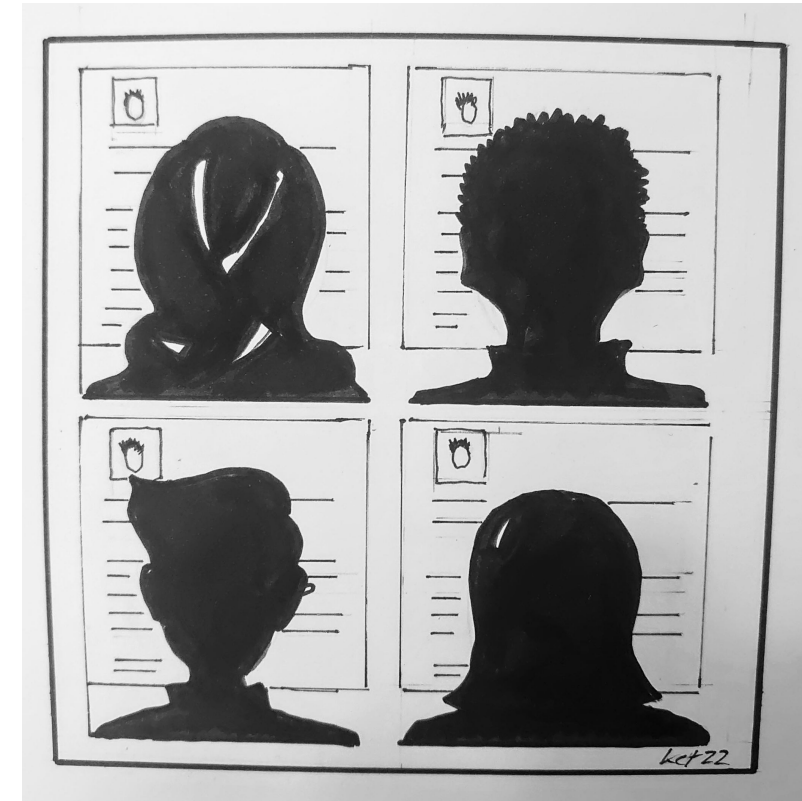

Illustration by Dr Kate Carruthers Thomas

Findings 1 – routes and actions – an applicant's PADC journey

Findings 1 – 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 t, the email style as 'undesirable', applicants' PG and UG grades, and recruitment capacity.

Findings 2 - 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)

Findings 3 – reflections and EDI

Supervisors' reflections on their actions within EDI framework:

The data indicate that specific types of students could be disadvantaged by supervisors' actions and (academic) judgements in PADC

- Students with differentiated (communication) needs (e.g., displaced students)
- External vs current students
- Mature vs recent graduates
- First generation vs highly educated background

Discussion

- In order to understand doctoral admissions from an inclusivity perspective, it is necessary to explore the role of supervisors in pre-application communications.

- This is an important admissions stage where **many applicants are deterred from even submitting an application**.

- This presentation has explored the supervisors' perspective in pre-application communications, recognising the **active role supervisors play in this process** (as opposed to their construction as an absent, passive force in the literature).

- 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**.

Project resources

▸ **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

• **Professional Development Activity Kit**

- – For working with doctoral supervisors on their awareness of their PADC practices
- – To facilitate dialogue and discussion about PADC
- – To encourage awareness of the inclusivity implications of PADC practices

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:

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References

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