131 The role of doctoral programme directors and professional services staff in managing pre-application doctoral communications (PADC): Enablers and gatekeepers in doctoral recruitment?

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Before submitting formal applications to study, prospective doctoral students often contact university staff to seek information and feedback. Despite such communication being commonplace in many disciplines, this stage of the admissions process remains informal and largely unregulated. Previous research on formal admissions revealed concerns about inequalities and exclusions that routinely occur. We argue it is necessary to extend consideration to inequalities that may occur at the pre-application stage. This paper reports on a multi-method institutional case study investigating the perspectives of supervisors, doctoral programme directors (DPGRs) and programme officers (POs). In this paper, we contextualise pre-application communications within wider admissions literature, share key findings about the role of DPGRs and POs in pre-application communications, and draw out key implications. The paper argues that pre-application communications are an important consideration in terms of inclusivity, and that a fuller understanding of all of those involved in screening and gatekeeping processes is needed.

Full paper

Introduction

Researchers have identified a host of concerns relating to inequities in doctoral admissions, such as access to admissions information (Dangeni et al., 2023), exclusionary admissions criteria (Ghose et al., 2018; Potvin et al., 2017), inconsistent evaluative processes (Squire, 2020), and ambiguities surrounding merit and diversity in admissions (Posselt, 2016). To date, the focus in the field is formal admissions procedures, with informal processes remaining neglected. Pre-application doctoral communications (PADC) are under-considered in doctoral admissions literature, with any existing studies tending to focus on communication between prospective applicants and potential supervisors (e.g. Milkman et al., 2015; Sabet et al., 2021; Spencer-Oatey, 2021). In contrast, there has been limited consideration of communication that may occur between prospective applicants and other departmental role-holders. The purpose of this paper is to explore the roles and experiences of these role holders: doctoral programme officers (POs) and directors of PGR (DPGRs).

The study

This paper emerges from a wider empirical study conducted at a UK Russell Group university which explored the actions and perspectives of different institutional actors in relation to PADC (www.warwick.ac.uk/PADC). The project investigated the actions and perspectives of supervisors, academic doctoral programme directors (DPGRs) and PGR programme officers (POs). This paper focuses on the two latter role holders, who were studied through online, semi-structured interviews with POs (N=8) and DPGRs (N=12) to explore departmental pre-application practices. They were asked questions about three broad themes: descriptions of their role in PGR admissions to map their responsibilities, practices and processes in their departments; questions about their role in PADC to understand the ways in which they engage with potential applicants; and questions about how their involvement in PADC practices may have EDI implications. This paper presents an inductive analysis of interview data. The study received ethical approval from the University of Warwick.

Findings

1. Nature of PADC

The study found that DPGRs and POs were primarily contacted by email, and that the key thematic foci of communications included queries about eligibility and entry requirements; funding and scholarships; how to identify a potential supervisor; proposals and research topic feedback; application timeframes; visas and healthcare issues; and accessibility. The roles that DPGRs played with regard to the pre-application process varied greatly across the institution, ranging from a high level of involvement to limited contact with potential applicants. POs also played a diverse and layered role in the pre-application doctoral communication process, and most were involved in managing the day-to-day queries that are sent to the programme's resource account from potential applicants and checking the applications as they come through the university admission portal. While taking distinct roles, both POs and DPGRs contributed to admissions decision making, such as by selecting whether or not to forward initial inquiries on or engage in in-depth dialogue.

1. Inequalities emerging through PADC

Many POs and DPGRs accepted that gatekeeping occurs during PADC. However, gatekeeping was not generally considered to be a negative or exclusionary process; rather, 'screening' was described as a necessary part of admissions. However, there were other gatekeeping points where EDI was more of an obvious concern, for example in relation to who was positioned to make these kinds of decisions, which types of communication were considered to be 'good enough' to be forwarded or responded to, and judgements made about suitability based on initial approaches alone. Both POs and DPGRs identified that mature students or professionals returning to study, applicants with different educational backgrounds, those with qualifications from non-UK institutions, and applicants from Global South contexts seem to encounter greater barriers in navigating PADC.

Discussion

In order to understand potential exclusions that occur within doctoral admissions, it is necessary to investigate the role of all departmental stakeholders in pre-application communications. While the perspectives of supervisors have had greater focus in the literature to date, this paper explores the perspectives of DPGRs and POs, recognising the active and complex role they can play in this process, as well as the diversity of arrangements across institutions, departments and disciplines. By researching the roles that DPGRs and POs play in PADC, this paper attempts to map a broader picture of the admissions ecosystem and highlight potential points at which minoritised and under-represented applicants might be excluded before even applying.

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