



Constraints, initiatives and enablers in doctoral applications and selection – Briefing note for Schools and Departments

This brief note outlines the constraints faced by underrepresented minoritised British applicants at the doctoral level as evidenced in the literature. Some potential actions and initiatives to address the constraints are drawn from findings of research with academic and professional staff at institutions, Doctoral Training Partnerships, and Centres for Doctoral Training involved in YCEDE.

To enable these actions and initiatives, the findings suggest:

- senior departmental leadership and commitment to equity and diversity (E&D);
- opportunities for collective deliberation and reflection;
- strong legal basis for change (positive action rather than positive discrimination);
- generating and learning from own processes, evidence and data;
- embedding E&D across all stages of the application process (from pre-application through to the offer stage); and
- learning from other departments, disciplines, institutions and minoritised applicants / students.

The table below highlights the constraints and provides some examples.

Institutional selectivity

- Disciplinary assumptions – for example, evidence from the US¹ highlights that smaller minority-serving institutions (akin to the British post-1992 or non Russell Group pre-1992 institutions) often do not have the resources to offer advanced courses in STEM subjects such as Physics. As such, applicants from such institutions are assumed (sometimes correctly) to not have taken certain ‘canonical’ courses though this in itself says nothing about applicants’ ability / potential rather, their opportunities and their advantage
- Focus on institutional reputation – related to the above, the hierarchy / elitism of different types of institutions and the perceptions of the abilities of their graduates
- Limited (or no) interest or openness to supervising minoritised applicants’ research interests

Possible actions

- Increased visibility of minoritised academics / current PhD candidates
- Demystification of the typical PhD candidate
- Encouragement of interest from diverse applicants
- Bridging or Foundation Year programmes or pre-doctoral courses
- Policy / procedural stipulations around doctoral E&D

- Guidance / training around supervisor – applicant pre-application communications, particularly for underrepresented minoritised applicants

De-application

- Related to institutional selectivity, evidence suggests some minoritised applicants may choose not to apply due perceived bias in how applicants are assessed², beliefs or perceptions of who does a PhD, e.g., White British, male / female, middle class (‘not someone like me’), or experiences with prospective supervisors / depts at the pre-application phase³

Lack of info about PhD

- Interested applicants may lack adequate or correct information about available PhD opportunities (sometimes due to limited social or cultural capital), what doing a PhD entails, or post PhD career pathways

Possible actions

- Detailed websites, webinar / video sessions or recordings, 1-1 info sessions
- Outreach or WP initiatives at secondary / UG / Master’s
- Mentoring (with caution & care)
- Signposting to funding opportunities, deadlines, requirements

1 Miller et al., 2019

2 Jackson-Cole & Chadderton, 2021

3 Burford et al., 2023

Lack of application support

- Minoritised applicants sometimes lack knowledge and information about how to prepare application materials, e.g., personal statement⁴, research proposal (RP), CV, etc. This is particularly crucial for competitive funded places, including those within departments

Possible actions

- Clear, visible info about application process and assessment criteria on institution / dept websites
- Multiple (fixed) application cycles
- Structured statements, CVs, RPs, additional guidance on RPs

Use of narrow criteria

- Evidence, again from the US, highlights predictive limitations (i.e., of graduate outcomes)⁵; economic, and geographical burden; and ethnic and gender variance⁶ of commonly used cognitive criteria such as the GRE (in the UK, such cognitive criteria include degree classification, marks and, implicitly, institutional reputation or ranking)
- Some British scholars have also critiqued the narrowness of using the research reputation of prior institutions (e.g., undergraduate or Master's) as an implicit or explicit criterion
- Increasing arguments about the equity opportunities of more holistic criteria which consist of both cognitive and non-cognitive criteria⁷; however, these are highly variable and more challenging to assess⁸

Possible actions

- Holistic criteria, e.g., + non-cognitive criteria (e.g., personal effectiveness domain of the Vitae Researcher Development Framework⁹, values, etc.)
- Explicitly welcoming applicants with non-traditional trajectories (and assessing them appropriately)
- Contextualisation (e.g., enabling applicants to provide contextual detail e.g., caring responsibilities, career breaks, barriers, etc.)
- Additional opportunities form (e.g., for demographic characteristics for eligibility for ring-fenced opportunities or for EDI data collection where permitted)

Bias in selection process

- As above, solely cognitive criteria already embedded with inequities for specific groups of applicants
- Other issues around bias in selection related to earlier points around deselection – (un?)conscious biases of selectors / supervisors who assess applicants' materials

Possible actions

- Supervisors' training on E&D in applicant assessment
- Two-person interview panel (more for department scholarships)
- Clear templates / scoring systems with guidance on use
- Balanced weighting of holistic criteria
- Monitoring and evaluation of interview reports / outcomes
- Feedback from successful and unsuccessful candidates

4 Chiu, 201

5 Michel et al., 2019; Miller et al., 2019

6 Posselt & Miller, 201

7 Kent & McCarthy, 2016

8 Michel et al., 2019

9 *Vitae Researcher Development Framework*

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