A TOOLKIT FOR

FAIR DOCTORAL ADMISSIONS FOR ETHNICALLY AND RACIALLY MINORITISED APPLICANTS

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

CLOSE THE GAP

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The toolkit outlines a step-by-step guide to drive meaningful and sustainable change in doctoral admissions towards greater racial and ethnic equity. Despite the expansion of postgraduate-level education and decades of widening participation efforts at earlier study levels, ethnically and racially minoritised British students remain persistently underrepresented at the doctoral level. There is, therefore, a clear need for all universities to examine and improve their doctoral admissions processes and practices to address this issue. This toolkit aims to support that activity, building on experiences of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

While the primary focus of the toolkit is on race and ethnicity, the approach can be adapted to address inequities affecting other underrepresented groups. Through a three-phase framework, it invites programmes, departments and institutions to examine gaps in access, critically assess admissions processes and practices, and implement initiatives that embed equity at the heart of doctoral admissions. The toolkit highlights three steps:

1. Understanding the issue

- Collect and analyse admissions data to identify patterns of race inequity.
- Map admissions processes to uncover formal and informal practices affecting equity in admissions.
- Gather insights from admissions staff and applicants to inform targeted initiatives at key admissions stages.

2. Developing and implementing solutions

- Collaboratively design, test and refine initiatives that address identified barriers.
- Adopt a holistic approach to ensure comprehensive change.

3. Evaluating and sustaining change

- Use iterative feedback loops to refine initiatives over time
- Beyond process adjustments, the toolkit emphasises the need to implement steps toward changing institutional and departmental cultures.

By adopting this phased methodology, programmes, departments and institutions can implement actionable steps toward closing offer rate gaps and promoting fairer doctoral admissions practices for ethnically and racially minoritised groups. This framework offers a roadmap for embedding ethnic and racial equity as a shared institutional responsibility – rather than one that disproportionately falls on underrepresented staff. These are high-stakes issues, and it is essential that equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) practices are fully institutionalised and sustained across the organisation.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE TOOLKIT

Background

Race and ethnic equity in doctoral education is an urgent and important priority for UK higher education. Despite the expansion of postgraduate-level education and decades of widening participation efforts at earlier study levels, ethnically and racially minoritised British students remain persistently underrepresented at the doctoral level. After the catalysing report by Leading Routes showing a 'broken pipeline' for Black applicants accessing UK Research Council funding[1], there has been a rapid and increasing recognition across the sector of the need to advance fair and equitable doctoral admissions, with investments from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), the Office for Students (OfS), and Research England to address persistent barriers faced by Black, Asian and other racially and ethnically minoritised groups.

Fair access and diversity in doctoral education are of critical importance for multiple reasons.

Racial and ethnic equity in admissions is fundamentally about social fairness and access to opportunity. Pursuing a doctorate is a transformative opportunity for intellectual growth and career development. Yet structural racism, narrow selection criteria and admissions practices that overlook diverse forms of research potential can restrict individual opportunity and diminish the capacity of the sector to recruit from the full spectrum of talent. Potential for research is evenly distributed across society; as such, higher education institutions have a responsibility to ensure their admissions systems are unbiased and structured to recognise and support the full breadth of potential for doctoral study.

Ensuring racial and ethnic diversity in doctoral studies is also vital for research excellence. When researchers come from diverse backgrounds, they are more likely to bring a wider range of perspectives, experiences and questions. This enriches intellectual inquiry and helps disciplines to grow, evolve and innovate. In contrast, a narrowly representative research community risks producing a narrower body of knowledge. Research funders in the UK[2] now explicitly recognise that diversity is essential to the country's research strength, viewing novelty and competitiveness as rooted in diverse skills, experiences and ideas.

Finally, there are alignments with wider sector efforts and expectations. Funders and regulators place increasing emphasis on fair access to doctoral study. Legal obligations such as the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty emphasise the importance of embedding equity in admission practices. Thus there is a need for higher education institutions to act proactively, ensuring that their admissions practices do not inadvertently help to reproduce racial and ethnic inequalities and injustices.

Against this context, the higher education sector has both a responsibility and an opportunity. By critically reviewing and refining current admissions processes, higher education institutions can ensure that all candidates with the ability to thrive and succeed in doctoral study are given a meaningful opportunity.

[1] https://leadingroutes.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/The-Broken-Pipeline-Report-Sept-2019-120919-1.pdf
[2] UKRI blog: Why valuing novelty is key to tackling bias in research funding

How this toolkit was constructed

This toolkit was created by Close the Gap (CtG), a 4-year Oxford–Cambridge collaboration funded by the Office for Students and Research England. CtG was inspired by data gathered by both institutions that showed a persistent gap in doctoral offer rates, in which Black-British, British-Pakistani and British-Bangladeshi applicants were about half as likely to receive a place for doctoral study compared to White UK applicants from 2017 to 2020. CtG aimed to:

- develop doctoral selection processes and practices that reduce the offer rate gap for UK-domiciled applicants from underrepresented ethnic and racial groups, tailored to the specific circumstances of different academic disciplines
- contribute evidenced strategies for wide organisational change in doctoral admissions, cultures and practices across the sector.

Over the course of the project, we worked with a range of academics, students from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, professional services staff and external partners. Drawing on these experiences, this toolkit integrates the insights gained from those seeking resources and guidance to advance fair access, and outlines the overall framework that we developed and applied.

A key finding of this project is that doctoral admissions are complex: the offer gap cannot be attributed to a single clearly defined cause or phase of admissions, but results from the cumulative effect of various practices (with wide variation across academic disciplines) over the course of the admissions cycle. A holistic approach, in which multiple evidence-informed initiatives are introduced at various stages of the admissions process, is therefore crucial. The resource pack at the end of this toolkit offers examples of initiatives that CtG introduced and trialled over the course of the project targeting different stages of the doctoral admissions process.

Purpose

This toolkit is designed to support institutions in achieving equitable access to doctoral programmes. It provides an overarching approach for collaboratively examining and refining existing doctoral admissions processes and practices, with the aim of reducing ethnic and racial disparities in offer rates. Although this toolkit was developed with a focus on ethnic and race equity, it can be adapted for use with other underrepresented groups, including applicants who are the first in their families to apply for a place in postgraduate research (PGR), as well as for postgraduate taught (PGT), programmes.

While supporting students after admission is key, this toolkit focuses on admissions. It is designed to provide staff involved in doctoral admissions with insights for making admission to their programmes fairer. However, it must also be recognised that doctoral admission is just one point within the broader academic pipeline, and efforts at widening participation should be viewed as part of a broader effort to improve fairness in academia. For meaningful, long-term change to occur, the recommendations outlined in this toolkit should be implemented alongside complementary initiatives, such as targeted outreach at earlier education stages, dedicated funding for doctoral students from underrepresented groups, ongoing academic support and career development.

Figure 1: Three-phase approach

What can this toolkit help us do?

- Foster the use of data to identify offer rates and offer rate gaps for different groups at different levels (programme, department, institution etc).
- Reflect on the formal and informal doctoral admissions processes and practices employed by selectors.
- Identify aspects of admissions that could be improved (eg made more transparent and equitable).
- Co-develop, implement and evaluate doctoral admissions initiatives.
- Embed sustainable culture change within programmes, departments and institutions.

Audience

This toolkit is designed for those involved in shaping policy and strategy for doctoral admissions and access at UK higher education institutions. This may include those in leadership positions at the institutional level who can champion the access agenda, academics working on or leading doctoral admissions processes, and professional services staff involved in admissions and widening participation activities.

Successfully introducing and sustaining change will likely necessitate building a collaborative coalition among multiple stakeholders. For those new to race equity work, the reading list compiled in the **resource pack** offers a helpful starting point to deepen understanding and support meaningful action.

Outline

The toolkit introduces a three-phase approach (see Figure 1 above) designed to promote sustainable change through the development and implementation of evidence-informed doctoral admissions initiatives that can be tailored to each academic department or programme's needs.

It embeds collaboration between academic and professional services staff involved in PhD admissions, so that together they may develop, tailor and refine the initiatives over time.

Additional resources detailing specific initiatives co-developed with departments and tested through the approach are included in the **resource pack**.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUE

To introduce and sustain equity improvements in admissions, it is essential first to collect and analyse relevant admissions data and understand how the admissions process works. In our interviews with programme leaders, many emphasised the importance of accessing both university-wide and programme-specific data to understand equity issues and what factors underpin them, and to raise awareness among colleagues. This involves:

- gathering admissions data to identify specific patterns of applications, offers and equity gaps. Collecting and analysing data that links admissions criteria to student success, such as completion rates, can also shed light on prevailing assumptions;
- examining both formal and informal admissions processes and practices used by departments and individual assessors. Understanding how admissions are conducted is an essential part of revealing aspects of the process and practices that may unintentionally disadvantage ethnically and racially minoritised applicants, as well as other underrepresented groups. Admissions are complex and heterogenous across different disciplines and institutional contexts. Various factors contribute to differences in offer rates, so it is important to understand the complexity in sufficient depth to identify which elements may contribute to inequalities and to target effective refinements.

> “One of the most useful things has been continually bringing in data about our admissions pool, how it compares across subjects in the university, and what's happening in other institutions. These constant jolts expose the inequalities that still exist and that we still need to reckon with.”
>
> **Academic staff**

1.1 Working with admissions data to identify equity gaps

Understanding the issue necessitates a comprehensive analysis of admissions data. This serves as a foundation for understanding the current state of representation of ethnically and racially minoritised applicants, identifying equity gaps and measuring progress over time. There are two key areas of action to consider:

Area of action 1: Review data collection procedures and collect data

Start by reviewing existing data collection practices. Identify what data is currently available and what additional data would be useful to have in order to fully understand race-based trends in admissions (application, offer and acceptance rates, ethnicity and socioeconomic information etc). It is helpful to think early on about what will be needed in the long term to ensure appropriate infrastructure is in place to collect, share and store data. For more information, see **Introducing Contextual Data in Doctoral Admissions**, included in the resource pack, for guidance on data collection.

Area of action 2: Analyse and interpret data

Use the collected data to examine applications and admissions outcomes by racial ethnic groups to identify offer rates. Where applicant numbers are too small, aggregate data at department or broader disciplinary levels (eg social sciences, humanities) to reveal meaningful patterns.

Remember that interpreting these results involves looking at both university-wide trends and those that are particular to specific departments or programmes. Our work across different departments revealed important nuances: in some disciplines, low application numbers from certain racial and ethnic minority groups suggest that the applicant pipeline itself may be the main driver of offer rate gaps. In such cases, challenges may lie within national trends and/or the specific institutional or programme pipeline. Conversely, when there is a sufficient number of applications from minoritised groups, observed offer rate gaps may indicate issues within the admissions selection processes or criteria.

Example

As part of the CtG project, offer rates for PhD applicants were analysed to assess whether the likelihood of receiving an offer varied across different racial and ethnic groups. Because the number of UK applicants from Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds was relatively small within individual programmes, the data were aggregated at the faculty/division and departmental levels, as well as across the two universities. The applicant pool's racial and ethnic diversity was benchmarked against external data (in this case, Census 2011 figures for 19–33-year-olds in England and Wales) to assess issues of representation against broader population demographics.

CtG calculated offer rate gaps between UK ethnically and racially minoritised applicants and White UK applicants. The analysis revealed a persistent disparity: in both Oxford and Cambridge, candidates from minoritised racial and ethnic groups were approximately half as likely to receive an offer for doctoral study compared to White candidates. However, these disparities varied significantly by subject area.

This evidence-based approach can inform targeted outreach and selection strategies.

Additionally, examining the relationship between admissions criteria and doctoral completion rates can help to test assumptions about who is likely to succeed, which can potentially aid in refining criteria for fairness.

Consider intersectionality

It is also vital to consider intersectional factors, such as race and ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Racially and ethnically minoritised applicants might face a 'double disadvantage', where inequities related to both race and social class intersect, compounding the challenges faced during the admissions process.

1.2 Understanding existing admission practices

Examining admissions practices is key to gaining a clear understanding of how admissions are currently conducted. This can uncover barriers, processes or practices that inadvertently disadvantage minoritised applicants. This involves examining both formal procedures and informal practices, including the underlying assumptions about what constitutes an ideal candidate for PhD study and how these shape admissions criteria.

Conversations with interviewees highlighted the importance of exploring not only formal requirements and criteria, but also informal practices and assumptions that shape admissions decisions. Understanding the complexity of existing admissions practices thus lays the foundation for developing targeted initiatives at different stages of the admissions process.

Engaging with students and staff who have lived experience of the issues at stake is especially valuable. Their perspectives can illuminate barriers not immediately apparent to those who have benefited from existing systems and practices.

Consider approaching academic departments/units with expertise in educational research or equity (for example, education or social sciences) as part of this approach. Partnering with researchers in these units can provide knowledge and support for investigating admissions practices and their impact on certain demographic groups. In addition, as this exercise involves efforts from those gathering data (at central or unit levels), those in charge of administrative procedures and academics conducting admissions, it is crucial to establish cooperative relationships between academic staff and professional services teams.

Because admissions processes, practices and criteria may vary widely across institutions and departments, those working in central teams may find it useful to compare and contrast different disciplinary areas as a starting point for understanding the range of admissions processes at your institution.

Step 1: Identify and engage relevant stakeholders

Create a stakeholder map to identify academic and professional services staff involved in admissions processes, as well as any other relevant stakeholders (for example, education and EDI leads, and race and equity champions). Establishing these relationships early on means you can draw on varied expertise throughout all stages of the work. It also means that there is buy-in for the work from the earliest stages, which can be leveraged later when it comes to implementing any adjustments to policy or practice.

Step 2: Collect data

Collect information from different sources and key stakeholders about the admissions processes to gain a comprehensive understanding of current practices:

- **Policy and document review**: collect documents describing admissions policies, procedures/guidelines and criteria, to understand the formal admissions process and how it is communicated, and identify any issues with transparency or potential biases.
- **Review department and programme websites**: reflect on the transparency of information conveyed to applicants about application timelines, requirements, criteria, funding and related practices, such as whether and/or how applicants are expected to contact prospective supervisors.

- **Stakeholder interviews and conversations**: organise interviews, focus groups, conversations or workshops with academic and professional services staff who are involved in different aspects of admissions to understand how practices are perceived and implemented. Speaking with academics who participate in admissions panels, application reviews or applicant interviews provides insight into selection phases and the criteria and assumptions influencing decisions. Professional services staff will additionally be able to provide insight into the administrative aspects of admissions such as application and offer-making timelines, open days and/or managing general enquiries from prospective applicants. Together with academic processes, this information provides a broad picture of admissions practices and processes within a single department, programme or institution.
- **Applicant/student feedback**: gather views from current students from underrepresented backgrounds who have recently gone through the admissions process. These conversations can provide insight into the clarity and accessibility of information on application processes and assessment criteria, perceived barriers and overall perceptions of the process. Facilitators conducting these discussions should be culturally sensitive and attuned to race and ethnic debates to encourage open dialogue.

Step 3: Identify key admissions stages and analyse the data

Drawing on the collected information, examine each stage of the admissions process from pre-application activities, such as initial contact with supervisors, to offer-making and final acceptance.

This analysis should identify specific stages where racial and ethnic biases or inequitable practices may occur and where targeted initiatives could be introduced. Focus on areas involving discretionary decisions, subjective judgement or implicit criteria, as these are key points where racial and ethnic biases can emerge. Also consider stages with low transparency or inconsistent communication, which may disproportionately disadvantage minoritised applicants. Variations by discipline are key as well. The interviews we conducted, for example, highlighted that, in humanities and social sciences, the research proposal and supervisor fit carry significant importance in admissions decisions. In contrast, in STEM fields, academic records and technical skills seem to play a major role.[i]

It is important to recognise that the admissions system is complex and disadvantage is likely to be cumulative. There is unlikely to be a simple, single initiative that will ensure fairness in admissions. Rather, a holistic approach involving multiple coordinated initiatives across all the stages of admissions is likely necessary (see Figure 2).

To ensure an informed analysis, it is advisable to consult colleagues with expertise in race and ethnic equity, as well as those familiar with relevant EDI work in higher education. Additionally, the compiled resource pack can be a helpful starting point.

[i] Inouye, K., Robson, J., Rodriguez Anaiz, P., Baker, S., & Ilie, S. (2025). Assessing the person or the project? How disciplinary ontological and epistemological assumptions shape doctoral admissions in elite UK institutions. *Higher Education.* **https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-025-01438-8**

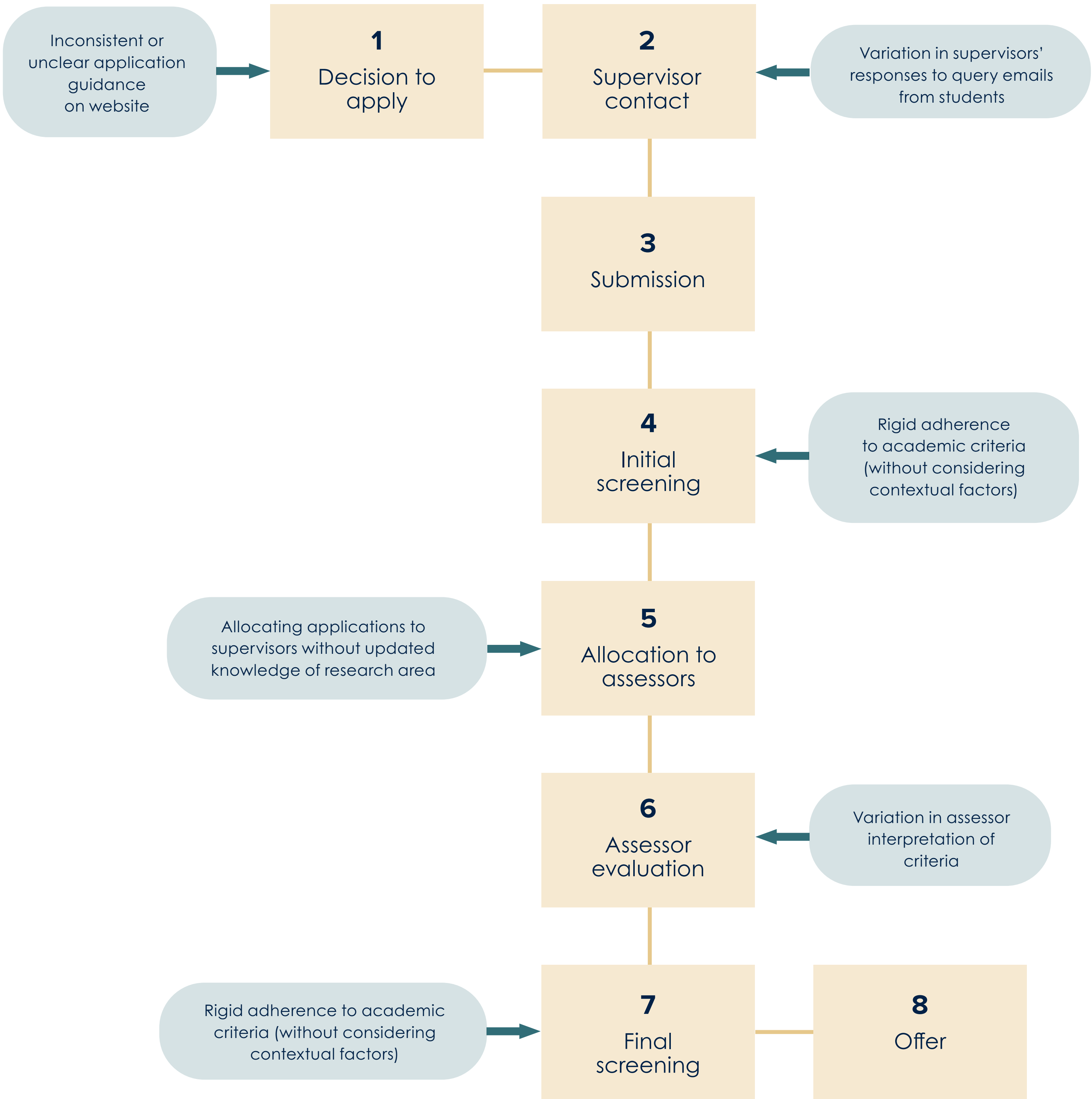

Figure 2. Example: Identifying stages of the admissions process that may be subject to inequities or bias. In this figure, the orange rectangles represent stages in the admissions process, while the text in the oval blue boxes identifies factors that may disadvantage ethnically and racially minoritised students.

DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING SOLUTIONS

This phase focuses on developing and implementing solutions. We have found that a collaborative, iterative and equity- and race-aware approach to initiatives in doctoral admissions is key. Building on the insights gathered in the previous phase, we have found this process to involve:

- **Designing, piloting and refining initiatives**: using findings from phase 1 to develop solutions, test them in practice and refine them iteratively based on feedback.
- **Collaborating**: co-creating initiatives with input from various staff involved in admissions helps to tailor them to specific processes, practices and academic cultures, and to address the specific challenges and barriers identified. A collaborative approach ensures that disciplinary cultures and practices are taken into account and any changes make sense to those involved.
- **Implementing a holistic, multilevel approach**: a holistic approach recognises that systemic, interconnected changes are essential to disrupt entrenched racial and ethnic inequities. While small changes and 'wins' are important, without coordinated efforts they may not be sustained. A multilevel approach to equity in doctoral admissions recognises that efforts should address individual behaviours, attitudes and practices, as well as departmental and organisational cultures and policies.
- **Embedding race-aware approaches**: ensuring that the design and evaluation of initiatives explicitly engage with racial and ethnic equity. Race-neutral or vaguely defined EDI principles can obscure clarity about addressing racial and ethnic inequalities in particular.

“I think it helps me reflect on my own practices, particularly a tendency, I suppose, to favour people who are like me. I understand we can also favour people who aren't like us, but I do believe I'm biased, and that we're all biased, and that we need training to address that.”

Academic staff (supervisor)

> “If you don’t know how to do these things, like reaching out to your supervisor before you apply, then you might never get accepted… If I hadn’t asked my professor’s undergrad, I wouldn’t have learned. So it’s sort of… insider information that should be maybe more accessible.”
>
> **PhD student**

2.1 Admissions processes and practices

Our work suggests that, to develop a more race-aware and equitable admissions process, departments and programmes should co-develop and pilot initiatives that address potential barriers at every stage, from pre-application to final offer-making. The following sections highlight some of the initiatives we introduced. A collaborative and iterative approach helped us to ensure these initiatives are both sustainable and tailored to specific departmental contexts and needs.

Providing structured opportunities for learning and exchange is also key. In our workshops and events with PhD programme staff and administrators, participants noted that these sessions enabled them to build relationships with colleagues across departments and to learn about effective, race-aware practices from a broader network.

Pre-application initiatives

Pre-application initiatives can help make the process more transparent, supportive and accessible, ensuring that racially and ethnically minoritised – and other underrepresented – applicants are not disadvantaged by hidden rules or opaque practices.

- **Revise and update webpages**: ensure that the application process, eligibility criteria, necessary documentation, and fees and funding information are transparent and clearly outlined on webpages to reduce information barriers. For more detailed guidance, refer to **Making PhD Admissions More Transparent and Inclusive: Recommendations for Improving Websites** in the resource pack.
- **Develop guidance materials**: create applicant-focused resources such as guides, FAQs and templates for personal statements, supervisor contacts, CVs and/or research proposals. Providing accessible resources helps to demystify key aspects of the application. Also include an avenue for a prospective applicant to ask questions.
- **Implement applicant support programmes**: establish mentoring schemes where current students and academic staff provide tailored feedback and guidance to applicants throughout the application process. For an example, see **Designing and Implementing an Applicant Support Programme** in the resource pack.
- **Make expectations explicit about pre-application communication with supervisors:** in departments requiring pre-application contact with supervisors, ensure clear guidelines are provided on departmental websites regarding how to identify supervisors, the purpose of contacting supervisors and the information that should be included in an enquiry email (eg an abstract of the proposed project). Encourage supervisors to update their profiles regularly and provide accurate details about their research interests and areas they supervise, particularly during pre-application communications. These informal interactions can inadvertently produce racial and ethnic inequities when applicants receive disparate responses.
- **Training to supervisors:** equip supervisors with training and/or written guidance to help them recognise unconscious biases and equity issues that can arise when making pre-application judgements based on an applicant’s background or CV. See the resources **Supporting Equitable Pre-Application Communications with Prospective Supervisors** and **Designing Workshops for Supporting Race-Aware Equity in PhD Admissions**, included in the resource pack.

> “One thing that I think is really important, in terms of fighting against biases, is actually changing the mindsets of supervisors. So it’s not just about, I’m looking for ‘the best of the best’, but it’s actually thinking about it in a very wide frame. Achieving both diversity and excellence is really important.”
>
> **Academic staff**

Admissions initiatives

Initiatives at this stage require rethinking traditional processes, practices and assumptions to help address racial and ethnic inequities in how applications are reviewed and evaluated.

- **Critically review criteria through a race and ethnic equity lens:** admissions criteria and practices should be critically re-examined through an anti-racist lens, recognising how existing norms and standards can unintentionally reproduce inequity. Without this deeper reflection, even well-intentioned reforms risk reinforcing the very inequalities they aim to address. For example, placing too much weight on degree class can inadvertently disadvantage racial and ethnic minority applicants due to the persistent ‘awarding gap’ in the UK.
- **Introduce contextual data in admissions**: this should be part of a broader open and fair recruitment process. Incorporating contextual data in admissions assessments ensures that applicants’ achievements are viewed within the context of their educational and social backgrounds, not as shortcomings to be compensated for, but as part of a fuller and more complete picture of their potential. When used appropriately, contextualisation supports a more nuanced and equitable evaluation of applicants. See the resource **Introducing Contextual Data in Doctoral Admissions** for detailed guidance.
- **Introduce equitable competency-based assessment frameworks**: specifying and broadening the scope of admissions criteria can enable a more comprehensive assessment of applicants, moving beyond a focus on ‘traditional’ academic achievements such as degree classifications and the status of previous institutions attended. As mentioned before, this approach is particularly important in the context of the **‘awarding gaps’**, disproportionally impacting ethnically and racially minoritised applicants. By introducing a wider range of competency-based assessments, departments can evaluate key attributes such as motivation, independence or innovative thinking – qualities with a known link to PhD success. In the resource pack, see **Designing and Implementing a Competency-Based Admissions Tool** for more detailed guidance.
- **Create and refine decision-supporting tools:** implement decision-support tools, such as matrices, scorecards or scoring rubrics, to guide assessors in making consistent, evidence-based decisions. These tools will help mitigate potential biases (eg overvaluing or undervaluing certain applicants or inconsistently assessing otherwise comparable applicants) and ensure consistency across individual assessors and panels. These tools can also help assessors use evidence to support their decisions.
- **Improve interview practices**: develop and implement a more structured approach to interviewing applicants. This could include the use of guides that outline key criteria and standardised questions aligned with those criteria; an approach that can be integrated with the competency-based framework described above. Structuring interviews in this way helps ensure that all candidates are assessed more consistently and fairly, with a clear focus on relevant competencies and potential. For more detailed guidance, refer to **Designing and Implementing Race-Equitable Interview Practices** in the resource pack.
- **Develop and implement safety-net mechanisms:** encourage departments to assign a staff member to review borderline applications with a race equity lens or applications flagged through the use of contextual data. This role can ensure that applicants’ achievements have been contextually considered at every stage of the selection process, from shortlisting to offer-making.

> “Excellence is something that these universities strive to cultivate. But you can’t cultivate excellence if you’re only targeting a very small percentage of people who know what template is considered excellent.”
>
> **PhD student**

2.2 Institutional and policy change

Achieving racial and ethnic equitable admissions also requires coordinated, institution-wide and policy-level changes. In our interviews with those involved in admissions, we heard frequently the importance of more collective spaces and the need for an organisational framework that supports change. A coherent, structured framework is more likely to work than isolated changes targeting individual assessors alone. In addition, institutional policies serve as a critical safeguard against an individual’s gatekeeping practices. From our project experience, some of the key strategies that made a difference include:

- **Creating spaces for honest dialogue and racial and ethnic literacy**: it is important to acknowledge the additional emotional and professional burden this work often places on staff from ethnically and racially minoritised backgrounds, who are frequently expected to lead on equity efforts and deal with resistance and backlash. This frequently invisible labour can be another manifestation of racial and ethnic inequities within academia.

  For this reason, we found it valuable to develop wider events and workshops. Collective spaces and professional development initiatives help to widely empower and equip all staff with the tools to engage with racial and ethnic inequities, ensuring that responsibility for race equity is widely and institutionally shared.

- **Building a coalition for change:** focus your efforts on engaging a ‘coalition of the willing’ – those already committed to change – while also working with the ‘coachable middle’ who are open to new ideas. In our experience resistance is part of the process, and it’s important to meet challenges with constructive engagement. We have learned there are no shortcuts or universal solutions for addressing resistance; these issues must be understood in each context.

- **Ensuring support for introducing initiatives:** staff involved in admissions told us that they need adequate time, resources and institutional support to implement initiatives that challenge entrenched cultural assumptions and habitual practices. Collaboration between academics and professional services is crucial to ensuring that the necessary support structures are in place to make initiatives both feasible and sustainable.

- **Developing clear policy guidance concerning relevant legislation:** universities have a legal obligation under the Equality Act 2010 to eliminate discrimination and advance equality of opportunity. Developing and sharing clear institutional policies and guidance on how these duties apply to doctoral admissions helps ensure that equity-focused efforts are well understood and empower academic staff to navigate equity work confidently and lawfully.

- **Strengthening internal communication and awareness:** we saw that early and consistent communication ensures that departments receive guidance at times that align with their workflows. Targeted communication campaigns can raise awareness of equity programmes across the university, particularly beyond key contacts.

> “In my experience working in groups that try to push things forward, I’ve seen the resistance and how it creates a lot of negativity. It can make the environment even less welcoming. Some people feel threatened by widening participation. They entrench themselves and then become more difficult. I think this is what makes it really hard.”
>
> **Academic staff**

EVALUATING, ITERATING AND SUSTAINING CHANGE

From our experience, admissions practices and access challenges vary widely across disciplines and departments. As such, we have found it valuable to approach change as an ongoing process, with continuous evaluation and refinement after each admissions cycle. This ongoing feedback not only allows improving initiatives but also helps to foster reflective practices among staff.

3.1 Evaluation

To evaluate the impact and implementation of change, two complementary forms of evaluation are usually employed:

- **Impact evaluation** asks *whether* an initiative has achieved its intended outcomes.
- **Process evaluation** asks *how well* an initiative was implemented and is operating.

While these types of evaluation can be conducted independently, combining them together is particularly informative.

Impact evaluation

Impact evaluation seeks to establish whether a given initiative has made a measurable difference, typically in terms of offer rate gaps, applicant pool diversity or selection outcomes. Approaches might include time series analysis or before-and-after comparisons. These can help track changes over time or between departments implementing vs not implementing certain initiatives. However, we found that there are some practical constraints to keep in mind:

- Small applicant numbers, particularly among certain racial and ethnic groups or at programme level, can limit the statistical power of these analyses.
- In holistic approaches, because many changes are introduced to different stages of the admissions process, isolating the effect of a single initiative may be difficult.

Process evaluation

Process evaluation complements outcome-based assessment by focusing on how initiatives are implemented and experienced. For example, gathering qualitative feedback (through informal conversations, interviews, open-ended questionnaires or workshops with staff and applicants) provides rich insights into what works well and what needs adjustment. This feedback can help uncover practical, cultural or attitudinal challenges that might not be apparent from numbers alone.

A process evaluation helped us to identify knowledge gaps and areas where further training or support is needed to build capacity for equitable admissions practices.

For more detailed guidance on implementing process evaluation, see the resource **Implementing a Process Evaluation of Initiatives Aimed at Transforming Doctoral Admissions**.

Refining initiatives

Drawing on evaluation insights is key to being able to refine and improve initiatives and approaches. Our process evaluation interviews with key stakeholders provided valuable feedback. For instance:

- adjusting training programmes or resources to fit particular needs (eg timing, format)
- enhancing the clarity or accessibility of the resources developed
- revealing inconsistencies in how different assessors or departments interpret and apply new tools
- highlighting challenges with staff engagement or buy-in. A process evaluation can help uncover reasons for resistance or lukewarm support, and guide strategies for increasing engagement

> **“** EDI committees matter when it comes to monitoring statistics and developing protocols. You may not know the background of individual candidates, and probably shouldn’t, but having access to summary data sharpens the mind. That’s where EDI committees have real power: monitoring data, shaping policy and putting pressure on departments to do better. **”**
>
> **Academic staff**

- raising awareness about an increased administrative workload, lack of proper IT support or any other supporting mechanisms needed.

Encouraging regular review of data and admissions practices has supported sustained reflection on equity, and aligning these efforts with broader institutional goals has helped maintain momentum for change.

3.2 Sustaining wider institutional and departmental culture change

Achieving lasting impact requires ongoing work to shift both institutional and departmental cultures, embedding racial and ethnic equity as a core value and rethinking what excellent research potential looks like in doctoral applicants. Cultural change is not easy but, from our experience, it can be supported through various means:

- **Promoting commitment by leadership:** identifying key senior individuals across the organisation who can actively support and champion change and race-inclusive practices has helped keep equity on the agenda at both the university and department levels.
- **Solidifying change through governance structures:** making use of governance and committee structures to embed change has been effective. For example, establishing a permanent postgraduate access committee or developing a dedicated institutional strategy can help to ensure lasting impact from equity-focused work. Discussing and introducing change via existing governance committees provides the organisational authority needed to challenge entrenched practices while supporting change at the structural level. Such mechanisms can help address departmental inertia by institutionalising change.
- **Fostering broad ownership**: inviting staff at various levels to contribute to the design or tailoring of initiatives. This encourages people at all levels of the organisation to assume responsibility for changes, while recognising there may be variations in admissions processes by discipline.
- **Proactive engagement strategies**: drawing on the experience of colleagues and units with prior experience in equity-focused efforts, who are well positioned to advise and provide valuable insights for new initiatives.

SPOTLIGHTS: OXFORD AND CAMBRIDGE

With the known challenges in PhD access outlined earlier, our two universities have each developed approaches to gather, embed and sustain efforts in this area. We aim to highlight recent initiatives that illustrate the toolkit in practice, showcasing two distinct ways of applying its process. Below are descriptions of these two approaches:

Oxford's Graduate Student Access Strategy

Oxford aims to attract talented students from all backgrounds. While undergraduate access has been a focus, concerns about graduate study became more relevant after tuition fees increased in 2012, particularly for disadvantaged students facing high debt.

In response, Oxford began collecting socio-economic data, revealing underrepresentation among certain groups, and launched **access initiatives** (eg UNIQ+ research internships, Black Academic Futures scholarships and a pilot using contextual admissions data).

More recently it was felt that it would be helpful to bring these independent initiatives under the umbrella of a University-wide strategy with a clear set of agreed priorities, objectives and metrics.

In 2022, a task and finish group was formed under the Graduate Access Working Group (now set up as a formal subcommittee) to draft a Graduate Student Access Strategy (GSAS). This aimed to provide a framework for improving access and fairness for all students, drawing together the various graduate access workstreams taking place across the University. The GSAS would sit underneath and align with the University's broader Strategic Plan and education priorities.

The group consulted widely, surveying academic departments and colleges to identify priorities, challenges and ongoing initiatives. Findings from these consultations and the CtG project informed the draft strategy, which includes a vision, objectives, a governance structure and an action plan with deadlines and metrics.

The strategy, which was approved in 2025, will be overseen by the Graduate Access Subcommittee, which will be responsible for developing and approving detailed targets aligned with the overall strategic objectives while considering local departmental needs and requirements. To support continuous improvement, an Evaluation Manager post was also created.

Including postgraduate access in the Cambridge Access and Participation Plan

The University of Cambridge has consolidated its postgraduate access initiatives under its Access and Participation Plan (APP), a public commitment agreed with the Office for Students. This represents a public, high-stakes commitment to widening postgraduate access.

Cambridge has identified barriers to access including awarding gaps, limited masters' funding and lack of exposure to research-intensive environments. Internal data show that applicants from non-research-intensive universities face the greatest challenges in accessing Cambridge postgraduate study. Information barriers further compound these issues, as many students lack access to informal knowledge and the guidance needed to navigate the admissions process effectively.

To address these issues, Cambridge's 2025–9 APP includes changes such as a contextual flag to identify applicants for further consideration who have not studied at Oxford or Cambridge and have faced socio-economic disadvantage.

Additionally, initiatives like the Postgraduate Applicant Support Programme and Research Experience Placements provide tailored guidance, mentoring and hands-on research opportunities to strengthen PhD applications from underrepresented students. The Applicant Support Programme helps students refine their applications with input from Cambridge academics and PhD mentors, while Research Experience Placements offer direct research exposure to build skills and confidence in undertaking research projects.

In addition to these initiatives, Cambridge continues to sustain and develop master's-level funding for students from underrepresented backgrounds. This funding is crucial, as many PhD courses at Cambridge require applicants to have completed a master's qualification before applying.

These initiatives are aligned with the anticipated outcomes of the APP and include both quantitative and qualitative measures to assess their impact. Over the 4-year APP cycle, Cambridge plans to offer a minimum of 160 research experience placements. As the APP progresses, Cambridge will continually review and refine its approach based on emerging evidence.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS: SITUATING ADMISSIONS IN THE BROADER CONTEXT

The toolkit presents an approach for driving meaningful and sustainable change in doctoral admissions to advance fair access for ethnically and racially minoritised applicants and other underrepresented groups. However, admissions practices must be seen as part of broader efforts to address intersecting factors that shape access to doctoral education across the educational pipeline. For example, lower rates of progression to doctoral study among ethnically and racially minoritised students are often linked to inequities at earlier stages of education, including undergraduate and postgraduate taught levels. In some disciplines, this results in fewer applicants from these groups reaching the stage of applying for doctoral programmes, highlighting the need for proactive outreach and bridging educational programmes to support their transition.

As discussed in this toolkit, admissions practices can contribute to access inequities. Criteria that prioritise degree classifications or prestigious educational backgrounds disproportionately disadvantage ethnically and racially minoritised and other underrepresented applicants, who are less likely to hold such credentials. Critically revisiting these practices to contextualise achievements can foster more equitable and race-aware admissions.

Funding disparities further exacerbate inequities in access. Unequal funding opportunities for racially and ethnically minoritised students create additional barriers, effectively breaking the pipeline to doctoral education. Efforts to address these disparities through targeted scholarships and financial support are crucial.

Finally, achieving race and ethnic equity does not end at access – supporting underrepresented students once they enter doctoral programmes is equally vital. Racially and ethnically minoritised applicants often confront racism and other forms of undermining experiences, which further complicate their academic journeys. Educational institutions often operate within a framework of unwritten, implicit rules and expectations – what has been referred to as the ‘hidden curriculum’. These norms, such as understanding academic and disciplinary jargon, navigating power dynamics with supervisors or building professional networks, can pose additional challenges for underrepresented students, who may not have had prior exposure to these informal practices. Institutions can address these barriers by implementing structured and ongoing support to ease transitions.

By situating changes in admissions practices within this broader context, institutions can more effectively tackle the multiple racial and ethnic barriers shaping access to doctoral education and support the success of students from underrepresented backgrounds when they are on course.

RESOURCE PACK

This resource pack provides practical guidance for fostering fairness in doctoral admissions, organised across 3 levels of intervention:

Level 1: Individual change

Tools to help staff involved in admissions engage in self-reflection and develop equitable decision-making practices

1. Supporting equitable pre-application communications with prospective supervisors
2. Designing workshops for supporting race-aware equity for PhD admissions

Level 2: Recruitment and admission practices

Tools and strategies to embed equity in doctoral admission practices

3. Designing and implementing an applicant support programme
4. Designing and implementing a competency-based admissions tool
5. Introducing contextual data in doctoral admissions
6. Designing and implementing race-equitable interview practices

Level 3: Organisational approaches

Frameworks and guidance for departments and institutions to build systemic change

7. Implementing a process evaluation of initiatives aimed at transforming doctoral admissions
8. Assessing readiness for change towards racially and ethnically equitable admissions practices
9. Making PhD admissions more transparent and inclusive: recommendations for improving websites

By addressing multiple levels, these resources aim to create meaningful, lasting improvements to transform doctoral admissions into more race-equitable and inclusive processes and practices.

SUPPORTING EQUITABLE PRE-APPLICATION COMMUNICATIONS WITH PROSPECTIVE SUPERVISORS

Overview

Pre-application communications between prospective doctoral supervisors and applicants are a crucial but largely unregulated part of the doctoral application and assessment process. This guide outlines practical ways to develop high-level guidance for managing pre-application communications and to facilitate reflection on implicit preferences in supervisor communications.

Rationale

While the extent to which supervisors are involved in the formal assessment of doctoral applications varies across universities and departments, the prospective supervisor is often the first gatekeeper to admission to a PhD. Initial communication between prospective supervisors and applicants may: 1) encourage or discourage potential applicants, and/or 2) facilitate initial judgements about applicants and applications, which may influence the formal assessment process. Key evidence on the role of supervisors and supervisor communications suggests:

- Academic staff may be subject to implicit preferences – unconscious inclinations that can influence perceptions and decisions (Posselt et al, 2023). Such preferences can inadvertently shape how supervisors respond to applicants, particularly when decisions are made swiftly and based on limited information, including aspects such as the applicant's name as signalling ethnicity (Milkman et al, 2015) or the reputation of their previous institution (Posselt, 2018).
- A dismissive or unresponsive supervisor can disproportionately impact ethnically and racially minoritised, and other underrepresented, applicants, who may already have received negative implicit or explicit messages about their place in academia. Applicants from underrepresented backgrounds are more likely to feel discouraged from applying, disadvantaged in navigating the admissions process, excluded from serious consideration and disconnected from the informal networks that often facilitate entry into academia (Milkman et al, 2015).

Aims

- Increase equitable approaches to prospective supervisor communications by enhancing transparency and introducing a set of guidelines to structure this informal phase of admissions.
- Stimulate discussion and reflection among academic staff on the role of supervisor communications in the admissions process, and on the impact of implicit preferences.

Implementation guide

Preparation

1. Review any existing guidelines on prospective supervisor communications, including any instructions for prospective applicants on whether and/or how to contact supervisors.
2. Hold initial discussions on pre-application supervisor communications with prospective supervisors in the department. These discussions can be embedded in existing staff meeting agendas to get a sense of how academics view pre-application communications, and what practices or strategies they employ to manage queries from prospective students. Inform professional services staff of the approach so they are aware of the tone, nature and content of prospective supervisor communication.

Implementation

1. Develop and **host workshops** for academic staff to further reflect upon practices surrounding and purposes of pre-application communications, and the ways in which

implicit preferences may influence responses to students. Topics could include: responses to internal vs external applicants, how CVs may influence initial impressions of applicants, whether the way the query letter is written (level of formality, language etc) shapes responses. For additional guidance on creating workshops see the guidance below and the resource on **Designing Workshops for Race-Aware Equity in PhD Admissions**.

2. Drawing on what you have learned from the initial conversations and workshops, develop a set of high-level guidelines for managing supervisor communications, then share it widely within your department. This guidance should be aligned with the department's admissions processes. In formulating guidelines consider:
   a. the purpose of supervisor communications (eg to indicate supervisor capacity, share information about pre-existing projects/research groups etc)
   b. what materials applicants should share (eg project abstracts, CVs), and how much feedback supervisors might provide on applications
   c. encouraging supervisors to refer applicants to other colleagues where there is a mismatch in research topics or lack of supervisor capacity
   d. whether response email templates could be created for supervisor use.
3. Encourage academic staff to update their online staff profiles, where available, regularly and at least annually to ensure that their research areas are up to date. Information on supervision capacity could be included.
4. Update admissions websites with clear guidelines for identifying and contacting supervisors that align with the supervisor guidance in Step 2 above. For example, communicating the purpose of contacting a supervisor and what information to include are important for transparency.

Evaluation

Seek feedback from prospective supervisors on both the guidance and the workshops to understand their applicability to their own personal circumstances, and their ultimate effectiveness, and refine accordingly.

Tips and implementation recommendations

Recognise time constraints

A possible objection to implementing this guidance may be time constraints; some supervisors receive large numbers of emails from prospective students, and do not have time to respond to each one. It is important to recognise this as an issue, and factor it into any guidelines. Co-developing guidance with supervisors – rather than imposing top-down recommendations – can improve both relevance and uptake. For example, collaboratively creating a set of adaptable email templates can help supervisors manage their time efficiently while maintaining equitable communication practices.

Keep guidance high-level

Supervisors will likely have their own systems/practices in place for managing communications from students, and their own opinions on the purpose of these communications. Resistance to formal guidance is therefore possible. Keeping the guidance high-level may be important for initial buy-in. Most important is to support reflection on supervisor communication practices and emphasise an approach that is equitable.

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DESIGNING WORKSHOPS FOR SUPPORTING RACE-AWARE EQUITY FOR PHD ADMISSIONS

Overview

Traditional doctoral admissions practices can potentially perpetuate racial and ethnic inequalities when not subjected to critical evaluation. Academic staff are the key decision-makers in PhD admissions. Workshops and professional development spaces can provide opportunities for staff to critically reflect on their practices, challenging ingrained assumptions and biases. This guide outlines practical steps for designing workshops and training initiatives for increasing equity.

Rationale

Common admissions mindsets and practices among staff can unintentionally inhibit access for ethnically and racially minoritised and other underrepresented students. For instance, definitions of academic excellence often rely on criteria such as degree classifications, which disproportionately exclude certain demographic groups due to previous educational inequalities.

Implicit biases, and not just formal criteria, can also influence decision-making in admissions. Research (eg Nakae, 2022; Posselt, 2016; Woo, 2020) has shown that implicit bias can influence multiple stages of admissions, from whether and how staff respond to email enquiries from prospective students, to how written applications are assessed and interviews are conducted.

These unconscious attitudes or stereotypes affect how candidates are evaluated, both favourably and unfavourably, often without awareness. For example, Posselt (2016) found that PhD applicants from China were expected to have higher test scores due to assumptions about test preparation culture in the US.

Workshops can help participants become aware of how automatic association impacts equity and recognise how assumptions about merit and loosely defined 'fit' influence decision-making. Facilitated opportunities for reflection and dialogue among staff are a key way to critically reconsider how commonly used practices might disproportionately disadvantage underrepresented applicants.

The IGTP (Insights, Goals, Techniques and Practice) framework – from teacher professional development – offers an evidence-based approach to planning and designing workshops and professional development/training. This framework organises 14 evidence-based mechanisms that support behaviour change into four key areas (see Sims et al, 2021, in the references list):

- **I:** Gain new insights
- **G:** Pursue new goal-oriented behaviours
- **T:** Acquire new techniques
- **P:** Embed these changes into practice

Workshops designed using this broad framework can maximise their impact by balancing activities across all four dimensions. This guide provides examples and recommendations for structuring workshops and training using this framework to drive individual change in doctoral admissions.

Aims

The key aim of this guide is to support the design and planning of workshops for staff involved in admissions.

Implementation guide

Preparation

Define workshop aims

Prior to the workshop, identify specific equity goals for the programme (eg increasing awareness of representation of ethnically and racially minoritised applicants, reducing biases in evaluation practices etc).

Create workshop materials

Prepare resources (eg slides, handouts, infographics) and develop activities aligned with the IGTP framework, as shown below.

Implementation

Insights: challenge assumptions and build awareness

The aim of this step is to present some data and research that help staff recognise potential inequities in doctoral admissions and question common assumptions. Some examples include:

- departmental or institutional data on admissions, emphasising trends by race and ethnicity. Highlight any disparities or representation issues in applicant pools and admitted cohorts
- relevant research or policy documents that explore racial and ethnic equity in PhD access or potential biases. Suggested resources for initial searches:
  - your own university's and programme's admissions data
  - **UKCGE policy brief** on postgraduate access
  - the Sutton trust report ***Inequality in the Highest Degree?***
  - disciplinary reports such as those on **inequality in early career research in the UK life sciences**.
- information about bias in admissions. Nakae et al (2022) on **Bias Breakers Workshops** provides all the necessary guidance for implementing interactive and applied bias training
- evidence that challenges assumptions about merit and potential. For example:
  - findings that PhD success is shaped not only by prior academic performance but also by competencies such as motivation and resilience (Sheldon et al, 2024), or by structural factors like funding access (Skopek et al, 2022)
  - institutional data on PhD completion to help reinforce this point
- insight about how common admissions practices (eg reliance on academic degrees, informal supervisor contact) may inadvertently disadvantage certain groups
- lived experience of inequity in doctoral admissions to share their insights. The experiences of students and staff can illuminate barriers not immediately visible and help ensure discussions are grounded in real experiences.

Goals: set equity goals

The aim of this step is to guide participants in identifying practical equity goals that can be implemented within their admissions context.

Some strategies include:

- Facilitate exercises during the workshop. Provide a template or worksheet where participants can articulate their goals:
  - a specific equity-related objective (eg 'Improve the transparency of pre-application communications')
  - why this goal matters in their PhD programme
  - a broad timeline
  - resources or support needed
  - some indicators of progress.
- Offer example equity goals relevant to PhD admissions, such as:
  - diversity targets
  - reviewing and updating selection criteria to ensure they do not disproportionately disadvantage ethnically and racially minoritised applicants
  - contextualising applicants' backgrounds during evaluations
  - improving transparency of admission processes, funding and timelines
  - responding equitably to pre-application enquiries.

Techniques: provide tools and strategies

This step aims to introduce participants to practical tools and methods that can support more consistent and equitable decision-making during admissions. Some examples include:

- Introduce more structured evaluation tools such as:
  - scorecards, rubrics or evaluation matrices to promote consistency in evaluation across assessors and align judgements with transparent criteria. More detail can be found in the resource pack **Designing and Implementing a Competency-Based Admissions Tool**.
  - standardised interview protocols to ensure consistency, including agreed-upon questions and assessment criteria. More detail can be found in the resource pack **Designing and Implementing Race-Equitable Interview Practices**.
- Share practical strategies for mitigating implicit bias (eg Nakae, 2022) provides a set of practical resources in the appendix).
- Provide take-away resources (eg templates, rubrics, checklists) so that participants can begin to experiment with potential new tools.

Practice: apply and reinforce new behaviours

This step focuses on application. The aim is to give participants the opportunity to try out and reflect on new approaches. For example:

- Facilitate mock application reviews
  - Use anonymised case studies to simulate real admissions scenarios.
  - Ask participants to evaluate applications using current or new rubrics or structured tools, then compare results and discuss any variations in judgement or scores.
  - Review and discuss applicants' emails to prospective supervisors (real or fictional). This can be useful for understanding informal decision-making practices.
- Use role-playing exercises to practise. Participants can take turns acting as applicants, interviewers or observers.
- Facilitate debrief sessions to:
  - reflect on these exercises, and share feedback collectively
  - encourage peer-to-peer learning.

Tips and implementation recommendations

EDI expertise: where possible, involve a colleague with relevant expertise in race equity or inclusive pedagogy to support the session or its planning.

Addressing resistance: be prepared to address discomfort or defensiveness when discussing bias. There are no shortcuts or one-size-fits-all solutions for addressing resistance, and it is important to understand these within the institutional and disciplinary contexts in which they emerge. Frame discussions constructively, focusing on improving practice rather than assigning blame.

Time: ensure the workshop is not overly long.

Feedback: use surveys or feedback forms to measure the workshop's effectiveness and identify areas for improvement.

Resource repository: develop a repository of workshop materials that participants can access post-training to reinforce learning and share within their departments.

Workshop example: Equitable practices in PhD admissions – supervisor communications

This suggested workshop is designed to encourage PhD supervisors to reflect on their decision-making practices. A key focus is on raising awareness of bias or implicit preferences during pre-application communications.

Overall aims

- Raise awareness of the role that supervisors play in either restricting or broadening applicant pools.
- Facilitate peer discussion on how supervisors respond to prospective applicants and make early judgements.
- Consider the equity implications of these responses and interactions.

This guidance builds on the resource **Designing Workshops for Race-Aware Equity in PhD Admissions**, and uses the IGTP framework for behaviour change:

- **I –** sharing insights
- **P –** embedding changes into practice
- **T & G –** techniques and goal-oriented strategies

Workshop activities

1. Welcome and introductions

Aim: set the stage and begin self-reflection.

- Welcome participants and outline the goals: to reflect on current practices, share experiences and discuss equity in the pre-application process.
- Prompt supervisors to begin thinking about their own practices and experiences.
- On-screen prompt as participants arrive: *Jot down one or two things you notice or look for when you receive a pre-application email from a prospective student.*

2. I – sharing insights

Aim: provide insights on how racial and ethnic and other inequalities emerge in admissions and how supervisors influence access.

- Seek and share materials about access and participation for racially and ethnically minoritised students and the current state of PhD admissions. Some suggested sources to initiate your search are:
  - your own university's and programme's admissions data
  - **UKCGE policy brief** on postgraduate access
  - the Sutton trust report ***Inequality in the Highest Degree?***
  - disciplinary reports such as those on **inequality in early career research in the UK life sciences**.
- Highlight the key influences on supervisor responses (eg implicit bias, assumptions about risk and readiness, access to funding). A starting point can be found in this collection of **outputs and training materials** developed by the University of Warwick.
- Invite reflection and discussion: *What surprised you? How might these insights apply to your own practice?*

3. P – embedding changes into practice

Aim: reflect on diverse practices and their equity implications.

- Break into small groups (3–4 people).
- In advance, prepare anonymised or fictional email samples from prospective applicants, aiming at gathering from successful and unsuccessful applicants.
- Ask supervisors to individually review short email samples from prospective students, and make jotted notes of first impressions.
- In groups, ask supervisors to discuss:
  - How do you typically respond to such emails?
  - What criteria do you use to decide whether to encourage a formal application?
  - What kinds of responses or follow-up actions do you typically take?
  - How might your response influence the applicant's chances?

4. T & G – techniques and goal-oriented strategies

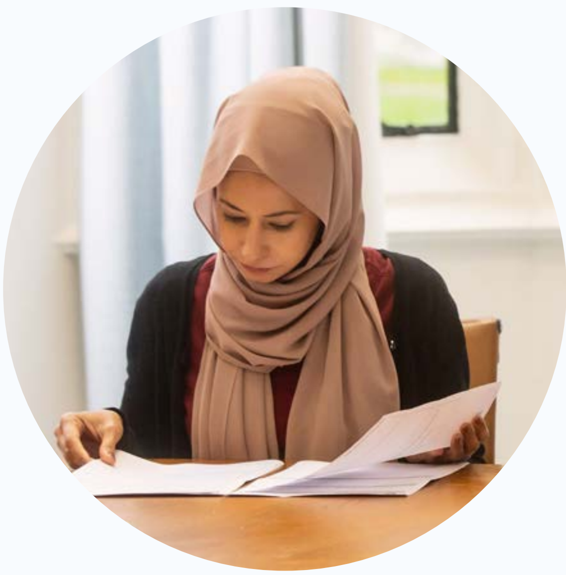
Aim: identify practical, equity-oriented steps for pre-application interactions.

- Seek and share practical materials or frameworks for bias reduction in applicant screening. Suggested resources to kickstart your search:
  - **University of Washington's Online Toolkit** or **Bias Reduction and Improvement Coaching (BRIC)**
  - Nakae et al (2022): **Bias Breakers Workshops** provides all the necessary guidance for implementing and interactive and applied bias training.
- As a group, discuss:
  - What inclusive strategies could we implement in our responses?
  - How could we standardise practices while allowing for flexibility?
  - Are there cues we should be mindful of (eg institutional background, language use, self-confidence)?
- Final prompts:
  - What's one thing you learned today?
  - What's one thing you'll do differently as a result?
  - What specific goal could you set for future communications with prospective applicants?

5. Closing and takeaways

Aim: reinforce learning and encourage continued reflection.

- Quick recap of key insights and strategies discussed.
- Distribute a handout or guidance sheet that summarises takeaways and practical tips for equitable supervisor communications.



Example

Workshop Planning

Workshop title:

Date and place:

Purpose:
Outline what participants will learn and achieve

Participants:
Who is going to be there?

Insights (I)	Goals (G)	Techniques (T)	Practice (P)
Introduce evidence	**Brainstorm actionable goals**	**Introduction of tools**	**Mock application reviews**
Discussion prompts • What factors do you think contribute to admissions disparities? • How might our admissions criteria and practices exclude some applicants?	**Discussion prompt** • How can these goals be made specific, measurable and achievable within our department?	**Discussion prompt** • How does this tool address equity challenges in our department?	**Discussion prompts** • What influenced your decision-making? • Did any assumptions come into play? • What changes will you make to your assessment process based on this practice?

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DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING AN APPLICANT SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Overview

An applicant support programme helps participants to prepare their application for university study through activities such as one-to-one mentoring, online group sessions and campus visits. This guide provides advice for institutions to develop and implement their own application support initiative, based on the University of Cambridge's AIM: PhD programme.

Rationale

Applicant support programmes exist to democratise access to information, advice and guidance (IAG) about university applications and study, recognising that an 'information gap' disproportionately affects applicants from underrepresented groups and those who are less familiar with the institution to which they are applying. PhD admissions are often perceived as impenetrable and lacking transparency, which can impact applicants' ability to submit a competitive application and put them off applying altogether. By providing tailored, specialist IAG to applicants who might not have otherwise had access to it, such programmes aim to increase offer rates to these groups and increase their participation in study.

The University of Cambridge has run a support programme for undergraduate applicants for several years. The relevant learnings from that programme helped to develop AIM: PhD, which launched in 2024. While there is little evaluation data from similar postgraduate programmes in the UK, there is evidence that suggests that mentoring can be associated with improved rates of progression to higher education.

Aims

The exact aims of an applicant support programme will depend on your institution's priorities, but may include:

- increasing the number of applications from people from certain underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds
- improving offer rates and representation of students from certain underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds
- decreasing the offer gap between applicants who have previously studied at the institution and those who have not.

Design

- Identify the aim of the programme.
- Review application data to determine the underrepresented groups you wish to target. In particular, consider the intersection between race and ethnicity and socio-economic background, and which criteria to use to identify the students you wish to target. Consider the eligibility criteria for the programme, eg race and ethnicity and/or socio-economic criteria.
- Identify the specific interventions that the programme will deliver and at what points in the programme they will take place.
- Consider how the programme could offer support from pre-application to enrolment stages.
- Develop theory of change to link interventions to outcomes and detail how each outcome will be achieved.

Implementation guide

Preparation

- Plan staff resources needed to deliver the programme, especially colleagues with specialist academic or admissions knowledge required to assess applications and deliver sessions. Secure resource for this where needed.
- Gather list of participating courses and departments and understand the application or entry requirements for each.
- Agree with participating courses any special arrangements for dealing with PhD applications from programme participants (eg guaranteed interview, application highlighted to assessors).

- Determine application process for programme and set up application form if necessary (see **Tools and resources** section for example application questions).
- Advertise programme and recruit participants. Consider how to reach target groups through targeted advertising (eg via other universities, third sector organisations or professional networks).
- Recruit and train mentors (mentors could be PhD students).
- Organise briefing for staff involved in programme.
- Collate or create resources for participants and mentors.
- Consider how records of mentoring meetings, participant goals etc will be kept.
- Establish payment system for mentors (consider flexible monthly hours).

Implementation

- Consider launch event and/or in-person visit.
- Support mentors to establish relationships with participants.
- Deliver programmed activities, such as mentoring and information sessions.

Evaluation

- Keep staff reflection log throughout programme to capture thoughts, successes and areas for improvement.
- Plan pre- and post-programme data collection from participants, and light-touch evaluation at regular intervals throughout programme.
- Consider how other stakeholders might contribute to programme impact and process evaluation (eg mentors, staff).
- Consider using tracking tool such as the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) to monitor participant destinations.

Tips and implementation recommendations

Responding to challenges:

Assessing applicant suitability for the programme

- In the programme application, include questions on research interests, motivations for doctoral study and programme expectations.
- Consider contextual data from applicants alongside information on academic performance.
- For those included in the assessment of applications, emphasise the importance of not seeking polished applicants, but instead identifying those who would benefit from support to develop their application.

Low participant engagement

- Consider in-person launch event to give participants a chance to meet mentors and establish a relationship.
- Support mentors to engage with participants (eg setting expectations, conversation starters, goal setting, in-person meetings).
- Make expectations around engagement clear in application process.
- Set regular meetings between participants and mentors.
- Establish process for off-boarding non-responsive participants.

Timing and structure of programme: recruitment takes place before applicants have begun to consider PhD opportunities or full programme is too time consuming

- Offer maximum flexibility in recruitment: applications open longer; rolling start dates.
- Consider a condensed or flexible version of programme.
- Promote the programme year-round and have an online ‘register your interest’ form to capture interest.

Low number of applications

- Ensure the application process is not unnecessarily lengthy.
- Promote the programme on different platforms or channels.
- Consider third-sector organisations, education providers, professional networks or similar, who might have direct links with potential participants.
- Encourage current students to share details with their networks.
- Consider how the eligibility criteria can be widened to encourage applications, while allowing underrepresented groups to be prioritised if oversubscribed.

Tools and resources

Example application questions

The questions below are provided as examples of questions that could be used to assess eligibility and motivations for an applicant support programme. This is not an exhaustive list, and we have not provided response options for multiple choice questions. Where appropriate, we recommend giving a 'prefer not to say' option.

Assessing eligibility

- During your time at secondary school, did any of your parents, step-parents or guardians have an undergraduate degree (eg BA, BSc etc), or a postgraduate qualification such as a master's, a postgraduate diploma, a postgraduate certificate or a doctorate?
- Were you eligible for Free School Meals at secondary school? ('Free School Meals' refers to school meals available free of charge to individuals whose financial circumstances make them eligible.)
- Have you ever lived in public care or as a looked-after child for a period of 3 months or more? This can include:
  - living with foster carers under local authority care
  - living in a residential children's home
  - being 'looked after at home' under a supervision order
  - living with friends or relatives in kinship care – either through a formal arrangement (eg a Special Guardianship order) or an informal arrangement without Local Authority support
- Do/did you have caring responsibilities for a family member or friend who could not manage without this help during secondary school and/or your undergraduate study? (Caring responsibilities include providing unpaid care to a family member or friend who could not cope without your support, lasting for 3 months or more, occupying more than 10 hours per week. This may be due to illness, disability, a mental health issue, or substance misuse.)

Contextual statement (optional)

This is an opportunity for you to tell us about any events or circumstances that have had an impact on your education and limited your ability to perform in your studies. You do not need to provide personal or detailed information about these circumstances; we only ask you give details of the **impact** that they have had on your studies.

Events or circumstances might include:
- factors that you felt limited your choice of institution when choosing your university
- any essential regular commitments that impacted the extent to which you could dedicate yourself to your studies (eg caring responsibilities, employment during studies etc)
- any serious disruption to your studies that prevented you from studying for at least 3 months over the course of a year (eg financial considerations, illnesses, bereavement etc)

Motivations

- Please tell us about your motivations for studying for a PhD, including how it supports your future career aspirations. You may also like to talk about relevant previous study or employment.
- Please provide a brief summary of your research interests and potential PhD research topics.
- Please tell us about your motivations for joining this programme, and how you think it will support you in your goals.

References

Professional reference

- Please rank the applicant's intellectual ability demonstrated in their professional role.
  - **Exceptional** – the best you know in your current professional life
  - **Very strong** – among the very best you know in your current professional life
  - **Strong** – among the best you know in your current professional life
  - **Good** – significantly better than the majority you know in your current professional life
  - Not in any of the above categories
- How large is the group of workers to which you are comparing this applicant's performance?

Academic reference

- Please rank the applicant's academic performance:
  - **Exceptional** – best performer in year
  - **Very strong** – among top 5% in year
  - **Strong** – among the top 10% in year
  - **Good** – among top 20% in year
  - Not in any of the above categories
- How large is the cohort size to which you are comparing this applicant's performance?
- Are you aware of adverse circumstances that may have prevented the applicant from achieving their full potential in reported academic results?
  If you feel able to do so, please use the space below to provide any relevant further information about the impact of these circumstances on the applicant's academic achievement. Please do not provide information about the nature of the adverse circumstances or disclose confidential information about the applicant.

Professional and academic references

Please use the space below to provide details of anything else that you think is relevant to the application.

References

Brutger, R. (2024). The PhD pipeline initiative works: evidence from a randomized intervention to help underrepresented students prepare for PhDs in political science. *Journal of Politics*, 86(1), 383–387.

DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING A COMPETENCY-BASED ADMISSIONS TOOL

Overview

The following sections provide guidance on developing a competency-based admissions tool. Topics include framework design, assessment rubrics, competency selection, question development, implementation planning and evaluation. Practical tips, resources and examples support each step.

Rationale

Research indicates that attributes such as motivation, persistence, conscientiousness and effective study skills are strong predictors of doctoral success. However, these qualities are frequently overlooked in current admissions practices, which tend to privilege narrow academic metrics that can disadvantage ethnically and racially marginalised applicants.

Competency-based admissions frameworks assess candidates based on demonstrated abilities, potential and diverse experiences, rather than relying solely on traditional academic metrics.

This approach enables a more equitable evaluation by taking a holistic view of applicants' competencies linked to doctoral success, supported by clear and consistent assessment criteria. It is designed to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in access to doctoral research by creating fairer opportunities for candidates whose talents may be obscured by structural inequalities in education and attainment.

Aims

- Reduce racial and ethnic disparities in postgraduate admissions and improve outcomes for racially and ethnically marginalised groups.
- Minimise bias in assessment processes and enhance transparency in decision-making.
- Support holistic evaluation by considering a broad range of evidence.
- Create space for non-traditional backgrounds, such as career changers and industry professionals, to promote fairer admissions.
- Highlight broader potential to enable more equitable assessments and widen participation for all underrepresented groups in doctoral research.

Design

Identify predictors of success through literature review

Building an evidence base is essential when advocating for institutional change. Conducting a literature review can help identify the competencies most strongly associated with success in doctoral research, thereby strengthening the rationale for adopting a competency-based admissions approach. Research consistently highlights competencies such as motivation, conscientiousness and resilience as predictors of doctoral success.

Existing research highlights that socio-emotional competencies are strong predictors of PhD success.

Tip: Literature review search: *What competencies predict doctoral success?*

Key terms to search:

- socio-emotional competencies
- non-cognitive skills
- psychosocial characteristics
- transversal skills | transferable skills

Choose competencies

Select competencies that:

- are relevant to your institutional context, adaptable to a range of applicant strengths and that experiences align with your institutional context and existing processes

- promote inclusive assessment practices
- accommodate diverse backgrounds and experiences
- can be assessed through evidence provided by the applicant.

Tip: Competencies like 'Self-discipline' or 'Openness to change' reflect conscientiousness, a key predictor of PhD success – but may unintentionally exclude those who approach structure or adaptability differently (eg neurodivergent applicants). Consider selecting competencies to reflect diverse working styles rather than reinforcing rigid expectations.

Assessment framework

An effective assessment mechanism can be referred to as a framework, which brings together the core components used to assess applicants in a consistent and transparent way.

This includes:

- a definition of what you are assessing and why
- a rubric outlining performance levels
- a scoring scale for assigning numerical values
- weighting of competencies (if applicable)
- a structure for calculating total scores.

Choosing a framework

- Review existing competency-based frameworks .
- Identify elements that align with your institution's needs and context.
- Consider adopting or adapting an existing framework if it matches your requirements.

Tip: Collaborate with colleagues running similar programmes to share templates or resources. Existing frameworks may need adaptation, but they provide valuable starting points and significantly reduce development time.

Scoring criteria and evaluation structure

Scoring criteria

To ensure consistency in how competencies are evaluated, it's important to provide structured criteria that guide assessors in determining whether a candidate demonstrates competency at a low, moderate or high level.

- Clearly define performance levels – what would a low-, moderate- and high-level response look like?
- Describe what each level might look like for each competency.
- Ensure the rubric is structured for fairness. The language should be inclusive, and assessments should allow for different demonstrations of competency.
- Provide concrete examples of how competencies may be demonstrated differently (eg research experience vs professional experience).

Scoring scale

You could choose between a 3-point or a 5-point scale:

- A 3-point scale (eg Low, Medium, High) may simplify assessment and enhance equity by reducing subjective distinctions that do not meaningfully predict success.
- A 5-point scale may allow for finer differentiation between applicants.

Weighting competencies

Consider whether all competencies should carry equal weight, or if some (eg motivation, independent research potential) should be prioritised based on the specific needs of your programme.

Defining score levels

Set clear criteria for what constitutes low-, moderate- and high-level responses. Ensure these reflect a holistic view of potential, rather than focusing solely on academic achievement. To support fair and inclusive assessment, scoring guidelines should explicitly recognise a wide range of experiences, including professional and personal contexts, as valid demonstrations of competency. Assessors should be encouraged to value different forms of evidence and avoid privileging traditional academic pathways.

Total scoring structure

Decide how the overall score will be calculated. What will the total score range be?

Seek feedback

Organise workshops, focus groups or meetings with:

- internal staff members
- academics and assessors
- wider staff members
- representatives from diverse departments
- current students who can reflect on the experience of applicants being assessed

Initial feedback sessions are a valuable opportunity to get feedback on the competencies, framework, assessment criteria and scoring scale you've chosen. They can also help identify important competencies you may have left out.

> **Tip**: Tailor competencies to disciplinary needs. For example, lab-based programmes may prioritise teamwork, while arts and social sciences may emphasise independent research.

Question development

If the admissions process in your programme, department or institution includes interviews, you can use the competencies identified in the previous steps to develop an interview protocol that incorporates more structured questions aligned with these competencies. For more detail on how to increase structure in PhD interviews, refer to the resource pack: **Designing and Implementing Race-Equitable Interview Practices**. Questions can also be included in written application forms.

Create a question bank with flexible options for interviews and/or application forms, if relevant to your context.

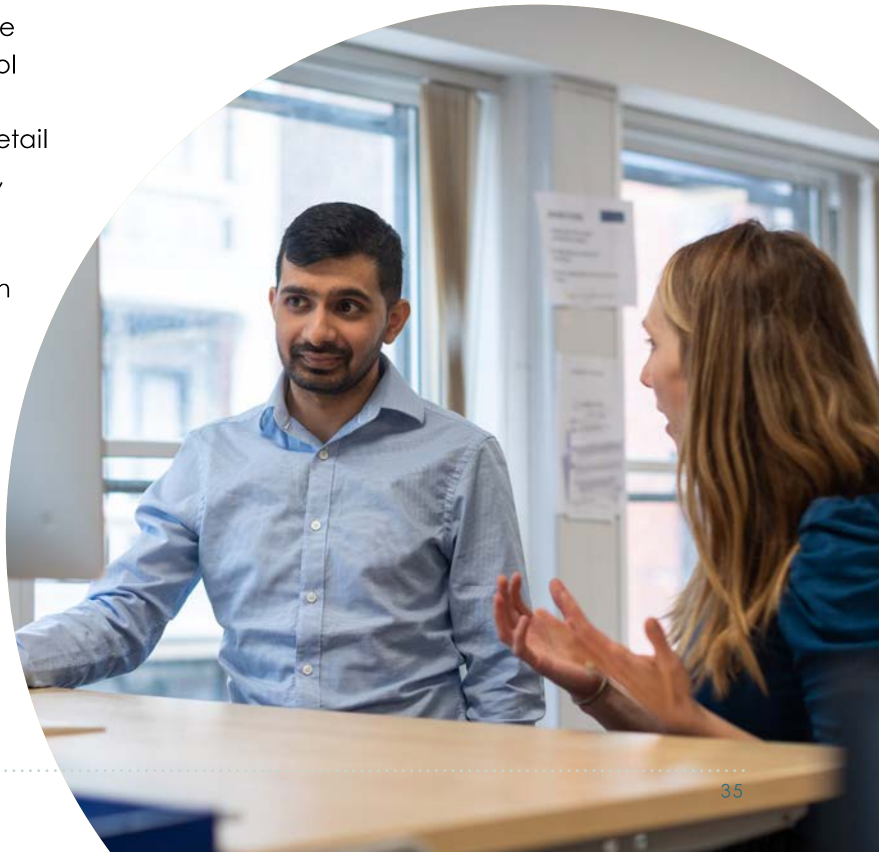
Provide assessment guidelines to clarify what each question is intended to evaluate. For example:

- **Motivation:** assess the applicant's drive and intrinsic motivation to learn and develop.
- **Independent study:** assess the applicant's ability to work independently and meet milestones.

Review language for ways to affirm diverse experiences and avoid any unintentional assumptions about applicants' prior access to opportunities.

Design questions that allow expanding ways for applicants to demonstrate strengths, rather than favouring only traditional academic pathways. Focus interview questions on potential and pay attention to transferable skills from other relevant context, such as employment.

Incorporate different types of questions, such as hypothetical scenarios to explore how candidates might handle future situations and questions about past experiences to understand how candidates have demonstrated key competencies. For more details refer to the **Designing and Implementing Race-Equitable Interview Practices** resource pack.



Implementation guide

Piloting

Implementation will vary depending on institutional constraints, resources and existing admissions processes.

You could think about:

- parallel assessment with your current assessment system
- targeted testing of specific components in your admissions process
- rolling out the new tool to a particular department or field of study to test.

Pre-pilot activities

- **Talk to students**: gather feedback from prospective applicants.
- **Stakeholder meetings**: engage faculty, admissions teams and decision-makers.
- **Final adjustments:** refine the tool based on feedback.

Planning considerations

- **Timeline development**: plan the pilot rollout, evaluation process and troubleshooting strategy in advance.
- **Logistics coordination**:
  - Who will be responsible for implementation?
  - How will data be collected (eg forms, existing systems)?
  - Can this be integrated into current admissions platforms?
  - Which staff members need to be involved?

4. Evaluation

Data collection

Use both quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate the impact and usability of your competency-based assessment approach. Consider the scope of your pilot or trial – for example, are you testing the tool alongside your existing assessment method, within a specific department, or only during interviews?

Quantitative data

Collect numerical data to compare outcomes with your current admissions process.

- Run a parallel scoring exercise: if you're trialling the tool alongside your existing system, ask assessors to score applicants using both and compare results.
- Use Likert-scale questions to gather feedback on clarity, usability and fairness.
  Example questions: *How confident did you feel using the scoring criteria?* or *How easy was it to differentiate between applicants?*
- Analyse outcomes by applicant characteristics (eg offer rates by race and ethnicity or other characteristics) to identify any shifts in patterns for underrepresented groups.

Qualitative feedback

Gather detailed insights into how assessors experience the tool.

- Use open-text boxes in feedback forms to capture reflections on usability, fairness and clarity.
- Conduct short interviews or focus groups to explore assessors' views in more depth.
- Ask whether the tool supported holistic evaluation and felt fairer for applicants from underrepresented groups.

Analysis

- Compare outcomes for underrepresented groups across different assessment methods using both quantitative data and qualitative feedback.

  What are the key differences and similarities between the two methods?
- Review assessor feedback to identify recurring themes related to usability, clarity and perceived fairness.
- Evaluate implementation to surface operational challenges (eg time burden, training needs).
- Identify areas for improvement based on the data collected and use these insights to refine your framework.

Next steps

- Action plans:
  - detailed strategies for next-phase implementation
  - plan wider implementation or a larger pilot.
- Share outcomes with stakeholders involved.
- Express gratitude to participants for their contributions.

Resources

Example qualitative feedback questions for assessors

General feasibility of applying this in practice

- What worked well?
- What can we improve and how?

Recording decisions

- How can we best record decisions to ensure transparency of the decision-making?
- Is the framework meaningful?
- Does it allow us to better assess the strengths applicants might bring to doctoral study?
- Is it less biased against students who have traditionally been underrepresented at the university?

Useful resources from institutions and initiatives

1. Equity in Doctoral Education through Partnership and Innovation (EDEPI)

EDEPI is a project aimed at creating a more inclusive and competency-based PhD admissions process by reducing reliance on traditional academic metrics.

Postgraduate Researcher Competency-Based Admissions Framework and Guidance – a detailed guide on competency-based admissions, including structured assessment criteria, interview guidance, key competency domains and question bank.
Read the framework

2. MasterMind Europe: competency-based admissions at the master's level

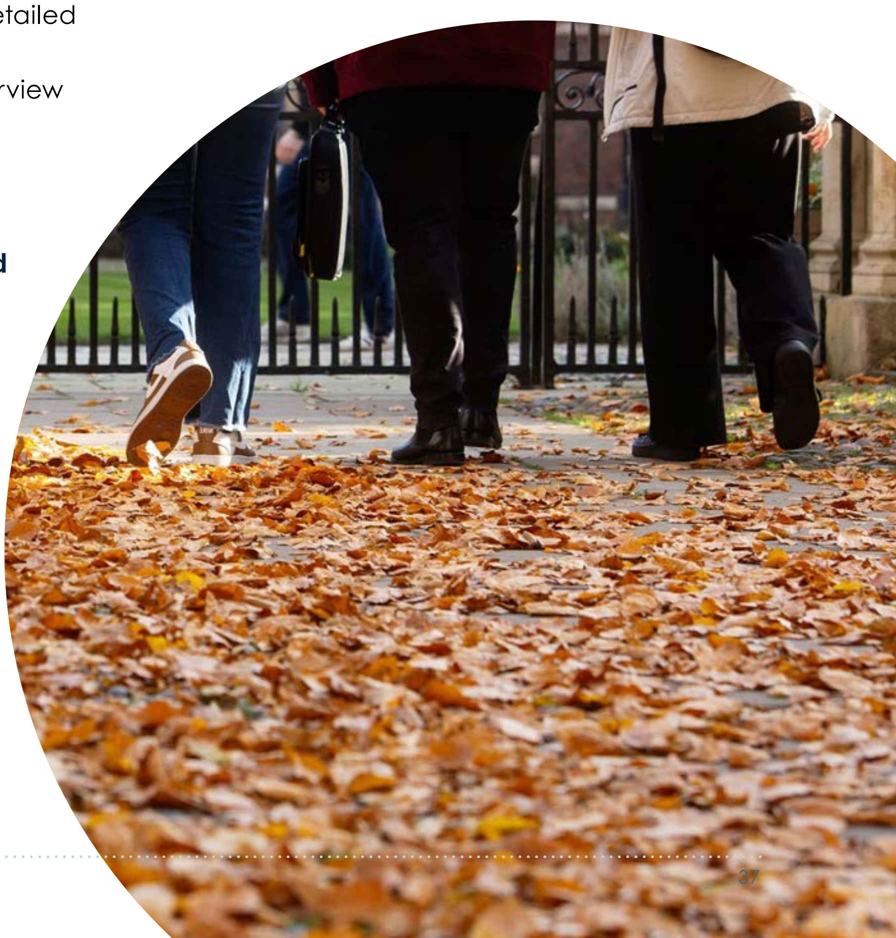
MasterMind is for competency-based assessment at the master's level. While not focused on PhDs, it has a lot of detailed guidance, advice and templates for creating a competency-based admissions framework.

- **Framework Development Guide**: this resource provides a detailed step-by-step guide and valuable questions to ask yourself when developing an admissions framework.
  Read the guide
- **Assessing Competencies** – a structured guide with competency evaluation questions.
  Assessing Personal Competencies and Traits
- **MasterMind full resource library** – a collection of templates and guidance
  Access all MasterMind resources

3. University of Wisconsin – Holistic Admissions Toolkit for graduate admissions

The University of Wisconsin's Holistic Admissions Toolkit is designed for graduate-level admissions. While not specifically for the doctoral level, it includes valuable resources for structuring equitable interviews, competency-based rubrics and templates for ideas when developing your own.

Holistic Admissions Toolkit – a comprehensive resource covering holistic review strategies, competency-based rubrics and interview standardisation.
Access the toolkit



INTRODUCING CONTEXTUAL DATA IN DOCTORAL ADMISSIONS

Overview

Contextual data has been used successfully in undergraduate (UG) admissions across the higher education sector for many years and is widely recognised as an important component in ensuring fair and equitable admissions processes, thereby enhancing academic excellence. More recently, contextual data has also been recommended for use in doctoral admissions and has been introduced across a number of institutions (including **Oxford** and **Cambridge**).

Contextualisation is an essential component of reforming doctoral admissions as it helps to recognise the value and the richness of a wider range of applicant experiences. It is therefore one way of mitigating the effects of structural racism and other forms of structural inequality, as well as enhancing academic excellence.

The purpose of this resource pack is to provide a step-by-step guide to introducing contextual data into doctoral admissions, which can be adapted as appropriate to different institutional contexts. While there are crossovers with the use of contextual data in UG admissions, there are also important differences at PhD level to take into account, as explained below.

Aims

Explain how to:

- collect and use contextual data in doctoral admissions
- support academic staff in understanding and applying contextual data effectively.

Implementation guide

Preparation

1. Collect the data

To use contextual data in doctoral admissions, institutions will need to collect their own widening participation (WP) information from applicants: there is no central service, such as UCAS, for providing and verifying this.

Actions

- Review and expand your institution's application form to include the collection (on a voluntary basis) of WP information from applicants about their context, background and personal circumstances.
- Think carefully about how questions are worded, and provide supporting help text, to ensure that applicants understand and interpret the questions correctly, and understand that the information is being used for contextual assessment.
- Update your applicant privacy notice and applicant-facing webpages in order to ensure your institution is able to store, process and share the data securely and in accordance with GDPR (the data should not be shared beyond the purposes of academic and scholarship assessment, and evaluation).

2. Choose the metrics

To decide what WP information to collect, you will need to consider which metrics for assessing disadvantage and underrepresentation you are planning to use as part of the doctoral admissions process.

Actions

- Research the different metrics used in contextual admissions – such as Free School Meals (FSM), Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), care-experienced – and the numerous studies regarding how to **measure disadvantage**, as well as which are the most **suitable metrics** to use (the Office for Students **equality of opportunity risk register** and **access and participation data dashboard** provide helpful resources).
- Develop institutional priorities and collect the relevant WP information from applicants in order to build up a detailed database over several years. Where collecting information about race and ethnicity, it is recommended to use guidance from the UK census.

- Use this database to analyse your PhD cohort, including which groups of applicants are more or less successful in the admissions process (for example, you might compare your PhD cohort with your UG cohort, as well as with the cohorts across the sector (via Higher Education Statistics Agency data).
- Based on the gaps identified through your data analysis, refine your priorities and application form to ensure you are collecting the most relevant and useful information.

Implementation

1. Calculate the contextual scores

Calculating contextual scores, based on the WP information collected, will help you to compare applicants in terms of their relative advantages and disadvantages. It will also enable assessors to understand an applicant's context quickly and easily.

Actions

- Decide how many points to assign to each metric, based on a) the research literature (referenced above) on the accuracy and reliability of each metric; and b) the gaps that you have identified in your own admissions data and the resultant institutional priorities.
- Automate the process for score calculation and build a test plan to reduce the risk of data error.

2. Use the data in the admissions process

Contextual data should be considered at every stage of the admissions process and used in carefully considering applicants' prior attainment and academic potential rather than applied as a one-off 'compensatory' mechanism.

Actions

- Agree how to define the 'disadvantaged' group of applicants. For example, this could be the top 20% of applicants in terms of contextual score.
- Assign responsibility, for example to the Admissions/Programme Lead, to ensure that appropriate consideration is given to disadvantaged applicants.
- Agree what 'appropriate consideration' means in practice for your institution/ academic department. For example:
  - Disadvantaged applicants who meet the minimum academic standard proceed automatically to the interview stage of the admissions process.
  - Where disadvantaged applicants are assessed academically and are considered to be close to the threshold for proceeding to the next stage of the admissions process, they are reviewed again by the Admissions Lead.
- Develop training and guidance to ensure assessors and Admissions Leads are clear on how scores are calculated and how they are expected to act. The guidance may need to be adapted to fit with different academic departments' admissions processes (eg where they do/do not conduct interviews).

Overall, if the use of contextual data is to be effective, institutions will need to include enough flexibility in their doctoral admissions criteria and processes to allow for offer-making to applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds where appropriate (see also the related resource packs: **Designing and Implementing a Competency-Based Admissions Tool** and **Designing and Implementing Race-Equitable Interview Practices**).

Evaluation

To enhance the collection of WP information, you will need to review applicant responses in order to ensure they understand the questions (eg review the number of 'don't know' responses and refine the wording where required).

To enhance the calculation of scores, you will need to continue to analyse your admissions data. This is to understand where gaps are closing/emerging over time, and therefore which metrics should be prioritised.

To enhance the guidance and training, surveys and interviews should be carried out with academic assessors focusing in particular on their understanding of how scores are calculated and of how they are expected to act.

Tips and implementation recommendations

International applicants

Contextualising international applicants is more challenging than contextualising UK applicants. This is because UK institutions have a better understanding of the UK context and better access to UK data. When collecting WP information via the application form, you will need to consider which questions are relevant and applicable for UK applicants and which for international applicants (eg questions relating to postcodes and UK government definitions, such as FSM eligibility, will not be relevant for international applicants).

When calculating scores, it is recommended to use different scoring systems for UK and international applicants.

Self-reported data and verification

Some of the data provided by UCAS as part of UG admissions is verified. However, if data is collected for doctoral admissions via an application form, this is self-reported and not verified.

You will need to consider whether to introduce verification measures, for example requesting applicants share accompanying evidence in support. However, this can create significant administrative burdens both for applicants and for institutions, as well as creating delays to admissions timelines. A light-touch form of verification can be carried out by comparing the contextual data with referee statements and other information submitted. You may also choose to collect contextual statements from applicants, to supplement the data and assist with verification.

Where information is not verified it is important to consider how strongly this should be used in the admissions process and how assessors should be guided in relation to this.

Missing data

Some applicants may not know the answers to certain questions or may choose not to provide information. Where there is missing data, you will need to decide whether to still score the applicants. If applicants with missing data are not assigned a score, you will need to develop an approach to assessing these applicants alongside those given a score.

Scholarship assessment

This toolkit is focused on the use of contextual data as part of PhD admissions processes. However, some of the contextual data collected may also be used and adapted for the purposes of doctoral scholarship assessment.

Resources

- Using contextual data to widen access to higher education: **https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13603108.2019.1678076**
- Sutton Trust: *Inequality in the Highest Degree?*: **https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Inequality-in-the-Highest-Degree-Final-Report.pdf**
- Sutton Trust: *Measuring Disadvantage*: **https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/measuring-disadvantage-higher-education-polar-fsm/**
- Which are the most suitable contextual indicators for use in widening participation to HE?: **https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02671522.2017.1402083**
- Office for Students:
  - Equality of Opportunity Risk Register: **https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/equality-of-opportunity-risk-register/**
  - Access and Participation Data Dashboard: **https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/data-dashboard/**
- HESA data: **https://www.hesa.ac.uk**

DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING RACE-EQUITABLE INTERVIEW PRACTICES

Overview

Interviews are a central part of many doctoral admissions, providing opportunities to assess candidates beyond their written applications. However, traditional interview practices tend to lack consistency, making them more prone to biases. While PhD admissions are typically highly contextualised to the discipline and area of study, interviews thus requiring flexibility, developing an agreed set of questions and underlying criteria can help ensure that all candidates are assessed more fairly. This guide provides practical recommendations to design and implement structured interview protocols, with the overall aim to support ethnic and race-equitable selection practices.

Rationale

Compared to other stages of the admissions process, interviews are often less structured, making them more vulnerable to bias, as research shows. This can disadvantage applicants from ethnically and racially minoritised backgrounds, even when they meet academic requirements.

Because PhD admissions are more decentralised and interviews usually occur after initial screening, there is limited evidence on how interviews affect equity in doctoral admissions. However, research in fields like medical education and the labour market shows that adding structure to interviews, such as using standardised questions and clear scoring criteria, can reduce bias and lead to fairer, more equitable evaluations.

- **Medical school admissions**: studies show that structured interviews, incorporating standardised questions and independent scoring, reduce the impact of social biases. For example, Lumb et al (2010) examined 734 postgraduate applicants to a UK medical school and found no significant disparities in outcomes related to gender, race and ethnicity, or socio-economic status. Their approach involved multiple interviewers using pre-determined questions and independent scoring against defined criteria, leading to the conclusion that their structured interviews did not introduce social biases into the selection process.
- **Labour market research**: there is a large body of research on interviews in the employment context. A meta-analysis showed that structured interviews improve reliability and mitigate biases in candidate assessments (Levashina et al, 2014).

While it might not be feasible or desirable to structure the full content of a PhD interview, introducing partial structuring can enhance race-equitable decision-making. Structuring interviews involves two key aspects: content (what candidates are asked) and process (who conducts and assesses interviews and how they are conducted and assessed).

Aims

- Enhance fairness in interview practices by incorporating structured approaches to interviewing.
- Provide clear, consistent interview evaluation criteria to support race-equitable decision-making across all candidates.

Implementation guide

Developing structured interview protocols – with a bank of agreed questions and clear evaluation criteria – can improve consistency, fairness and transparency in admissions processes. Embedding an equity lens in this work means broadening the ways applicants can demonstrate strengths, designing questions and criteria that recognise different routes into research and academia – for example, by paying attention to transferable skills from employment.

Where institutional policy allows, consider sharing the criteria or competencies that will be used to assess interviewees (due to AI, there are recent concerns about sharing questions). Making these expectations clear can help level the playing field, enabling applicants from all backgrounds to prepare accordingly. Where it is not possible, providing general information about the interview and areas of focus can still promote greater transparency.

Preparation

1. Conduct a PhD job analysis

Start by identifying the key competencies and skills needed in your PhD programme. These should guide both the design of interview questions and the criteria used to evaluate responses. For complete advice on this refer to the resource pack **Designing and Implementing a Competency-Based Admissions Tool** for guidance on framework design, competency selection, rubric development and planning for implementation.

- Clarify and develop a list of competencies that can be assessed through the use of interviews (eg research skills, critical thinking, collaboration). Make use of existing frameworks such as the **Researcher Development Framework (RDF).**
- Agree what can be assessed through interviews: some competencies may be better evaluated through written materials, while others lend themselves well to interview-based assessment. The increased use of AI in written applications might suggest a more extended use of interviews.

2. Develop a bank of questions

Design questions that align with the identified competencies, allowing applicants to draw from a range of personal, academic and professional experiences. Use a combination of:

- **past behavioural questions (PBQs)** – based on the idea that past behaviour predicts future behaviour, PBQs invite applicants to describe how they have approached relevant situations in the past (eg *Can you describe a time when you had to independently learn something new or solve a complex problem?*)
- **situational questions (SQs)** – rooted in goal-setting theory where intentions predict future behaviour, SQs ask candidates how they would respond to hypothetical job-related scenarios (eg *How would you approach conflicting deadlines for research deliverables?*)

3. Design rating scales

Design and use rating scales to guide consistent evaluation across assessors:

- Define clear performance levels to evaluate the interview or individual responses. Use simple levels, 1–3 (eg exemplary, satisfactory, insufficient) or 1–5 for greater differentiation (eg below expectations, needs improvement, meets expectations, exceeds expectations, outstanding).
- For additional consistency, include anchored scales, which include specific examples, or anchors, to facilitate consistent ratings of responses across interviewers. For example:

Question: Can you describe a time when you had to independently learn something new or solve a complex problem?

Rating scale (1–4) example:

1 **Below expectations**	Provides a vague or incomplete response with little evidence of independent planning or problem-solving.
2 **Needs improvement**	Demonstrates some independence but provides limited evidence of independent work and problem-solving.
3 **Meets expectations**	Clearly explains how they approached a new or complex topic, sought resources, overcame challenges and applied what they learned independently.
4 **Exceeds expectations**	Meets level 3 criteria and additionally demonstrates reflection on their learning process, broader applications or how they shared/built upon their new knowledge.

Implementation

Once the interview protocol is designed, it is important to pay attention to the process. While structure improves fairness in assessments, flexibility is key, especially in the context of discipline-specific or project-based doctoral programmes. The steps below outline some practical recommendations in relation to the implementation of structured interviews:

1. Train interviewers

Prepare and deliver training to socialise the interview protocol and procedures.

2. Conduct structured interviews

- Follow the agreed protocol across candidates.
- Allow a proper space for natural follow-up, but ensure follow-up questions remain relevant to the agreed competencies and criteria.

3. Rate responses systematically

- Use the constructed matrix or scale and ensure clarity on whether overall or per-question scoring is expected.
- Strongly encourage interviewers to make notes during interviews to support scoring and decision-making. Provide a template for assessors to record notes against criteria.

4. Collaborate across panels

- If your admissions process includes a panel of interviewers, ensure a diverse representation of people. A range of perspectives can help to mitigate individual bias and might allow underrepresented candidates to see themselves represented.
- Facilitate collective discussions after interviews, where panel members compare and reflect on their ratings. These conversations help to calibrate scores and promote shared interpretation of the criteria.

5. Evaluation

- Monitor and track key indicators or metrics, such as the diversity of shortlisted and selected candidates, to gain insight into fairness issues across social groups and to understand whether the structured process is contributing to more equitable outcomes
- Conduct post-interview debrief sessions with interviewers to capture experiences and reflect on the process.
- Use this feedback to refine the question bank, rating scales and training sessions.

Tips and implementation recommendations

Be aware of racial and ethnic biases

Acknowledge how implicit biases or stereotypes can disadvantage underrepresented candidates. Focus on structured processes to counteract these tendencies.

Delay judgements

Avoid forming pre-interview impressions from application materials or making snap judgements during interviews based on superficial traits like confidence or appearance. Some organisations now separate application forms and CVs from the interview process to help reduce anchoring bias (where prior information, such as educational background or work history, can influence an interviewer's assessment).

Train interviewers to focus on interview evidence and triangulate later with application materials. This approach minimises bias and helps prevent false positives and false negatives. A false positive occurs when a candidate who appears strong on paper underperforms, yet positive preconceptions obscure observing weaknesses. Conversely, a false negative happens when a candidate is prematurely dismissed, preventing their strengths from being recognised during interviews.

Use multiple interviewers

Include at least 2 interviewers to enhance reliability and provide balanced perspectives.

Avoid general judgements

Avoid vague criteria such as 'fit' or 'hireability'. Instead, rely on well-defined indicators to ensure fairness in evaluations.

References

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Lumb, A. B., Homer, M., & Miller, A. (2010). Equity in interviews: do personal characteristics impact on admission interview scores? *Medical Education*, *44*(11), 1077–1083.

IMPLEMENTING A PROCESS EVALUATION OF INITIATIVES AIMED AT TRANSFORMING DOCTORAL ADMISSIONS

Overview

Conducting an evaluation of initiatives introduced is critical for understanding their impact and any challenges encountered during implementation. This is essential for sustaining meaningful transformations. Two major types of evaluation are often employed in this context: impact evaluation and process evaluation.

- Impact evaluation focuses on outcomes, such as whether an initiative achieved its intended effect (eg increasing PhD offers for racially and ethnically minoritised applicants).
- Process evaluation, on the other hand, examines the mechanisms of change, including how initiatives are designed, implemented, and used in practice.

While impact evaluations typically occur at the end of an intervention, process evaluations can take place during implementation, enabling iterative refinement of interventions. This guide focuses on process evaluation, offering a general guide to assess the processes driving change in doctoral admissions.

To embed sustainable change, insights should be shared with institutional governance structures and leadership teams. Doing so helps ensure that learning feeds into broader organisational structures.

Rationale

Impact evaluations are key to measure and keep track on progress. But critically reviewing doctoral admissions to be more inclusive requires a more explicit focus on the processes of change itself and a detailed understanding of how change unfolds. Process evaluations focus on the *how*, examining whether initiatives are implemented as intended and identifying the factors that facilitate or hinder progress.

A process evaluation is particularly valuable for various reasons.

- **Addressing complexity**: changes to doctoral admissions often involve introducing multiple initiatives across various stages of the process, making it challenging to isolate the impact of any single intervention.
- **Enabling iterative reflection**: process evaluations allow for continuous feedback on the design and implementation of initiatives, offering insights into how change occurs. This is essential for ensuring that initiatives are sufficiently tailored to departmental or disciplinary needs, and that the departments have the capacity and administrative and technical support required to maintain them.
- **Providing comprehensive insight**: process evaluations offer qualitative insights by integrating perceptions from multiple stakeholders.

As such, a process evaluation includes:

- understanding the theory of each respective initiative (as planned and understood by implementing departments), resulting in the generation of initiative-specific theories of change
- exploring how individual initiatives align with or complement existing institutional strategies or theories of change where they exist
- understanding perspectives of staff (academic, administrative etc) involved in the initiatives
- understanding department-level admissions practices, and how these may have changed either in response to a specific initiative or as a result of wider institutional cultural change
- understanding whole-institution processes of change and culture shifts, including by the generation of a theory of change.

Aims

- Offer general guidance for setting a process evaluation in place to understand how admissions initiatives are implemented and used in practice
- Support the collection of feedback on enablers and challenges from a diverse range of stakeholders to inform the refinement of initiatives for future admissions cycles.

Implementation guide

Preparation

1. Identify the individuals you want to speak with

Engage a diverse range of individuals, including:

- those who contributed to the selection and design of the initiatives
- staff involved in admissions who applied the initiatives in practice.

Speaking with a variety of stakeholders ensures a clearer understanding of how initiatives are being used in practice, whether the initiatives are perceived as achieving desired results, and how the initiatives could be further refined.

2. Decide what methods you will use to gather information

Choose methods appropriate for your context. Your choice may depend on the availability of those you seek feedback from and/or the number of people you want to reach.

- **Interviews**: offer in-depth discussions and feedback (these require more time and resources from both the interviewer and the interviewee).
- **Focus groups or workshops**: could be most effective if the aim is to have a larger and more interactive discussion among those who used the initiatives. However, they can be hard to organise and not everybody will feel able to share the full range of their views in a group setting.
- **Questionnaires**: can reach larger groups, though engagement may vary. Getting in-depth feedback this way may require participants to write at length in their response.
- **Evidence review** of any relevant department (or university) policies or guidance documents and relevant information, to see if the initiative has been included and how it is articulated.

3. Develop key questions

Decide on the key questions that will guide the interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, etc. For example:

- What initiatives did your department implement and why?
- [For each initiative implemented]: What was your experience of [insert name of initiative]? What worked well? What could be improved?
- Did the initiatives change your perspective or practices around PhD admissions? Why/why not?
- What lessons have been learned for the future implementation of initiatives in the next admissions cycle?

Implementation

- **Conduct feedback sessions**: organise the informal conversations, focus groups or questionnaire(s) to gather qualitative insights from staff about their experiences with new admissions initiatives. Ideally, the first process evaluation should occur after an admissions cycle where the initiatives were piloted, with results used to adjust practices for subsequent cycles.
- **Document insights**: take notes during the discussion to document the main points. You may also choose to record the sessions or collect interview data, provided you have obtained the necessary permissions from all participants and ensured compliance with data storage and protection requirements.
- **Analyse feedback**: organise and analyse the collected information, identifying common feedback to understand how each initiative has been implemented and perceived with each department.
- **Refine initiatives**: use this information to make recommendations about whether any initiative should be refined or adapted and how.

Tips and implementation recommendations

Timing: schedule process evaluations towards the end of the admissions cycle to capture fresh insights.

Iterative feedback: plan for repeated evaluations to refine initiatives over time.

Focus on mechanisms of change: understand the why and how behind observed outcomes to foster deeper institutional shifts.

Connect this analysis with impact data: this helps assess not only the perception of change, but also whether initiatives were effective in transforming offer rates for different social groups.

Sample: Interview questions for a process evaluation

1. Role

What was your role in the process of implementing [introduce initiative] in your department/programme/unit?

2. Purpose

- What do you believe was the purpose of introducing [name of the initiative] in the PhD admissions process?
- At the start of implementation, did you anticipate it would influence your assessment process (eg scoring, shortlisting or offer-making)? If yes, in what ways?

3. Preparation

Did you receive external guidance or training before or during the use of this initiative?

- If yes, how useful were the materials provided?
- If training was provided, what was your perspective on it?

4. Process

- How did you use the [data/resources or tools/training/guidance] provided by this initiative during the assessment process?
  - At what points in the assessment process did you or the panel consider the data/tools/resources?
  - What was your experience?
- How, if at all, did the [initiative name] influence your approach to (eg scoring applications, making shortlisting decisions etc)
- What is your overall feedback on using this initiative during the assessment process?
  - What do you think happened that would not have done without the initiative?
  - What challenges did you encounter?
  - What worked well?
  - What could be improved?

5. Impact and learning

- What do you think was the overall impact of this initiative on your department?
  - Did it result in changes to timelines or processes?
  - How were departmental/programme selection processes modified or implemented as part of the initiative?
- Has this initiative influenced your perspectives or practices around admissions?
  - If yes, in what ways? Can you share any specific examples?
  - If no, why not?

6. Next steps

- Would you recommend continuing to use this initiative in future admissions processes? Why or why not?
  - If yes, what additional support or improvements would be useful for sustaining or enhancing the initiative?
- Are there any final thoughts or insights you'd like to share?

ASSESSING READINESS FOR CHANGE TOWARDS RACIALLY AND ETHNICALLY EQUITABLE ADMISSIONS PRACTICES

Overview

As higher education institutions work to diversify their doctoral student bodies, introducing changes to established admissions practices can be challenging. Efforts to address racial and ethnic inequities may encounter resistance, a lack of preparation or insufficient information and resources.

This brief guide draws broadly on organisational readiness assessment tools and insights from racial and ethnic equity literature to support doctoral programmes in evaluating their preparedness to adopt more racially and ethnically equitable admissions practices. It is designed as both a conversational and reflective tool to help identify barriers and enablers to transforming admissions processes. It can be used in departmental meetings, academic staff committees or any other departmental decision-making group considering changes to doctoral admissions processes.

Rationale

Transforming doctoral programmes towards greater racial and ethnic equity begins with an honest assessment of current departmental processes, practices and overall readiness for change. This involves recognising and addressing several interconnected dimensions that may enable or hinder transformations. This process demands a dual focus on external pressures and internal preparedness.

Effective change also depends on fostering open dialogue and communication. Discussions about racial and ethnic inequalities often encounter resistance and may spark emotions such as fear, anger, guilt, defensiveness or mistrust. Acknowledging this discomfort openly and creating space for honest, reflective dialogue is an essential first step for productive dialogue.

The following prompts, adapted from Lehman et al (2002) and Miake-Lye et al (2020), help facilitate these practical discussions.

Aims

- Offer practical prompts to facilitate conversations about racial and ethnic equity in doctoral admissions.
- Provide a framework for identifying and assessing enablers and barriers to start implementing racially and ethnically equitable admissions practices.

Implementation guide

Suggested process

- **Set aside some time**: ensure the discussion has an adequate time slot.
- **Focus**: consider covering one section per meeting or selecting a few prompts relevant to your needs per topic.
- **Assign roles**: designate a facilitator to guide the conversation and a note-taker to document insights. The table below can be of help.

Use the following prompts to guide discussions. These questions are grouped into key dimensions:

Outer setting – understanding how external factors, such as funding and regulations, shape equity priorities.

- What aspects of external policies, funders' priorities or funding incentives shape racial and ethnic equity efforts in our doctoral admissions?
- What external mandates, guidelines or benchmarks currently influence our approach to racial and ethnic equity in PhD admissions, if any?
- How does our department's progress compare to similar departments regarding equity-focused admissions changes?

Inner setting – evaluating the organisation's capacity for absorbing change. This includes its processes (eg policies, procedures, IT infrastructure), the quality of formal and informal communications, and the strength of leadership to guide the process.

- What tangible commitments (eg funding, staffing, policy changes, practical changes) are in place to support racial and ethnic equity?
- What resources exist to support changes in admissions processes (eg internal communications channels, regular training events)?
- Are structures (eg data systems, administrative support, IT infrastructure) in place?
- How receptive are our institutional leaders and staff to changes aimed at improving racial and ethnic equity in doctoral admissions?
- What barriers (eg bureaucracy, competing priorities, resource limitations) might hinder our efforts, and what enablers (eg incentives, leadership commitment) might support them?

Initiatives' characteristics – gathering actors' perceptions of the feasibility, adaptability and effectiveness of proposed initiatives.

For each specific initiative being implemented:

- How well do staff understand and support initiatives aimed at increasing racial and ethnic equity in admissions?

- Is there evidence or data demonstrating the effectiveness of a proposed initiative?
- How adaptable are the proposed changes to our department or discipline?
- What challenges, such as time constraints or resource demands, might arise during implementation?
- How complex or disruptive do staff perceive these initiatives to be?

The people involved – considering staff attitudes, their diversity beliefs and confidence in their ability to advance equity within their roles.

- How comfortable are we in discussing topics like race, whiteness and institutional racism?
- What are the common reactions when racial and ethnic disparities in admissions are brought up (eg denial, defensiveness, openness)?
- Do we feel equipped with the knowledge and skills to assess applications through racial and ethnic equity lenses?
- What additional training or resources would help us build racial and ethnic literacy and mitigate biases in admissions?

Implementation process – developing strategies to attract and engage stakeholders in implementation and setting plans for execution and evaluation.

- Are there clear plans in place for introducing and sustaining racial and ethnic equity initiatives in admissions?
- How will the department monitor progress and incorporate feedback throughout the implementation process?
- Are mechanisms for evaluating the success of these initiatives in place?
- What systems are in place to review and monitor the programme's outcomes related to racial and ethnic representation and equity?

Document outcomes: practical assessment tool

The table below provides a structured way to document responses to the discussion prompts. Use this tool during your discussions to organise insights, identify key enablers and barriers, and outline actionable steps for advancing racial and ethnic equity in doctoral admissions.

	Enablers (What supports progress?)	**Barriers** (What challenges exist?)	**Action Plan** (What steps are needed?)
Outer setting: external policies and pressures			
Inner setting: organisational culture and structure			
Initiatives' characteristics: perceived feasibility and effectiveness			
The people involved: awareness, beliefs and capacity			
Implementation process: strategies for change			

Tips and implementation recommendations

- Understand that conflicts and resistance are part of the process.
- Create a safe environment where participants can share openly. Acknowledge that discomfort is natural and part of meaningful dialogue.
- Involve academic and professional staff and students in the process of reimagining admissions practices to bring in a diversity of perspectives.

References

Lehman, W. E. K., Greener, J. M., & Simpson, D. D. (2002). Assessing organizational readiness for change. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment, 22*(4), 197-209.

Miake-Lye, I. M., Delevan, D. M., Ganz, D. A., Mittman, B. S., & Finley, E. P. (2020). Unpacking organizational readiness for change: an updated systematic review and content analysis of assessments. *BMC Health Services Research, 20*(1), 106.

Patel, N. (2022). Dismantling the scaffolding of institutional racism and institutionalising anti-racism. *Journal of Family Therapy, 44*(1), 91-108.

MAKING PHD ADMISSIONS MORE TRANSPARENT AND INCLUSIVE: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING WEBSITES

Overview

University department websites are vital for providing prospective doctoral candidates with the information needed to navigate the – sometimes unclear – admissions process. However, inconsistencies in quality and clarity can create barriers, particularly for underrepresented students who may lack the 'insider knowledge' or networks that typically provide key insights into navigating the process. Websites also provide an opportunity to communicate a programme's or institution's commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion. This guide offers some practical suggestions to assess and enhance your department's websites, ensuring they are transparent, accessible and welcoming to all applicants.

Rationale

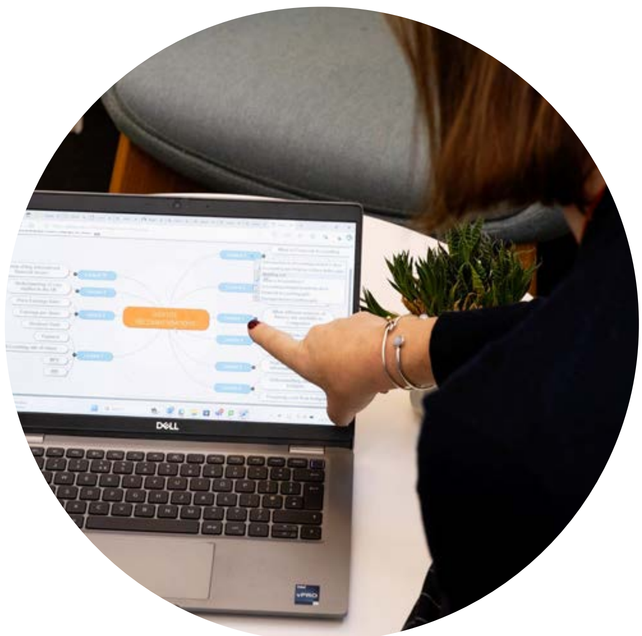
Equity in doctoral admissions begins at the pre-application stage by ensuring all applicants have access to clear and transparent information. Information barriers can disproportionately impact applicants from underrepresented groups, who may lack the informal knowledge or networks needed to navigate the application process effectively. Key challenges include understanding funding opportunities, the purpose of PhD studies, preparing competitive proposals, contacting potential supervisors and meeting unspoken expectations of doctoral study.

Clear communication of admissions and funding processes is essential, alongside fostering a welcoming online environment that signals openness to all capable PhD applicants. Designing websites that are user-friendly and inclusive ensures diverse candidates feel encouraged to apply.

In addition, websites provide an opportunity to communicate commitments to EDI. While an EDI statement alone does not guarantee that all members of a community will act in alignment with those values, clearly articulating shared principles and making a public commitment is an important first step. Explicit messaging about the importance of fairness and inclusion can help establish a shared sense of responsibility and create a kind of social contract around core values, something particularly important in the current higher education climate.

Aims

- Ensure all applicants, regardless of background, have equitable access to essential information about doctoral admissions, what constitutes doctoral research and what it is like in practice.
- Address and reduce the impact of hidden or informal knowledge on application success.
- Promote inclusivity by actively integrating EDI principles into outward-facing institutional communications.



Implementation guide: website audit checklist

✓ Assess clarity and consistency

- Critically review department webpages, including supervisor profiles, for clarity and accessibility.
- Ask yourself: what might be unclear or confusing to someone unfamiliar with the PhD admissions process?
- What type of messages is our institution or department sending? What messages are prospective applicants receiving about who is welcome and supported? Are these consistent across different webpages?

✓ Emphasise EDI principles

- Explicitly state that applicants from all backgrounds are welcome and highlight commitments to fair and equitable treatment of all PhD applicants.
- Ensure a wide range of people feature in any imagery and ensure outward-facing materials reflect the diversity of staff and students.
- Include a strong statement highlighting the institution or department's commitment to EDI. Prospective students often look to these statements when deciding where to apply. EDI communications play a key role in building trust and affirming a sense of belonging, particularly for those who may feel marginalised and are uncertain about their place in academia.
- Highlighting the diverse and vital contributions of graduate students to research, teaching and knowledge production can help reinforce a sense of belonging and academic purpose.
- Consult with colleagues in charge of undergraduate admissions, as they have experience on this matter.

✓ Provide comprehensive supervisor information

- Publish a list of available doctoral supervisors for the upcoming cycle or encourage supervisors to include this information in their web profiles.
- Encourage academic staff to maintain updated profiles, specifying areas of supervision interest and availability for new students.
- Clearly state whether pre-application contact with a supervisor is required or encouraged.
- Provide guidance on how to approach supervisors, including the expectations around this.

✓ Outline admissions and funding processes

- Provide a clear timeline or flowchart of the PhD application process, including both department-specific and centralised procedures.
- If you have the information, highlight when applicants can expect to hear the outcome of their application.
- Include direct links to funding opportunities and resources, ensuring applicants can easily access this critical information.

✓ Offer guidance on successful applications

- Provide clear tips for crafting strong applications, including research proposals, personal statements and CVs.
- Clarify what makes a strong application in your context, particularly for those unfamiliar with UK postgraduate norms.
- Clearly outline eligibility requirements, including prior qualifications and experience.

✓ Ensure a welcoming and accessible design

- Use a clean, intuitive layout.
- Avoid jargon and provide definitions for technical terms that may be unfamiliar to prospective applicants.
- Ensure the website meets accessibility standards for users with diverse needs.
- Periodically test your website's usability from the perspective of a prospective applicant unfamiliar with your institution.

Tools and resources

Student input: talk to current PhD students to gather input on website usability. Use their feedback to refine resources and ensure they address common barriers.

Guidelines and references: refer to institutional web design and EDI policies to ensure compliance and institutional alignment.

Learn from undergraduate admissions: draw on lessons and practices from undergraduate admissions teams and colleagues who have experience improving access and transparency.

READING LIST: RACE AND ETHNICITY, EQUITY AND ACCESS IN DOCTORAL EDUCATION

The following reading list offers a starting point for those wishing to deepen their understanding of equity in doctoral education with a focus on racial and ethnic inequalities. It includes academic research, policy reports and practical resources. While not exhaustive, the aim is to spark reflection and support learning.

Race and ethnicity in academia & lived reality

Voices of minoritised students: Southampton PhD Experience Report: **Understanding and exploring the experiences of Black and Asian Postgraduate Research (PGR) students**

Lived experiences of racially minoritised doctoral students: Gildersleeve, R. E., Croom, N. N., & Vasquez, P. L. (2011). 'Am I going crazy?!': **A critical race analysis of doctoral education**. *Equity & Excellence in Education 44*(1), 93-114.

Structural and emotional burdens in academia: Arday, J. (2021). **Fighting the tide: Understanding the difficulties facing Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) doctoral students' pursuing a career in academia**. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 53*(10), 972-979.

Diversity and innovation

Diversity–innovation and disadvantages in academic recognition: Hofstra, B., Kulkarni, V. V., Munoz-Najar Galvez, S., He, B., Jurafsky, D., & McFarland, D. A. (2020). **The diversity–innovation paradox in science**, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 117*(17), 9284-9291.

How teams that include different kinds of thinkers outperform homogenous groups: Page, S. E., Cantor, N., & Lewis, E. (2019). **The diversity bonus: how great teams pay off in the knowledge economy**
Princeton University Press

Doctoral access and funding inequalities

Report on funding inequalities by Leading Routes: Williams, P., Bath, S., Arday, J., & Lewis, C. (2019). **The Broken Pipeline: Barriers to Black PhD students accessing Research Council funding**

Report on inequalities in access to UK postgraduate education by the Sutton Trust: Wakeling, P., & Mateos-González, J. L. (2021). **Inequality in the Highest Degree?**

Broader context of racial and ethnic inequalities in UK HE: Arday J., Branchu C., & Boliver, V. (2022). **What do we know about Black and minority ethnic (BAME) participation in UK higher education?**
*Social Policy and Society, 21(*1),12-25.

Disciplinary-specific report – Life Sciences, Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council: Dias Lopes, A., & Wakeling, P. (2022). **Inequality in early career research in the UK life sciences**

Disciplinary-specific report – Mathematics, London Mathematical Society: Wakeling, P. (2024). **Mathematics in UK higher education: a brief overview**

Disciplinary-specific report – Social Science, Economic and Social Research Council: Tazzyman, S., Moreton, R., Bowes, L. et al. (2021). **Review of the PhD in the social sciences**

Admissions practices and tools

Implicit bias in early stages of recruitment: Milkman, K. L., Akinola, M., & Chugh, D. (2015). **What happens before? A field experiment exploring how pay and representation differentially shape bias on the pathway into organizations**. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 100*(6), 1678

Academic staff decision-making: Posselt, J. R. (2016). *Inside Graduate Admissions: Merit, Diversity and Faculty Gatekeeping.* Harvard University Press.

Recommendations for supervisory practice by the UK Council for Graduate Education: UKCGE (2022). **Supporting excellent supervisory practice across UKRI doctoral training investments**

Report reviewing holistic reviews in postgraduate education by the US Council of Graduate Schools: Kent, J.D., & McCarthy, M.T. (2016). **Holistic Review in Graduate Admissions: A Report from the Council of Graduate Schools**

The use of rubrics in academia to promote transparency and reduce bias in decision-making: Culpepper, D., White-Lewis, D., O'Meara, K., Templeton, L., & Anderson, J. (2023). **Do rubrics live up to their promise? Examining how rubrics mitigate bias in faculty hiring**. *Journal of Higher Education, 94*(7), 823-850.

Inouye, K., Robson, J., Rodriguez Anaiz, P., Baker, S., & Ilie, S. (2025). **Assessing the person or the project? How disciplinary ontological and epistemological assumptions shape doctoral admissions in elite UK institutions** *Higher Education*

Systemic and cultural change

Systemic change in postgraduate education: Posselt, J. R. (2020). ***Equity in Science: Representation, Culture, and the Dynamics of Change in Graduate Education***. Stanford University Press

Cultural change towards supporting diversity: Posselt, J., Reyes, K. A., Slay, K. E., Kamimura, A., & Porter, K. B. (2017). **Equity efforts as boundary work: how symbolic and social boundaries shape access and inclusion in graduate education**. *Teachers College Record, 119*(10), 1-38.

Practical guides and toolkits

Yorkshire Consortium for Equity in Doctoral Education (YCEDE) – **Toolkit for Equity in Doctoral Education**

Equity in Doctoral Education through Partnership and Innovation (EDEPI) – **Inclusive approach to PGR admissions**

UKRI **Good practice principles in recruitment and training at doctoral level**

Equity in Graduate Education Resource Center (US-based)

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