

Entry

Recruiting Doctoral Students: Getting It Right for All Involved

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Definition: This entry explores the different ways in which students are accepted onto doctoral degrees such as PhDs and professional doctorates. The processes involved are referred to in this entry, and in much of the policy-related and research-informed literature, as “recruitment and selection”. These processes are worthy of attention given that they are high stakes for students themselves, those who guide and advise them, known as academic “supervisors”, and for academic communities more broadly. The entry acknowledges that recruitment and selection processes differ between institutions and across geographical contexts. The entry draws upon research studies and policy documents which relate to recruitment and selection practices from local, national and international contexts.

Keywords: recruitment; selection; doctoral; student; postgraduate; access

1. Introduction

In the research literature on doctoral education, the issues surrounding student recruitment and selection tend to receive less attention than areas such as concerns about lower-than-ideal completion rates and student–supervisor relationships [1,2]. Local, national and international policy documents address recruitment and selection in terms of quality assurance, specifying target numbers and access and equality issues [3–5]. This entry provides a discussion of the challenges raised in a sample of these two types of sources (research-informed and policy-related) and considers the needs of students, academic staff and wider academic communities in getting the processes of recruitment and selection right, a key component of providing an effective doctoral experience for students, staff and academic communities [6].

The sources cited are taken from contexts around the world and so the distinctive priorities and issues are available for consideration. There is no suggestion, however, that local contexts prioritise the same issues as needing attention, or that the issues manifest themselves in the same ways. The globalisation of higher education [7] is recognised, and the aspiration of initiatives such as the Hannover Recommendations for Doctoral Education [5] to have a global reach is acknowledged.

Pathways towards a doctorate differ both within the same institution but also from context to context [8], and it is important to recognise that recruitment and selection processes and challenges may diverge according to the needs of the pathway. Professional doctorate, traditional PhD and PhD by publication are the most common pathways [8], while differing modes of supervision such as collaborative supervision from both experts in universities and those in industry are on offer in some institutions and contexts. These diverse pathways and the associated implications for recruitment and selection of doctoral applicants are included within the focus of this entry.

With these informing sources, the entry explores the following areas: (i) institutional expectations of doctoral applicants and critiques of their recruitment and selection processes; (ii) access issues including disability, race, gender, social class and recommendations for action; (iii) student mobilities and cultural and linguistic diversity; (iv) a concluding summary of current issues and future areas for exploration and development. By exploring research and policy into doctoral recruitment and selection in terms of areas (i) to (iii) above,



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it is intended that the entry will generate areas for future innovative practice and research which may serve to inform our understanding of wider issues affecting doctoral education such as low completion rates [1].

2. Institutional Expectations of Doctoral Applicants

Application for a doctoral place at a university may involve one or more of the following elements: an interview [4], submitted evidence of previous academic achievements [8,9], a written research proposal for a self-defined study [4], evidence of prior professional expertise (for applicants to a professional doctorate) [8], evidence of high-level language skills in the language(s) required, where appropriate, by the institution [10], one or more academic references and an application to join an existing research project [8]. Although each institution may publish entry requirements such as these, it is regularly noted in the literature that a high degree of subjectivity can be seen at play in the recruitment and selection processes [11], a point which is explored in more detail here.

Expectations of doctoral applicants have been criticised in both the policy-related and research-informed literature as being both opaque, on the one hand, and variable from institution to institution, on the other [4,12]. Part of the critique of such opaque regulations comes from the observation that, to an outsider to the higher education sector, the requirements for doctoral study may be tacit or taken for granted [11] or may appear to be following the rules of a game which is not explained [13]. In the words of McCulloch and Thomas [14], those involved in recruitment of doctoral candidates can refer to their desire to recruit the “brightest and best” applicants [14]; however, such phrases can be difficult to interpret for those outside of university environments and, more specifically, for applicants. Two recent works [15,16] have highlighted how the lack of clarity in doctoral application processes can serve to maintain the status quo of who gains access to doctoral study. An example of this is given [15] as being when potential applicants already known to doctoral supervisors are informally approached and encouraged to apply for doctoral study.

Variability in doctoral recruitment and selection processes between institutions and contexts can be seen in the different ways in which applicants experience the interview process. Those involved in interview processes can include all or some of the following: academic administrators, academic researcher leaders, likely directors of studies and supervisors [4].

The issue of variability in terms of recruitment and selection processes is addressed in the Hannover Recommendations [5], which call for transparency and accountability for all stakeholders in doctoral education.

Institutions recruiting doctoral students have also been criticised for having unrealistically high expectations of applicants on entry to their programme. This phenomenon has been named the ‘academic superheroes’ effect [17], which suggests skills expected on completion of a doctoral degree are, instead, being asked for as a requirement at the entry point. The challenge faced by universities is how to identify and select applicants with the potential to achieve success in a doctoral programme, while allowing for each applicant to develop during their time spent studying. The problem with having seemingly high expectations at the entry point is that attention is not given to institutional responsibilities to support each student’s developing transferable skills during the process of studying for a doctorate [18]. The work of Herschberg et al. [19] also contributes to this critique of institutions in their expectations of doctoral students and early career researchers [11]. The authors explore how discourses of internationalisation and the concept of excellence, as evidenced in recruitment and selection processes, can serve to reproduce existing inequalities in the academy. Further exploration of equality and access issues relating to recruitment and selection processes is provided in Section 3 of this entry.

The status of doctoral students in their institution varies from context to context, and these differing statuses have an impact on the framing of recruitment processes. One notable distinction is whether institutions conceptualise doctoral students as employees or as students. A study by Mantai and Marrone [18] explores recruitment in contexts in

which a doctoral student is treated as an employee within the higher education institution. This means that recruitment to a doctoral position is through a job advertisement, and this provides higher education researchers with an ideal source for exploring the explicit expectations of different disciplines, institutions and any changes over time. The study by Mantai and Marrone [18] takes a data-based approach to identifying and analysing the skills, qualifications and attributes required of doctoral applicants using job advertisements as their source material. A text analysis of the content of a sample of job advertisements is used to generate a taxonomy of skills required. The taxonomy covers the soft skills (e.g., communication skills) and hard skills (e.g., specific research skills) listed in doctoral job advertisements, and these were seen to change over time and across disciplinary and geographic contexts within Europe. The trends reported in the research showed how digital skills and the soft skills of interpersonal and communication skills became increasingly prominent over time. Mantai and Marrone conclude with the recommendation that greater transparency will be beneficial for doctoral applicants in terms of skills expected on entry, but also, greater clarity on how skills developed will be embedded in the doctoral programme itself.

The risks, both to potential students and to universities, of having a recruitment and selection process that is unclear or only accessible to those with inside information are considered below in a section on access issues.

3. Access Issues including Disability, Race, Gender and Social Class

Moving on from the published requirements of institutions recruiting doctoral candidates, it is important to consider how effective those processes are in terms of facilitating access for a broad selection of students, acknowledged in various policy documents as a priority [5]. The accessibility agenda is explored in the work of Pásztor and Wakeling [20] in relation to social class and doctoral education. Their study takes the form of a qualitative study of doctoral students' voices on their experience of barriers encountered during their studies. The findings cover barriers such as lack of access to funding and its impact on the likelihood of timely completion of the study. However, the authors also reflect on the nature of doctoral research undertaken and they link this to the need for the successful recruitment of a diverse doctoral student cohort. This argument moves beyond the imperative to achieve fair and equitable access to doctoral study by proposing that there are research topics not being explored and voices not being heard within doctoral scholarship when the recruitment and selection processes are not inclusive.

Studies within North America have explored practices which support pro-active recruitment and selection in doctoral education to ensure inclusive cohorts are achieved [9,21–23]. Strategies provided in these works include the consideration of the pre-doctoral phase of education and how effectively it is, or can be, used to provide widening participation for doctoral candidates [22]. Dieker et al. [22] state that if universities aspire to welcome candidates from a diversity of backgrounds, then attention needs to be paid to the details of, for example, how interested people can be transformed into applicants. A role for mentoring is proposed as a way of supporting this transformation to application in the pre-doctoral phase. Further approaches are presented which include the use of current and former students as a resource to recruit and support potential applicants, the use of keeping-in-touch strategies such as the circulation of newsletters and the organisation of campus visits to make the space and the people more familiar. The emphasis of these initiatives is on the proactive approach of the institution and faculty members in reaching out to potential doctoral candidates rather than relying on existing practices to achieve effective and inclusive recruitment and selection.

Further recommendations for attracting a more diverse doctoral student community are set out in the work of Gillani et al. [21], who also advocate for the importance of mentoring for equity through university recruitment and selection processes. Focusing specifically on the context of doctoral programmes for social work practitioners/researchers, Gillani et al. [21] note that universities have a responsibility to the social work profession in

supporting a diverse set of professionals as the next generation. The way in which mentors and mentees are matched is discussed, and considerations such as targeted mentoring are proposed whereby matching is undertaken with shared characteristics in mind so that mentees benefit from the experience of a mentor who has experienced similar life circumstances.

Mentoring for diversity at the pre-doctoral stage is supported also by Ghose et al. [9], who critique existing recruitment and selection practices, such as blind peer review, which, they say, serve to reproduce the status quo in terms of who does, or does not, gain access to a doctoral programme. Ghose et al. [9] advocate for a multi-level response to address both institutional and structural barriers experienced by some applicants to doctoral programmes. Their consideration of these barriers encompasses prior educational experiences throughout the learner's life and not only the time immediately prior to the application for doctoral study.

A more specific university role to support a widening of the participation in doctoral study is explored in the work of Griffin and Muñiz [24], who focus on the work of the Graduate Diversity Officer (GDO) and the potential for their facilitation of diverse students, in terms of race and ethnicity, into the doctoral recruitment process [24]. Griffin and Muñiz note that the GDO could play a greater role in ensuring diversity in the applicant pool for doctoral studies. The GDO could foster activities such as outreach to underserved populations and provide more liaison with academic colleagues so they can understand better the educational experiences of potential applicants from these communities. The GDO role is explained as a mediator between the administrators, often in central university services, who run the recruitment and selection process and academics, who, in their disciplinary departments, evaluate applications and select students. The role of mediators in recruitment and selection processes is explored further in Section 4 in relation to international students.

The studies explored so far in this section emphasise the need for recruitment and selection processes to be viewed alongside broader ecological factors influencing the educational experiences of potential applicants, some of whom may have encountered barriers or negative experiences in their previous education. This point is also explored in Booksh and Madsen [23], who focus specifically on the lack of participation in doctoral study in STEM subjects from students with disabilities. They recommend that there needs to be a more secure pipeline of doctoral students in STEM subjects, given that data from the USA shows the numbers of students with disabilities in this field is in decline. The writers observe that the current pipeline is leaky and therefore new efforts need to be made by institutions to attract and secure applications from doctoral students with disabilities in STEM subjects. The authors outline the multiple benefits that will accrue when this is achieved, including supporting the fulfilment of individuals while also enriching the academic community through diversifying the processes of decision-making and problem-solving [23].

A commitment to the values of access and equity in doctoral education explored so far in this section is also highlighted in the work of Roos et al. [25], which considers all aspects of the doctoral experience, including the recruitment and selection stages, from the perspective of ethical practice. Roos et al. include in their consideration of ethics the need for students to have equitable access to funding, a point made in common with many other researchers [25] and connecting also to stronger likelihood or ensuring of doctoral student retention and successful completion.

4. Student Mobilities, Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

The second recommendation of the Hannover report on Forces and Forms of Doctoral Education is that universities should “foster diverse ways of operating—embracing diversity of cultures” [4]. This recommendation is directed at universities and their ways of working; however, with the increase in student mobility [7], it is often at the level of the individual student that these diverse educational and cultural experiences are enacted. There is a growing body of research focusing on the implications of internationalisation and student mobility in doctoral education [26–28]. These studies explore and problematise issues

including linguistic diversity in doctoral education from recruitment through to writing and completion, enculturation into institutional practices and ways in which diverse epistemologies are recognised, or not, in doctoral spaces.

Linguistic diversity can add an additional layer of complexity in the doctoral recruitment and selection process, which is often relevant for international students [10] but can be relevant in the case of linguistically diverse students studying in their home context. Robinson-Pant and Magyar, considering the UK higher education context [26], challenge the acceptance of multilingual doctoral students via a written statement alone, arguing that a more rigorous admissions process would allow for an oral interview as well. The addition of an oral interview would allow supervisors and programme leaders to evaluate the oral language skills of the applicant in a live interactive context and would allow for applicants and supervisors alike to establish readiness for doctoral study. The need for appropriate English language skills to ensure success at doctoral level is noted as a factor in recruitment processes in a survey of UK universities [29], and the need to get this aspect of recruitment right is reinforced in the research of Robinson-Pant and Magyar [26].

A further phenomenon explored in the literature on recruitment and selection of international, doctoral students is the role of the education agent [26,27]. In the UK context the education agent is defined in a policy document guiding institutional practice as follows [30]:

“A person or organisation that deals directly with prospective international students on behalf of educational institutions.”

As seen in this quotation, the agent role covers a range of responsibilities from legal matters (visa application) to academic advice (course and institution matching). As such, these professionals can have a strong influence on an international student's decision-making regarding application to a doctoral programme in the UK. In their research studies, Robinson Pant and Magyar and Yang et al. [26,27] conceptualise education agents as mediators between universities and potential students. The need for, and influence of, such agents is problematised and explored in terms of the implications for students' expectations, agents' own experiences and challenges and institutional responsibilities to students, academics and agents. The findings raised in these two studies are explored below.

Robinson-Pant and Magyar, in their study of students' engagement with educational agents [26], analyse the mediating role provided by agents. The mediating role is seen as a side-effect of the unclear and variable territory of applying for doctoral study [4,12]. The agents' role in the application process is further evidence of the commercial nature of higher education as a market, in neoliberal terms [31], with the agents providing a commercial service as student-consumers explore the purchase of a suitable product. Robinson-Pant and Magyar suggest that the role of the agent and the mediation of information that they supply to potential applicants can be unhelpful in terms of creating unrealistic expectations on the part of students. On a more positive note, the authors characterise the education agent as also a critical friend in their support of potential applicants who are trying to navigate the complex, information-rich territory of university requirements and expectations for international, doctoral students.

In their research with agents, Yang et al. [27] also uncover the high levels of support educational agents provided to international students, a point which was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ethical responsibility agents have both in relation to universities and future supervisors as well as to applicants was set out in this study [27]. Agents are characterised as information-brokers, and, as such, the need for accuracy in their communications with applicants is extremely important. If information which influences an applicant's choice of institution and programme is not accurate, there is a risk that students may feel they have been overpromised a particular educational experience. The risk for universities in this scenario is that student satisfaction data may be negatively impacted, based on the gap between expectations raised at the pre-application stage in communications arranged by education agents.

In this section, we have seen how the increase in doctoral student mobility [7] has generated new roles for mediators between potential applicants and academic supervisors. While such roles may be necessary in supporting applicants to navigate complex and varying recruitment processes (explored in Section 2 of this entry), they also introduce the potential for mismatches in expectation for both students and supervisors. Complex systems in which multiple actors are operating are seen to put the need for universities to get the processes of recruitment and selection right at potential risk. A summary of concluding ideas reviewed in this entry now follows.

5. Conclusions

In this entry, the focus has been on how those involved in the recruitment and selection of doctoral students can achieve what will be to the benefit of all, that is, getting the processes and outcomes right. This means considering the needs of students and their likelihood of successfully achieving the doctoral award and developing the transferable skills that will support their continuing success at the post-doctoral stage. We can also, however, consider the needs of academia itself and associated professions, in the case of professional doctorates, which will be enriched if an inclusive and widening participation approach is taken to doctoral recruitment and selection.

In the policy-related sources and in research studies referred to in this entry, it is clear that processes for recruitment and selection for doctoral study appear to be, at times, complex and also very variable between disciplines, institutions and geographic contexts. This can have a discouraging effect on the diversity of the pool of applicants in terms of their status regarding ethnicity and race, social class, gender, disability and age. The implications for access and equity issues at doctoral level are of concern for universities and organisations overseeing them at local, national and international levels.

A final area explored in this entry relates to the challenges and opportunities generated by increasing student mobilities in the higher education sector and the issues this raises for the processes of recruitment and selection. The complexity of these processes are increased with the added layer of influence provided by commonly employed education agents who offer mediatory services between potential doctoral applicants and universities. The expectations and needs of potential students, academic staff and institutions can, in this case, rest in the hands of these information brokers, and the success of their brokering work can be high stakes for all involved.

To conclude, as universities continue to commit to the importance of research in achieving their missions and to supporting the next generation of researchers, the importance of having fair, transparent and robust recruitment and selection processes in place remains uncontested. The readiness of universities to keep these processes under review and to update and revise them when appropriate will ensure that they are fit for purpose and that the needs of students, staff, universities and academic communities will be met. The Hannover Recommendations [1] call for evidence-based decision-making in relation to doctoral education, and thus, the issues raised in this entry could generate new research studies to support ways of tackling known challenges such as lower-than-ideal doctoral completion rates.

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