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Improving the clarity of doctoral admissions webpage information: a UK institutional case study

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores data from an institutional case study on doctoral admissions at one UK university. Using a multi-part design, this paper first shares the results of a desk review of institutional webpages, and then reports on empirical research with academic directors of postgraduate research ($n = 12$), doctoral programme officers ($n = 8$), doctoral supervisors ($n = 19$), and doctoral researchers ($n = 15$) on their perceptions of, and interactions with, doctoral admissions webpage information. The webpage review identified seven categories of information departmental doctoral admissions webpages typically convey. The study reveals that doctoral admissions webpages have complex functions and diverse intended audiences. We document the key activity of webpage work and how this is divided. We also highlight potential information gaps for certain audiences. Our paper aims to contribute insights to create more transparent and accessible doctoral admissions information for all potential applicants. We conclude by sharing recommendations to enhance the quality of such information.

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Admissions; doctoral education; doctoral supervision; webpage information



Introduction

Amid a global context where doctoral education is expanding, the UK has witnessed a sizeable increase in the number of doctoral students (Taylor and Wisker 2023). Despite growing participation, doctoral admission remains competitive, with more applicants than there are available places. While increases in the participation rates of women have been recorded (Taylor and Wisker 2023), there remain profound participation gaps for people from ethnic minority backgrounds (AdvanceHE 2022; GOV.UK 2022; HEFCE 2016), those living with a disability (Mattocks and Briscoe-Palmer 2016) and Roma students (Roberts 2021). Within the UK there has been growing recognition that in order to meet national objectives to establish the country as a 'global science superpower' (DBEIS 2021, 5), there is an imperative to train and retain a research workforce that is more representative of the society it serves.

Within this context, doctoral education researchers have paid increasing attention to a range of issues which disadvantage particular social groups (Lindner 2020; NEON 2022). More recently, scholars have considered equity debates in relation to doctoral admissions (Posselt 2016; Smith McGloin et al. 2024), addressing concerns that 'the process of finding out

about, applying for and gaining admission to post-graduate research study is barely understood' (Wakeling and Kyriacou 2010, 8). As part of a wider research team, we have contributed to these debates, seeking to understand how pre-application doctoral communications, that is 'communications that potential doctoral applicants and university staff engage in prior to a potential applicant making a formal application for doctoral study' may be an important informal site where doctoral gatekeeping occurs (Burford et al. 2024, 5). While recent studies have developed a clearer picture of how doctoral applicants seek and share information (Kier-Byfield, Burford, and Henderson 2023; Kim and Spencer-Oatey 2021a; 2021b), it remains unclear whether the transparency of doctoral admissions webpage information is a participation barrier, particularly for minoritised doctoral applicants.

Our present study addresses this concern. We take institutional webpages as key sites where information for potential applicants is conveyed, also understanding that those without existing academic networks may not have other reliable sources to guide their doctoral applications. A wealth of previous studies have investigated the accessibility of university websites, often evaluating web content using guidelines developed to ensure websites and other electronic

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documents are accessible to people with disabilities (Alahmadi and Drew 2017; Campoverde-Molina, Luján-Mora, and Valverde 2023). Our work extends these considerations, with a particular interest in the *quality of the information*, seeking to understand if it *adequately describes the key steps required to apply* for doctoral study.

Drawing on data generated in a single-institutional case study (Ornelas and Solorzano 2004) of one Russell Group university in the UK, this paper explores what doctoral admissions information is currently presented on university webpages, how this information is developed and maintained and who does this work, and how a variety of institutional stakeholders perceive the transparency and wider quality of these webpages. The paper is guided by the following research questions:

- Research Question 1: What doctoral admissions web content is presented, and how consistently is such information presented across a single higher education institution?
- Research Question 2: Who undertakes the work of developing and maintaining doctoral admissions web information?
- Research Question 3: How do key stakeholders including doctoral students, supervisors, Directors of Postgraduate Research (DPGRs) and PGR programme officers (POs) use and perceive the quality of doctoral admissions web content?

Our paper begins by introducing our wider study. In order to answer research question 1, we present a review of institutional webpages on doctoral admissions, where we identify key topics that were covered on department webpages and their consistency across the institution. Following this, we address research question 2 and research question 3, by presenting findings of our empirical study with key staff and student stakeholders. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings and identifying key policy and practice recommendations to improve the transparency of doctoral admissions webpage information.

The study

This study comprised two stages. Stage one involved a webpage review of public-facing information¹ for doctoral applicants between 14 March and 9 June 2022. At this institution, doctoral admissions information is held both on central pages managed by the doctoral college, and departmentally, where admissions are managed. Central webpages provide a checklist on how to apply for postgraduate degrees at the institution, and an 'application portal' which focuses on the essentials

such as writing a personal statement, finding a supervisor and a guide to references. In general, the central webpages tend to be generic and documentation-orientated. This study is primarily focused on departmental doctoral admissions pages where more specific guidance is offered. The departmental webpages to be reviewed were first accessed via a list on the Doctoral College website. This was then cross-checked by checking each departmental PGR admission page to ensure that a full list of programmes was confirmed. As a result, 34 departments were identified for the webpage review. Our primary aims in conducting this review were to: (i) describe the nature of pre-application information on university web pages, and (ii) understand the level of consistency of such information across the institution.

Stage two involved a multi-year (2022–2023) empirical study, which conducted online semi-structured interviews with: (i) Directors of PGR ($n = 12$), and (ii) programme officers ($n = 8$) about departmental PGR pre-application practices, including information on departmental webpages. The study also involved online semi-structured interviews with (iii) doctoral students ($n = 15$) to understand their experiences navigating pre-application doctoral information, the resources and supports they relied on, and the challenges they faced. Additionally, (iv) a solicited diary study ($n = 19$) was conducted with PGR supervisors to understand their actions and reflective processes in relation to their pre-application contact with doctoral applicants (e.g. the extent to which they used webpage information to answer inquiries). Finally, (v) focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with a total of 11 supervisors from the diary study, which was the number of diary participants who agreed to participate (see Table 1).

Data analysis

For the webpage review, information was collected from public-facing university websites and stored on an Excel spreadsheet. It was analysed using thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun 2017). A list of themes about the pre-application doctoral information was developed, and an assessment was made as to their consistency (see details below), in order to address RQ1 and describe the informational content of departmental webpages on doctoral admissions.

Regarding data processing, the interviews and FGDs were auto-transcribed by Microsoft Teams and then checked manually by researchers. The Qualtrics diary forms were exported and then stored in an online spreadsheet. The interview and FGD transcripts and open-text responses in the diary were then subjected to thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun 2017) for the purposes of this article.

Table 1. An overview of the research design and participants.

Participant Group	Faculty	Participants	Method	Duration
Directors of PGR	Arts	3	Semi-structured interviews	Approx. 1 hour
	Social Sciences	4		
	Science	5		
Total	12			
Doctoral Programme Officers	Arts	2	Semi-structured interviews	Approx. 1 hour
	Social Sciences	3		
	Science	3		
Total	8			
Doctoral Supervisors	Arts	2	Solicited individual diaries and 3 focus groups (11 participants)	6-week diary study Approx. 1-hour focus group
	Social Sciences	15		
	Science	2		
Total	19			
Doctoral Students	Arts	5	Semi-structured interviews	Approx. 1 hour
	Social Sciences	5		
	Science	5		
Total	15			

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study, beginning with Stage One (the webpage review), followed by Stage Two (the empirical study).

Webpage review

After a closer examination of departmental webpages ($n = 34$), we identified seven broad categories of doctoral admissions information (see Table 2). Once we identified these seven categories of information, the research team then reviewed and evaluated the consistency and the level of detail of the information across the webpages.

The seven categories (in order from most to least common) are: (1) programme information, (2)

admissions information, (3) scholarships and funding information, (4) information on identifying a potential supervisor, (5) information on drafting a research proposal, (6) outlining the decision-making process, (7) Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)-related information. Some categories were highly consistent across departments, such as programme information, which typically introduced the department, outlined the programme specifications, and provided applicants with a point of contact. Admissions information (e.g. about the timeframe and process) and scholarship and funding information were all found across all departmental webpages. Despite this, the level of detail varied considerably. Some departments simply linked applicants to central university application guidance, whereas others tailored this information to account for department processes and procedures.

Table 2. Overview of webpage information categories.

No.	Category (nature of Pre-application information)	Consistency across Departments (no. departments included this information)	Level of Detail
1	Programme information: Department introduction Basic programme details Doctoral programme specifications Email contact information	(34)	All provided department specific information
2	Admission information: Admissions timeframes Admissions guidance and process	(34)	24 signposted to central pages 10 department-specific guidance
3	Scholarships and funding: Scholarships and funding at the department level Link to generic university funding and scholarship page	(34)	10 signposted to central pages 24 department-specific guidance
4	Identifying a potential supervisor: Link to staff webpages to browse their profiles and encourage applicants to contact potential supervisors directly Applicants are encouraged to contact the DPGR Applicants apply for a project-based doctorate	(31 out of 34)	31 department-specific guidance 3 no guidance
5	Drafting a research proposal: Central university portal for application advice and guidance A webpage or a link to department/discipline-specific guidance	(28 out of 34)	7 signposted to central pages 21 department-specific guidance 6 no guidance
6	Decision-making process	(12 out of 34)	12 department-specific guidance 22 no guidance
7	EDI-related information	(2 out of 34)	1 signposted to central pages 1 department-specific guidance 32 no guidance

Other categories were more variable, such as whether information was provided on identifying a potential supervisor, with 31 departments providing specific information and the other 3 departments not providing such information. Additionally, information about drafting a research proposal was found in 28 departments, among which 21 departments provided specific information and seven signposted applicants to the university's central application portal. Two categories were rarely found across the webpages. The first was an outline of the admissions decision-making process (e.g. timelines and procedure for decision-making). Our review found only 12 departments provided such information. Secondly, EDI-related information was found on just two department webpages, with one providing department-specific information and the other signposting to institutional EDI guidance. The majority of the departments ($n = 32$) did not include any specific EDI-related information or links to support for potential applicants.

Empirical findings

The complex functions of doctoral admissions webpages

Across our data, participants highlighted the importance of doctoral admissions webpage information. One participant described the webpage as 'obviously a really important window for the department' (Chris, DPGR), and another noted that it should present a 'good impression from the outside' (Bluebell, PO). Participants recognised that they are important sites for attracting potential applicants. Equally, in some departments, admissions webpages were positioned as speaking to multiple audiences: 'we have two things ... we're not only trying to attract students ... we're also trying to attract organisations to work with, to be able to fund our students. So, it's kind of two-tiered effectively' (David, DPGR).

Participants emphasised the high importance of the accuracy of webpage content. As Olivia (DPGR) noted, 'it's something we've paid more attention to in recent years ... you know, we've thought about a lot of different aspects'. Many participants identified the internal benefits of transparent information: 'it's where people tend to go first and get the information they need, and also making our lives a little bit easier in terms of not having to repeat the same information' (Olivia, DPGR). Ensuring that doctoral admissions webpage information was transparent was identified as a priority, particularly by DPGRs and POs.

Despite broad agreement that doctoral admissions webpage information ought to be accurate, participants in our study expressed how challenging it can be to convey an appropriate level of information. Chris (DPGR) outlined how 'bewildering' it can be to

translate a complex institution to prospective applicants: 'I don't think it's always quite clear from the outside how these bits of the university and external bodies are joined together'. Emma (DPGR) agreed that communicating across organisational webpages, central and departmental, was challenging. Luke (DPGR) warned of the likelihood of applicants getting 'lost in the all the branches and the thickets of all the different web pages and links.' Anna (DPGR) emphasised the high stakes of webpage information, pointing out that even a minor clarification in terminology can be the difference between recruiting an international PGR student or 'putting them off'.

In contrast, DPGR Alex argued that doctoral admissions webpage information was 'quite straightforward. But they [potential applicants] just have to make the effort, you know, like to understand the process'. This perception, that applicants do not read webpages thoroughly, was commonly expressed across the dataset. As Alex continues, 'I believe that they [students] don't read it. Yeah, most of the time' (Alex, DPGR). In her diary, Stephanie (supervisor) also shared that from her communication with a potential applicant that 'the candidate erroneously assumed we chose projects for PhD students and hadn't engaged with any of the information on our research web pages at all'. At times, it appeared that the ability to locate information on a departmental webpage was viewed as a tacit test of an applicant's doctoral admissibility. Arguably, we see evidence of this in the comments of Emma (DPGR), who noted that there was an assumption that:

If a student is a serious candidate for a PhD, then they should have already been doing some reading and research in a particular in that particular area, and they should know who are the people that work, you know who are the academics who are working in that field and then who would then be the best potential supervisors.

As POs are often responsible for dealing with queries that arrive in a resource account, they expressed the highest levels of frustration that applicants could or did not locate information on webpages. As Bluebell (PO) notes: 'if you're applying for something that you're gonna spend 3 1/2, four years, and it is a *research degree*, I would assume that people would do their *research* before they apply'. Throughout the dataset, POs identified the costs that direct applicant queries had on their time: 'The information is there to be found and kind of it's universal kind of accessing webpages to find information and we've tried to make it as clear as possible, so you do get the feeling that sometimes people are wasting your time' (Rebecca, PO).

The activity and division of webpage work

All participant groups in this project interacted with doctoral admissions webpage information. PGRs

most commonly interacted as applicants, and supervisors frequently referred applicants to department webpages or included links to department webpages in template emails they developed to manage student enquiries. Supervisors were also commonly responsible for updating their own professional profile pages, which applicants use when searching for potential supervisors. However, the two stakeholders that had the most frequent interactions with departmental webpage information were DPGRs and POs.

We identified five different types of doctoral admissions webpage activity that DPGRs and POs commonly undertook, namely: *creating content, reviewing content, seeking and incorporating feedback, maintaining webpages, and revamping them*. For Kate (PO), her DPGR would more often create webpage material, and she would be 'sort of the person checking the typos' and ensuring that duplications were eliminated 'I will sometimes send text back to (DPGR) to say, oh, we shouldn't go into this bit too much. You know, we should refer to the donkey's mouth [central webpages]'.

Participants noted that these pages required regular maintenance: 'We update them every year' (Anna, DPGR). Sometimes this regular review and updating of webpages was accomplished by the DPGR and PO working together, other times, as Olivia (DPGR) reports, it emerged as an action point from a PGR committee meeting and was actioned by an administrator.

However, updates to departmental webpages were not only completed on an annual schedule (e.g. to update deadlines). Olivia (DPGR) described the difference between 'tweaks' which might be done on an ad hoc basis, and 'overhauls' which would involve more extended revision to webpage materials. Anna (DPGR) explains the process of undertaking 'tweaks':

the student asked this question very early on before the website was updated, but I, you know, there wasn't, I wouldn't change something that was key to our policy. But a small correction, I think it's something that we could certainly add and update (Anna, DPGR).

DPGRs also reported processes of deeper review of departmental webpages. Sometimes this included reviews across all levels of study, as in this example that Chris was involved in:

We worked very closely with the marketing team and this this was part of a broader strategy that the department had across all our student bodies, all our student intakes ... So as a result of that, we completely revamped all the pages for prospective admissions (Chris, DPGR).

Our data also revealed practices of seeking and incorporating user feedback on webpages. This could be either ad hoc, or formalised, as in this example:

And we do ask for feedback from applicants who actually get offers and the pre-arrival website that I was talking about has a questionnaire it to say and is

there any other information that would have been useful at the point of application (Fiona, PO)

When examining the activities that DPGRs and POs undertook, it was not possible to discern clear boundaries when it came to the management and administration of admissions information on departmental webpages. Despite occupying distinct roles, our data reveals that DPGRs and POs did not necessarily have clear divisions of labour. Often DPGRs and POs acted as a pair, with one drafting and another cross-checking. However, our data revealed that either party could perform either role. For example, Luke acted as a 'checker' of webpage information that was drafted by the PO:

We did work on revising our PGR webpages a few years ago ... So that sort of thing would sit, so (anonymised) our PGR officer would be responsible for implementing that but he would, he shares potential updates to the webpage or guidance document or anything like that with me and I then give feedback and approve them before he updates webpages (Luke, DPGR).

However, another DPGR revealed quite a different process:

I took the lead in design and the process but then the details in terms of compliance with administrative requirements were done by her (PO) (Marc, DPGR)

Beyond POs and DPGRs, our study found that webpage work was often a collective effort. It sometimes involved the central university marketing team and information and technology departments when a redesign was needed, or a PGR level of study committee who might suggest changes be made.

Information gaps

Participants identified a number of gaps in webpage information, which is a key finding in order to address the EDI concerns motivating this paper. PGR participants in this study emphasised how heavily they relied on admissions webpage information to navigate toward doctoral study. Despite this, Zack (PGR) perceived it as 'almost so generic as to be meaningless. You know, speak to a supervisor, then apply to the university. [laughs] What does that even mean?'. Other students noted a lack of sufficient clarity due to multiple web pages across institutional/departmental and internal/external levels. PGRs in our study reported seeking support from 'knowledgeable others' such as admissions tutors, or friends and community members to decode such information, especially those who were first-in-family to doctoral study.

Of concern were some webpages that PGRs believed were intentionally obscured to limit opportunities to a chosen group of students:

I found that a lot of them were sort of hidden in bits of a website where you wouldn't look. So I just sort of went out and asked really ... So one of my personal tutors had this sort of internal fund within the lab for a PhD student and he put a sort of, a description and sort of an application page on like the [department] website. And he sent it to me, the link, to apply for it, um, but ... if I didn't use the link, if I tried to type in his name and PhD into Google or even just like PhD opportunities ... his PhD [funding opportunity] wouldn't be on the page ... And, yeah, it felt, it felt weird. (Gale, PGR)

Across our study, international students were also identified as website users who might struggle to make sense of unexplained UK terminology in doctoral admissions webpage information. Anna (DPGR) highlighted the importance of clarifying 'some of the terminology that is used because International students feel that the bureaucracy towards them can be, you know. It's forbidding'. Supervisors considered that webpage information to support international applicants also requires care, such as:

How to approach a supervisor. You know, clearly we've all been saying the same thing, like we're getting into our students that don't have a clue how to go about this and it's really detrimental for their application. You know, if it's not written anywhere for them, clearly under advice for international students on the application process and the culture of supervision in the UK (Participant 2, Supervisor FG2).

Other student cohorts, such as non-traditional students and neurodiverse students, were also identified as encountering information gaps when it comes to doctoral admissions webpage information. For example, Charlotte (DPGR) argued that it was important to 'call in' non-traditional students explicitly:

I know the university is very keen to be more inclusive to encourage those from non-traditional backgrounds. But when it comes to the course information, there isn't anything on there that encourages that or says that.

Equally, Lakeside (PGR) identified that as a neurodiverse student, having sufficient information about a funded project was essential in order to address rejection sensitivity:

I wanted to make sure they were the right fit and that again that comes from, I guess, neurodiversity. Like, I wanna make sure I'm gonna fit in with the research culture and with the supervisors and the people leading the project and find out what it was.

Concluding thoughts and recommendations

This paper has reported on the findings of an institutional case study in the UK, in order to gain insights into what doctoral admissions material is presented on departmental webpages, who undertakes the work of

developing and maintaining this content, and how various stakeholders perceive this material, including any observable gaps. While the focus of our study was on webpages, it is important to note that even the clearest webpage may not meet the information needs or preferences of all doctoral students, and that some students may prefer to access information in other ways (e.g. by contacting staff via email). The key contribution made by this study is its articulation of the importance of webpage information in the navigation of doctoral admissions, especially in a context where there are ongoing concerns about limited doctoral diversity. Framed by these debates, we undertook this study with the knowledge that sufficiently available and information is key to reducing possible barriers to doctoral admission that are within the immediate control of departments. Resulting from this study, we have identified recommendations for key stakeholders involved in developing, maintaining and using doctoral admission web information.

At the institutional level (e.g. Doctoral College/ Graduate School)

We recommend institutions develop a strategy surrounding the wider pre-application stage of doctoral admissions, including strategies for communicating relevant webpage information and ensuring transparency. At the institutional level, we recommend that responsible units share information with relevant staff (including professional services staff and supervisors) about institutional doctoral admissions, to ensure these are accurately captured and conveyed. We also recommend that opportunities to share practice around webpage information are created, so that best practices can be shared across departments.

For departments (e.g. DPGRs, programme officers)

We recommend the formalisation of departmental actions around webpages, including establishing a clear purpose, clear division of roles, and appropriately planning for the management of information (i.e. designing, maintaining, reviewing and revamping with planned checks in calendar). We also recommend departments consult with relevant staff about the webpages (especially those staff who receive a large volume of admissions email inquiries). We also recommend that departmental staff seek feedback from PGRs when revising admissions web information (e.g. via student representative committees). Having mechanisms to collect ad hoc and formal feedback may also be valuable.

Some recommendations for departments are around common problems with webpage layouts. It

may be useful to avoid avoiding multiple tabs/sub-pages, vague language, long paragraphs and invalid links. On the other hand, it may be helpful to display a checklist or flowchart that clearly outlines the pre-admission process, including the time frame and decision-making process and who is involved. Departments should also consider ways to create clear, transparent and accessible webpages, considering the specific informational needs of different applicants (e.g. first-in-family students, international students, neurodivergent students, etc.). Departments could consider specifically indicating their welcome to underrepresented applicant groups (e.g. disabled students, students from ethnic minority backgrounds, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students).

For supervisors

We recommend supervisors update their personal profiles, clearly stating supervision interests and capacity, to assist applicants to make enquiries. It is also helpful to speak with colleagues and students about their experiences and perceptions on how to make the webpage information transparent and effective and share best practices back to departmental leads. We also recommend that supervisors consult webpage information themselves carefully in order to ensure they pass on accurate information to applicants (e.g. around scholarship or admissions deadlines).

Note

1. The pages reviewed are departmental guidelines for doctoral admissions, not individual supervisor pages.

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