Exploring pre-application communications as an equity issue in doctoral education

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

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But first: what are pre-admissions doctoral communications?

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

- often emails from applicants to supervisors/POs or DPGRs.

- may include other forms too (video calls, phone calls, dropping by, approaches on social media)

- may be forwarded communications within departments (e.g. from DPGR to supervisor).

Our presentation today

- Sharing early insights and impressions from an institutional case study about pre-application doctoral communications (PADC) conducted at Warwick.

- Diversity and the researcher workforce
- EDI and doctoral admissions
- Pre-application as a 'gatekeeping' moment
- Introducing our study
- Sharing early findings
- Implications for practice

Diversity and the researcher workforce

- Recognition that people and culture are central elements to address to create a dynamic Research & Development sector.
  - Limited diversity of the researcher workforce has been identified as an area of national concern.
- Doctoral education is integral to researcher training, often the 'gateway'.
- But – 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 (Mattocks & Briscoe-Palmer, 2016)
- Doctoral admissions is a key point of intervention to develop a more equitable, inclusive, and diverse research workforce.

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

- ▶ 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 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 and blog posts).

▶ Equally, respondents to inquiries may make snap judgements, perhaps giving limited thought to their gatekeeping function.

▶ Little known about how various institutional players think about ethics involved in PADC and what it might mean to make inclusivity-aligned judgements.

Our study: #PADC_project

- Title: **Opening up the Black Box of Pre-application Doctoral Communications**
- Funded by the Research England Enhancing Research Culture Fund
- Emerges out of our own questions as supervisors, DPGRs who induct new supervisors (Co-I) and recent applicants (RAs).
- Explored in departmental development session on pre-application communications in Department of Education Studies.
- Emerges from previous research in the team (e.g. PI's work on discrimination & doctoral applications)
- Our project explores the practices of key stakeholders in relation to pre-application communications with potential doctoral applicants:
  - doctoral programme officers
  - supervisors
  - doctoral programme directors

"Dear Obese PhD Applicants": Twitter, Tumblr and the Contested Affective Politics of Fat Doctoral Embodiment

James Burford

Our project research objectives

▶ 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.

Participants and methods

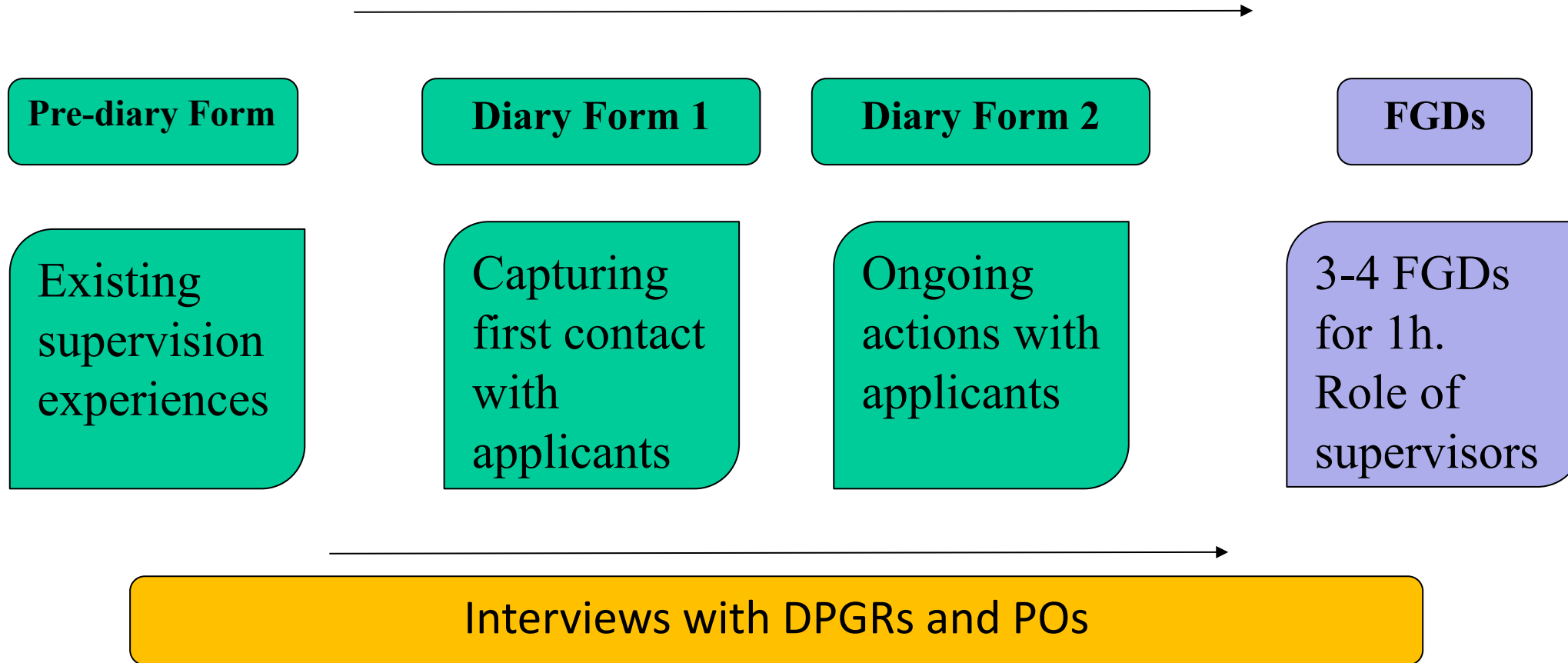| Multi-method design	
Semi-structured interviews	Solicited diaries & FGDs
Design • 1-hour semi-structured interviews • focus on i) the role in relation to postgraduate research, ii) the role in pre-application stage of doctoral admissions, iii) inclusivity practices **Participants** • 11 DPGRs, 8 doctoral programme officers • All participants drawn from across Warwick faculties	**Design** • 3 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

Participants and methods

6 weeks

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Pre-diary Form

Diary Form 1

Diary Form 2

FGDs

Existing supervision experiences

Capturing first contact with applicants

Ongoing actions with applicants

3-4 FGDs for 1h. Role of supervisors

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Interviews with DPGRs and POs

Our findings: A caveat

Our findings: Early impressions

▶ Departmental policies/practices for pre-application communications vary widely across Warwick.

▶ Depts place responsibility for PGR admissions on different role-holders.

▶ The role of PO also varies in terms of the extent of their involvement in decision-making processes.

▶ In general, email practices differ across all roles.

▶ The majority of the data suggests that pre-application communication is of great importance to the progression of an application.
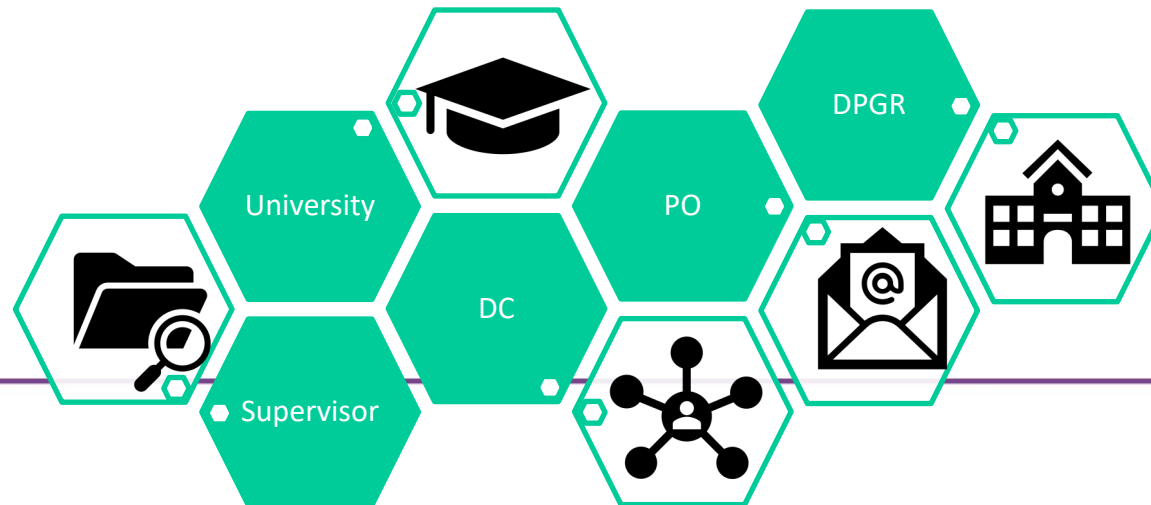
Our findings: Web review

What are the potential inclusivity-related challenges on the departmental webpages?

'Non-traditional' students may have more difficulty decoding tacit assumptions about 'how things work around here'. May need more information than others:

- Complicated web design and texts (language, long paragraphs and invalid links)

- From different backgrounds with different experiences (drafting a research proposal, communications)

- Decision-making process (evaluation criteria)

- EDI-related guidance and support (only found on 2 departmental webpages)

Our findings: Web review

For creating a more inclusive webpage/application process

Recommendations: making the What/Which/When/Where/How explicit

- To design the page with EDI-related awareness (audience, accessibility, various backgrounds);

- To make the pre-application information clear, e.g., 'Research Degree Application Checklist', essential steps for the application, 'who to contact', 'scholarship details' and 'what's next'.

- To consider: Images? Checking for English language accessibility?

Early impressions in relation to inclusion

▶ Some supervisors want to know how to enact EDI principles in pre-application communications.

▶ Some supervisors aren't sure how to think in nuanced ways about applicants who may require additional support (e.g. scholars at risk)

▶ Some supervisors worry that some applicants' communications might be privileged (e.g. in terms of their access to library resources/peers/networks to prepare proposals).

▶ Recruitment capacity/workload/busyness an issue: how does it shape supervisor inclination to engage with 'polished' communication over students who may need more support?

▶ Broadly, POs and DPGRs want to make more inclusive websites.

▶ Broadly, POs and DPGRs often discussed 'equal' treatment - concerns about whether applicants might have differentiated information/communication needs.

▶ Discussions about the privilege of 'dropping by' - very different for applicants from overseas.

▶ Minimal conversations about widening participation.

▶ Still early stages of analysis – so more comprehensive thoughts still to come!

Where to find out more

▶ Sign up for our workshops for supervisors and for DPGRs and POs (13th July). https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ces/research/current/padc/signup

▶ Look at our website here https://warwick.ac.uk/padc

▶ Follow along with the convo on Twitter using the hashtag #PADC_project

▶ Follow us on Twitter: @EmilyFrascatore @AhmadAkkad_ @Dangeni_ @jiaburford

Thank you!