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From Merit to Competence: Reconfiguring Doctoral Admissions Through Equity Practice

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Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

This paper examines how equity is enacted in doctoral recruitment by analysing two UK initiatives. Using institutional ethnography, the two authors explore how competency-based admissions frameworks reshape dominant framings of merit and reshape institutional practices. We distinguish between merit—as a privilege-laden proxy—and competence, which reflects attributes critical to doctoral success such as resilience, curiosity, and communication. The findings show how equity-focused models reconfigure recruitment by (1) redefining assessment criteria, (2) operationalising inclusive processes, and (3) enabling cross-institutional adaptation. These frameworks challenge entrenched gatekeeping behaviours and extend recognition to a broader range of applicants without lowering standards. Equity in admissions emerges not only as a moral imperative but as a strategic necessity for research excellence. We argue that embedding competence-based approaches offers a scalable, practice-led route to reimagining excellence in doctoral education.

Full paper

Introduction

This paper uses institutional ethnography to examine how equity work is enacted in doctoral recruitment. Drawing on our dual roles as researchers and practitioners, we reflect on two UK initiatives: the Competency-Based Postgraduate Admissions Framework from the Equity in Doctoral Education through Partnership and Innovation (EDEPI) project, and the model developed by the Centre for Doctoral Training in Diversity-Led Mission-Driven Research (DiveIn CDT).

We argue that equitable admissions must be seen not only as a moral imperative that improves doctoral education and institutional culture, but also as a strategic necessity.

Inclusive recruitment addresses systemic exclusion while strengthening research: diverse cohorts are associated with improved problem-solving, greater innovation, and increased societal relevance.

We explore not only *what* changes when equity is prioritised in admissions but *how* institutional practices are reorganised in response. Competency-based models challenge dominant definitions of merit, reshape decision-making processes, and enable new norms across institutional boundaries. Our findings illustrate how such frameworks can disrupt entrenched gatekeeping behaviours (Posselt, 2016) and expand recognition of academic potential.

Conceptual Framework

We distinguish between *merit* and *competence* in doctoral recruitment. While *merit* is often treated as an objective standard, it is closely linked to privilege- signalled by proxies such as degree classification, publication record, or institutional prestige. These indicators frequently reflect access to resources more than academic potential.

In contrast, *competence* refers to the demonstrated ability to undertake doctoral work and includes motivation, resilience, communication, and analytical thinking- attributes critical to success in research yet not captured by traditional academic metrics.

Following Cegolon (2022), we treat merit as a socially constructed and non-neutral category. Reframing admissions through a competency lens allows for broader, more inclusive understandings of excellence, and supports the diversification of access without compromising standards.

Methodology

Our institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005) is grounded in our active involvement in EDEPI and DiveIn as sites through which we analyse institutional cultures, routines, and forms of resistance. We draw on reflective fieldnotes and informal observations (July 2024–April 2025) to explore how equity-focused frameworks were introduced, received, and adapted.

Rather than treating equity work as a fixed set of policies, we focus on the situated processes through which competency models were operationalised; namely how decisions were made, criteria redefined, and values negotiated. This approach reveals the often-invisible routines that sustain or disrupt exclusionary norms in doctoral recruitment.

Discussion

We identify three interrelated ways in which competency-based models reshaped institutional admissions.

1. Redefining merit through structured frameworks

Both the EDEPI and DiveIn models introduced structured criteria (curiosity, collaboration, and resilience) that challenged traditional proxies for merit. These frameworks enabled institutions to rearticulate what constitutes excellence, positioning competence as a counterweight to hierarchies based on academic pedigree.

2. Reconfiguring recruitment as institutional practice

Operationalising these models required deliberate interventions into admissions processes: redesigning selection criteria, training panels, and structuring question- and problem-based assessments. These practices shifted emphasis from past achievement to future potential. While concerns were raised about compromising 'excellence', the negotiation of new values (e.g. interdisciplinarity, cohort learning) illustrated how institutional cultures can evolve toward inclusion.

3. Cross-institutional adaptation and mutual reinforcement

DiveIn's retrospective mapping to EDEPI demonstrated how established frameworks can be adapted across institutional contexts. This process not only validated existing practices but also extended the framework through context-specific additions. The mutual recognition between the two initiatives demonstrates the potential of practitioner-led, cross-institutional collaboration to drive sector-wide change. Such bottom-up practice-sharing offers a scalable route to embedding equity as a normative principle in doctoral admissions.

Conclusion

Following Lamont's (2009) argument that academic judgement is negotiated rather than neutral, we show how such negotiations are shaped by institutional contexts, values, and constraints. This involves a need to unveil the often invisible institutional routines that sustain some exclusionary academic norms in doctoral recruitment.

Competency-based models are more than technical fixes; they offer a new way to define and evaluate excellence. Our findings reveal how frameworks like EDEPI and DiveIn challenge exclusionary practices by embedding equity at the level of criteria and process. While resistance is inevitable, it is through negotiation, adaptation and collaboration that institutional norms begin to shift.

Equity in doctoral recruitment is thus both a moral and a practical imperative. It diversifies the talent pool, strengthens research outcomes, and enhances the sector's capacity to address complex global challenges. Realising these benefits requires sustained reflection, institutional commitment, and a collective willingness to reimagine what excellence looks like.