

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

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Prior to making formal applications, potential doctoral students often send academics informal approaches. In making judgements about these inquiries, academics effectively become gatekeepers to doctoral education and indeed to the academic profession. Previous studies on doctoral recruitment inequalities have focused on formal admissions, but it is equally vital to understand the pre-application side of admissions. This institutional case study researched the perspectives of supervisors, doctoral programme directors and programme officers and took a multi-method approach, including solicited diaries, interviews and focus groups. In this paper, we situate pre-application communications in the wider sphere of doctoral admissions and inclusivity in doctoral education; share key findings about the role of the prospective supervisor in pre-application communications; identify key implications. The paper argues that pre-application communications are an important consideration in terms of inclusivity, and concomitantly that the pre-application space is difficult to regulate.

Full paper

Introduction

Doctoral admissions is a broad international area of enquiry. Within existing literature on doctoral admissions, exclusionary practices have been highlighted, such as how academic staff identities influence decision-making (Squire 2020) and the exclusionary nature of admissions criteria (Mountford et al., 2007; Potvin et al., 2017; Cano et al., 2018; Ghose et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2021).

Literature review

Within existing accounts, the pre-application stage has been neglected in favour of exploring formal procedures (Littleford et al. 2018). In studies that mention the pre-application stage, the supervisor that responds to pre-application approaches is frequently obscured as a human subject. For instance, Milkman et al.'s (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. In another instance, 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. The purpose of this paper, then, is to explore the role and experiences of supervisors who participate in pre-application doctoral communications.

The study

The empirical study underpinning this paper is an institutional case study of a UK Russell Group University. We sought to explore the actions and perspectives of different stakeholders in relation to pre-application doctoral communications, and their ensuing impact on inclusivity in doctoral education. Project stakeholders included supervisors, doctoral programme directors (DPGRs) and programme officers (POs). The study included a literature review and department

website review; a 6-week solicited online diary study with supervisors to understand their actions regarding pre-application communications (19 participants); individual interviews with POs (N=8) and DPGRs (N=11) to explore departmental pre-application practices; focus group discussions with supervisors (c. 3 groups with c. 10 supervisors in total - in progress at the time of writing) to discuss their practices and experiences of communicating with potential applicants. This presentation will focus on the supervisors' perspective from the diary study. Diary data (c. 60 entries, each entry focusing on one potential applicant) have been analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

Findings

The study sought to map forms of pre-application communications that supervisors receive. As expected, the most common communication form is email from potential applicants (73.8% of applicants). The referral of potential applicants from DPGRs or POs (23.1% of applicants) was the second most common form.

In addition to mapping communication forms, the study also examined actions taken by supervisors receiving an inquiry. 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.

The diaries captured supervisors' reflections on their actions in relation to pre-application communications. The data produce a picture of an ideal applicant against which these communications are measured. This 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, and demonstrating an understanding of what a doctorate involves. For example, Carol (Faculty of Social Sciences) commented in her diary on an applicant's email message: "It was a good email and the applicant communicated well in terms of knowledge and interests to pursue a PhD" (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 in pre-application communications. This is an important admissions stage where many are deterred from submitting an application. This paper explores the supervisors' perspective in pre-application communications, recognising the active role supervisors play in this process (as opposed to their construction in the literature as an absent, passive force). While there is variation in the role of the supervisor across national contexts and institutional configurations, 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.

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