



Yorkshire Consortium for Equity in Doctoral Education

Report: Reforming Doctoral Selection for Equity; Insights from the YCEDE project

This report leans on the experience of the Yorkshire Consortium for Equity in Doctoral Education (YCEDE) project to share insights around doctoral selection reform which may be used as a starting point for thinking about selection reform in different academic units. It focuses on departments and institutions but also draws on work with DTPs (DLAs) and CDTs (DFAs).

Produced by: Bukola Oyinloye & Paul Wakeling (University of York)
July 2025

YCEDE cannot guarantee that all information contained in this resource is accurate at the time of reading, particularly with regard to dates, deadlines, and funding availability.

Suggested Audience: Staff

Suggested Sub-Audience: PGR Recruitment & Selection

This resource is intended for use in improving equity and outcomes for ethnically minoritised individuals interested in doctoral study or careers in research.

This resource was produced by the staff named above on behalf of the YCEDE project. Please ensure appropriate credits are clearly included in any external use of this resource.

TO CITE THIS

Oyinloye, B. & Wakeling, P. (2025) *Yorkshire Consortium for Equity in Doctoral Education*
[online] available at:

<https://ycede.ac.uk/toolkit/pgr-recruitment-selection-and-admissions/recruitment-selection/report-reforming-doctoral-selection-for-equity-insights-from-the-ycede-project/>



Yorkshire Consortium for
Equity in Doctoral Education

Reforming doctoral selection for equity: Insights from the YCEDE project

Bukola Oyinloye and Paul Wakeling

CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Introduction.....	4
Factors to consider	5
Academics’ attitudes to reform:	
Understanding intellectual and philosophical resistance	5
Complexity: Navigating complexity in disciplinary structures and funding mechanisms	8
Workload and competing demands:	
Assuaging concerns about EDI’s addition to staff workload	10
Locating the issue: Using data to identify where EDI challenges lie	11
Culture and communities of practice:	
Building coalitions to inspire and support reform.....	12
Levels of reform – examples from YCEDE.....	13
Conclusion	15
References.....	16

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report leans on the experience of the Yorkshire Consortium for Equity in Doctoral Education (YCEDE) project to share insights around doctoral selection reform which may be used as a starting point for thinking about selection reform in different academic units. It focuses on departments and institutions but also draws on work with DTPs (DLAs) and CDTs (DFAs) to discuss key considerations around selection reform, including academic intellectual and philosophical resistance and its linkages with power; complexities in disciplinary structures and funding mechanisms; workload demands and competing equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives; data or evidence-based EDI; as well as institutional cultures and communities of practice.

Additionally, the report discusses considerations in relation to the levels at which to target reform, be this at the institutional, faculty or departmental level. In so doing, it highlights the importance of institutional size, organisational structure of the doctorate, and disciplinary peculiarities for determining the level at which reform may be targeted as well as the extent of centralisation or localisation. Drawing on these ideas, the report offers the following recommendations for faculty or departmental leadership, university leadership and funders:

Faculty / departmental leadership

- a. Identify the philosophies and perspectives underpinning academics' arguments about selection reform
- b. Recognise (and harness) academics' often personal commitment to doctoral supervision through persistent consultation and engagement with them about doctoral selection reform
- c. Retain some elements of academic 'control' over the candidate selection process
- d. Identify and seize external opportunities for reform, e.g., DLA / DFA recommissioning processes, changes in leadership, etc
- e. Recognise the distinctions between more inherent forms of complexity and complexity which is much less epistemological and has occurred overtime
- f. Ensure minoritised academics do not have disproportionate share of EDI labour
- g. Collect, analyse and utilise data to identify where specific EDI issues lie
- h. Harmonise EDI initiatives at the departmental and programmatic levels
- i. Begin reform work with academics who share enthusiasm for the goals of reform to create a movement for broader change
- j. Appoint staff who are committed to implementing meaningful EDI initiatives to leadership roles (see recommendation 'f')

University Leadership

- a. Imbue faculty / departmental leaders with the power and resources to initiate and implement selection reform
- b. Workload EDI labour meaningfully
- c. Harmonise EDI initiatives at the institutional, and faculty levels
- d. Facilitate the collection, analysis and utilisation of data toward EDI reform, e.g., through appropriate systems and human (and other) resources
- e. Appoint staff who are committed to implementing meaningful EDI initiatives to leadership roles (gauge evidence of this commitment during recruitment)
- f. Balance centralised, prescriptive institutional policies and processes with localised, flexible, departmental policies and processes, e.g., considering institutional size, structure and disciplinary complexities
- g. Provide departments and faculties with ownership to embark on doctoral reform, and draw from these to create relevant institutional principles.
- h. Begin reform work with departments / programmes who share enthusiasm for the goals of reform to create a movement for broader change

Funders

- a. Maintain a commitment to racially equitable access to postgraduate research and include this in expectations for funded research organisations
- b. Oversee a sector-wide postgraduate research data system (at least for funded studentships) which includes data on applications for admission

INTRODUCTION

The Yorkshire Consortium for Equity in Doctoral Education (YCEDE) is a collaboration between five universities in Yorkshire (University of Bradford, University of York, University of Leeds, The University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University), 12 UKRI funded Doctoral Training partnerships and Centres for Doctoral Training plus a number of external partners dedicated to equity at doctoral level. The project is led by the University of York, and funded by the Office for Students (OfS) and Research England.

YCEDE aims to improve access to doctoral study for graduates from British Black, Asian and other minoritised ethnic backgrounds. It seeks to do this through four workstreams, the second of which underpins the present report and which works to improve access by reforming doctoral selection processes and practices.



Part of this work includes understanding existing selection processes and practices at selected ‘pilot’ departments across the five universities and working with these departments and specific DTPs and CDTs to review existing doctoral selection criteria towards equity while demystifying the recruitment and selection process. Among other considerations, doing this

has required considerable thought and negotiation about the level at and from which reform initiatives should be directed, i.e., whether at the institutional level (e.g., centralised selection criteria) or at the departmental level (localised, with departmental freedom to determine and apply own criteria), the implication thereof being the extent to which such reform processes ought to be prescriptive or flexible. We note here the distinction between PhD ‘offers of study’ (henceforth ‘offer of place’, often made through selection by individual or even pairs of academics within departments) and ‘offers of funding’ (usually made by committees or groups of academics using specified criteria at the departmental, institutional or inter-institutional levels). Across many British universities, offers of funding processes typically require separate application forms from offers of place (sometimes even within the same institution or department), and add additional dimensions to decisions about the level and extent of prescription or flexibility.

Drawing on our experience researching and implementing doctoral selection reform, this brief report suggests some factors to consider when embarking on such reform and illustrates with examples of the levels at which change has occurred within YCEDE. We focus on departments and institutions but also draw on our work with DTPs and CDTs, and we seek to highlight key areas of consideration rather than present an exhaustive list of everything we have learned. Notably, our experience matches general conclusions from similar work, from which YCEDE has drawn inspiration, in US graduate education which emphasises multilevel and systemic reform, rather than single ‘precision’ policy changes (Posselt et al., 2025; Rosinger et al., 2025) such as anonymising applications or establishing mentoring schemes. We begin by setting out various factors for consideration before considering the levels within university organisational structures at which reform may be directed.

FACTORS TO CONSIDER

In this section, we identify five factors which we have found important in investigating, promoting and supporting the reform of doctoral selection criteria and practices to enable more equitable outcomes for racially minoritised UK applicants. These cover:

- The attitude of academic staff to reform
- The complexity of postgraduate research (both in general and as it relates to selection and admission)
- Reform in the face of workload pressures and competing demands
- Locating the issues to be addressed
- Culture and communities of practice

Academics' attitudes to reform: Understanding intellectual and philosophical resistance

Our experience demonstrates that a critical factor to consider is the attitude of academic staff to reform. To varying extents, in each of the five YCEDE universities, individual academics play a pivotal role in doctoral admissions. Their attitude to reform of doctoral admissions for equity – whether enthusiastic, cautiously supportive or resistant – can be pivotal to the speed and nature of change. Various rationales are articulated for resistance to reform, particularly by academics. One involves the interconnectedness of academics' intellectual identities and their choice of doctoral candidates. Despite the massification of higher education and the identity tensions created by expanding roles of academics in the British context (e.g., research, teaching and learning, citizenship, social justice, community engagement, etc.) (Lamont & Nordberg, 2014), many academics seek to maintain their intellectual identity as part of an overarching personal academic identity – academics' views of selves which are constituted within the norms, values and beliefs which comprise disciplinary work structures and influence how individuals perform academic work (Phillips et al., 2022).

Doctoral supervision is an intellectual exercise which reflects, to varying degrees, academics' intellectual commitments and, in the predominant British doctoral 'offers of place' selection processes, in many cases academics single-handedly make decisions about



doctoral applicants whom they wish to supervise. Proposals to reform doctoral offers of place or even offers of funding processes are thus likely to have implications on the extent to which academics may exercise control over decisions about future supervisees. This, in turn, is likely to elicit reaction from supervising academics (and those who hope to become supervisors) for whom the current model enables significant integration or consideration of their intellectual identities. It is important to recognise that academics enjoy and value their involvement with doctoral education, often above several other aspects of their work. We have noted a strong sense of custodianship, which often includes a commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion, at least in the abstract. Harnessing this commitment and combining it with consultative, deliberative processes where academics feel heard – even those most resistant – are critical to enabling an environment conducive to the negotiation

...intellectual or philosophical academic resistance around selection reform is intertwined with power: academics' fear of its erasure or lack of some ownership over the candidate selection process.

of power and the possibilities of reform. Where early adoption of doctoral selection reform has occurred within YCEDE, this consultative process has been prominent.

Our experience from YCEDE suggests that (proposed) reforms to doctoral candidate selection, either through the individual academic driven offers of place or committee of academics driven offers of funding, have encountered, in some cases, stringent resistance due, in part, to perceived erosion of academics' intellectual identities emanating from proposed limitations on academics' control of the candidate selection process. In other words, the construction of equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives such as those of selection reform may be perceived by some as antithetical to academic freedom (Marom, 2023).

Intertwined with this intellectual resistance is academics' (often implicit) desire to leave behind an intellectual legacy or leave their fields/disciplines in 'adequate intellectual hands' through their

meticulously and, by extension, meritoriously selected doctoral candidates. The other main element of resistance are thus academics' beliefs about merit, whereby some academics are reluctant to abandon a particular notion of merit: backward-looking assessments of prior academic achievements (Stone, 2013). This reluctance persists despite critique of the Eurocentric or colonial roots of such beliefs (e.g., Tate & Bagguley, 2017) and the limitations they present for a more holistic assessment of doctoral potential; and the operationalisation of this notion of merit alongside diverse programmatic and institutional considerations (Posselt, 2016). In our work with pilot departments and units, selection reformers have also conceived change as being about contributing to the quality of research through identifying students with strong research potential through demonstrated tenacity, creativity and/or initiative beyond conventional measures of academic pedigree. Our research on what PhD supervisors actually value in their students (Oyinloye & Wakeling, 2024) highlights these qualities, which are often not directly selected for.

Given resistance to selection process reform may be due to various intellectual and philosophical rationales, working through them requires identifying the philosophies and perspectives underpinning academics' arguments against or implicit resistance to selection reform, where it is possible to do so. Our experience with YCEDE highlights the existence of intellectual resistance and hints at the philosophical, though the extent to which the latter is underpinned by Whiteness is a dimension we could not explore. Given the scope of the project, it has also not been possible for us to establish the extent to which either of these forms of resistance exist within the institutions in the consortium. Nevertheless, intellectual or philosophical academic resistance around selection reform is intertwined with power: academics' fear of its erasure or lack of some ownership over the candidate selection process. Given the intimacy of the typical supervisor-supervisee structure in British Higher Education, these concerns should not be overlooked. Our experience in YCEDE therefore suggests that proposed selection reform processes, particularly for offers of place, are more likely to be successful where academics retain some power within selection processes, the stage, degree and substance of which

to be subject to negotiation¹.

In a number of the pilot units we have worked with – and indeed with several units which voluntarily engaged with our workstream – there has been enthusiasm and readiness for reform. In such cases, a small number of committed individuals – especially where holding pivotal roles – have made considerable progress. This has manifested in different ways, sometimes through the leadership team in a DTP or CDT, sometimes a school/departmental graduate lead with one or two allies. Moments of change and transition external to the YCEDE project have often been a catalyst for change: this might be as simple as the role of postgraduate research lead in an academic

unit changing hands, or it may be more substantial, such as a (re)commissioning bid for a DTP or CDT where there is either the opportunity or, indeed, imperative to integrate EDI reform. The motives for change are usually organic and ‘bottom up’, even where there are strong extrinsic factors to consider. In the units which have made the most progress in reforming doctoral admissions, external factors have been a serendipitous stimulus to which latent reform ambitions have attached. This does mean, however, that in many areas there has been less enthusiasm or apparent impetus for change despite an abundance of goodwill. The next two factors explore additional reasons for such inertia.

1 We have also noted a successful multidisciplinary offer of funding doctoral scheme where individual academic supervisors are not involved in the selection process but academic committees directly shortlist applications and assess technical/research alongside non-cognitive skills.



Complexity: Navigating complexity in disciplinary structures and funding mechanisms

It is difficult to understate the complexity (Morrison, 2022) of the British doctoral selection landscape, only some of which is possible to highlight in this brief report. Much of this exists in the variation of doctoral selection in relation to subject / discipline (including field of study), institutional location/structure of doctoral study, institutional size, study mode (i.e., full or part time), applicants' demographic, application timelines, application processes (e.g., requirements, selection criteria, phases, etc), etc. Here, we discuss two of the most critical.

The first is that of disciplinary differences, particularly those (broadly) between the Sciences on the one hand, and the Arts & Humanities and Social Sciences, on the other. These differences exist in diverse ways, including in relation to selection (access), experience and outcomes. With selection in the Sciences, doctoral applicants typically apply to be part of a project conceived by an academic supervisor. If selected, they constitute a research team alongside existing or future doctoral candidates who work on different aspects of the supervisor's project. In the Arts & Humanities and the Social Sciences, doctoral applicants typically propose their own project, one typically aligned to some degree with the prospective supervisor's existing research or research interests. While these applicants may, if selected, be grouped with other supervisees to constitute a form of research group, each candidate implements their own distinct research project. Given these differences, it is typically argued by academics themselves that the Sciences place greater emphasis on applicants' cognitive and technical capabilities while the Humanities and Social Sciences place greater emphasis on applicants' proposed research projects.

Our experience in YCEDE aligns with the research project emphasis in the Humanities and Social Sciences, particularly given the reliance on the research proposal as the primary decision-making tool in these disciplines. However, our experience suggests that the research proposal is merely used as a proxy for applicants' technical and cognitive capabilities, particularly with offers of funding processes which assess research proposals for technical elements such as significance, contribution to knowledge, research design, etc. Be it through a direct assessment of technical and cognitive capabilities or an indirect assessment of these using the research proposal,

academics seek to use the tools in which they hold the greatest confidence to assess applicants' doctoral research (project) readiness. Other elements of disciplinary differences relevant to selection which merit consideration in reform processes include applicant demographics (e.g., use of Master's degree as a key selection criterion in the Arts & Humanities and Social Sciences); highest likelihood of funding among younger, full-time candidates in STEM disciplines in research-intensive universities (UKRI, 2021); range and availability of funding (and funders); structure of the doctorate, etc.

The second is funding, or as already alluded, the distinction between offers of place and offers of funding, and the various complex schemes, structures, funders and selection processes which exist for the latter. Considering complexity in relation to offer type entails considering the possibilities of reform within offers of place and/or offers of funding. Our experience from YCEDE has shown that resistance to reform exists within both offer types (after all, they both involve academics), and highlights the critical importance of persistent engagement with academics to listen and seek to assuage possible concerns about merit, intellectual or academic freedom (i.e., control), and disciplinary selection peculiarities, among others.

Our experience also suggests that despite these concerns, reform processes may more easily receive majority buy-in at the 'lower stakes' departmental offers of places (and even departmental offers of funding) outside of the intensely competitive research council offers of funding processes, against which philosophical (i.e., 'meritocratic') forms of resistance may be particularly strong. Given most offers of funding occur through the highly complex inter-departmental, inter-institutional and multi-, inter- or trans-disciplinary structures of Doctoral Training Partnerships (now Doctoral Landscape Awards or DLAs) and Centres for Doctoral Training (now Doctoral Focal Awards or DFAs), securing academics' buy-in for reform may prove lengthy though not impossible.

While deliberative processes are required even for complex offers of funding reform, our experience with YCEDE suggests that reform with these offer types may be significantly enabled by multi-level (i.e., institutional/DTP or DLA/ funder) commitment to change and authoritative leadership which directs

action towards evidence-based principles and positive practices around EDI. Notably, commitment and authoritative leadership have also been instrumental in reform processes at departmental offers of place. Our experience therefore suggests that even in the face of resistance and complexity, reform is attainable where leadership is committed to and endowed with the power to overtly direct or implement reform.

...a clear understanding of disciplinary and offer-type complexities, among others, will enable meaningful articulation of possibilities as well as sustainability of reform interventions.

While complexity, in its myriad facets, is a critical factor to consider, we believe it is important to distinguish between complexity which is more constitutive of disciplines (inherent) and that which is less so and has arisen over time (constructed). Inherent complexity includes facets such as nature of research within the discipline, disciplinary doctoral funding landscape, requisite technical skills for a research project, function of the PhD (i.e., as prerequisite or optional), relevant labour market structure, etc., for which reform may be structural or tied to the internal structure of the discipline. Constructed complexity, on the other hand, refers to those variations which may have arisen by happenstance and which have no strong external logic: e.g., application requirements, selection criteria, funding eligibility, application timelines, academics' involvement in decision-making, funder differences, etc. With constructed complexity, reform may be more attainable within a specified period. These differences moreover help distinguish between the extent to which complexity exists as a veritable constraint (the inherent form) and the extent to which it is being employed as a tool to delay or resist reform or, more benignly, as the unintended consequence of the relative lack of regulation of doctoral education (the constructed form). Whatever the case may be, a clear understanding of disciplinary and offer-type complexities, among others, will enable meaningful articulation of possibilities as well as sustainability of reform interventions.



Workload and competing demands: Assuaging concerns about EDI's addition to staff workload

Our work in YCEDE has highlighted concerns about the additional workload demands of selection process reform. Particularly (as shown in our research) for individual supervisor-driven offers of place in the Arts & Humanities and Social Sciences where research proposals are the main assessment tool and interviews are often cursory confirmatory acts rather than determinative, a more deliberative selection process which seeks to meaningfully assess applicants' soft and hard skills as well as consider their experiences and personal circumstances is likely to make further demands on academics' already limited time. Such a process may also rely disproportionately on the labour of minoritised academic staff (Marom, 2023).

While evidence suggests efficiencies are likely to exist over time as academics habituate to the new process and thereby become 'quicker' at it (Posselt et al., 2025), initial time / workload concerns are a valid consideration with selection reform. In our experience at YCEDE, among the departments who have embarked upon offers of place reform, initial departmental consultations and conceptualisation of the reform initiative have required deliberation and engagement time. Implementation time concerns have been highlighted as a possible constraint, though to a lesser degree. While these initiatives have mandated formal, criteria-supported interviews with clear assessment rubrics (and it remains unclear the extent to which these more formal interviews are being used to assess rather than confirm decisions about applicants), preliminary feedback suggests academics are finding these an aid, not a hindrance. Moreover, where these initiatives have been undertaken, the selection process has involved an additional departmental-level evaluation of the extent to which prospective supervisors have current capacity to supervise additional doctoral candidates, given existing workload and supervisory commitments. Not

only does this manage individual academics' control over the selection decision-making process, but it also addresses workload concerns by requiring academics to assess applicants only where they have current capacity to supervise (unless acting in a supportive capacity to a colleague).

Another aspect of workload demands involves the simultaneous implementation of multiple EDI initiatives, sometimes with similar activities. Recent movements and seminal reports (e.g., Williams et al., 2019) have instigated a clamour in the sector around EDI, with institutions embarking on multiple initiatives at different levels at the same time, implicating the same academics and/or professional staff and inadvertently promoting identity-based 'coalitions of the willing' (Marom, 2023, p. 1100). While we do not have measurable evidence of 'EDI fatigue' or same group coalition silos in YCEDE, our experience nevertheless highlights academics' concerns around simultaneous involvement in multiple initiatives with similar goals and objectives. Related to this is the significant turnover of staff, particularly in relation to non- or inadequately workloaded committee activities such as those around equity and diversity, a phenomenon itself related to deeper challenges around organisational resource/change management in the higher education sector.

Our experience therefore suggests that reform initiatives will need to assuage concerns about additional workload demands of specific proposed initiatives, particularly in light of limited coordination between various equity initiatives which may be occurring simultaneously in the same department, faculty or institution and in which the same academics are implicated. They will also need to address the management of staff such that turnover does not equate to a loss of knowledge or gains in relation to equity reform.

Locating the issue: Using data to identify where EDI challenges lie

As our experience has shown, selection reform may be driven by data and evidence not only in the way it applies evidence-based solutions, but also in the way it analyses data to identify issues around inequities, and lack of diversity and inclusion. Collecting useful EDI relevant data remains a perennial challenge across the sector which requires urgent attention. In relation to selection, our experience in YCEDE suggests that data is critical to helping to identify where issues lie to enable reform efforts to be relevant. For instance, while YCEDE's interventions have focused on reforming selection criteria, available application and enrolment data from some pilot Arts & Humanities and Social Sciences departments for offers of place decisions in recent years have shown little or no meaningful differences in offer rates between minoritised and White applicants. Conversations with academics in these departments have typically corroborated these findings. Moreover, the number of applications from this group of applicants in these departments have been so low as to render virtually meaningless group comparisons of offer rates. Our point here is not that data is not helpful. In fact, it is the opposite: that data is critical to the identification of which EDI issue to address or prioritise.

In light of these findings, our experience suggests that for some departments (and, by extension, in some disciplines), a particularly urgent and relevant issue appears to be that of increasing the number of applications from minoritised groups. This, of course, links to broader conversations about the 'pipeline' and how to engage minoritised young people, as early as secondary school, about research opportunities and pathways². Internships, especially if funded, are potentially an important tool here. Notably, regarding the 'pipeline', our experience in YCEDE has highlighted the preponderance of internal doctoral applicants, a phenomenon particularly acute in

the Sciences where supervisors tend to nominate their own (typically undergraduate) students due to existing relationships and greater confidence in students' acquisition of desired technical, cognitive or laboratory skills. Enrolling more minoritised students in potential candidate pools at the undergraduate and Master's levels (and increasing availability of funding for the latter) may therefore be as important as broadening recruitment activities to non-traditional advertisement channels in order to attract a more diverse applicant pool.

Misidentification of equity issues may lead to lethargy – for academics to involve in related activities – which in turn may be misperceived as a form of covert resistance. Above all, our experience cautions rigid interventionist approaches and advocates for flexible, responsive approaches which use existing data and open engagement to diagnose EDI issues to support the implementation of relevant interventions. We have found it important to listen to colleagues, recognising that in some cases the application-to-offer selection process may not have an evidential equity gap and that efforts are best directed to other elements of the 'pipeline', e.g., pre-application, on-course experience, etc.

The parlous state of postgraduate application data is a recurring obstacle to reform. Although it may seem a somewhat banal, technical concern on the surface, without robust, systematic and consistent data about doctoral admissions it is difficult to diagnose where issues (and success) lie, to monitor the outcomes of change initiatives and to compare within and across institutions. Until now, no national application data exists for postgraduate research. Some YCEDE colleagues are working to address the issue inter alia through the NEON Widening Postgraduate Participation working group; however, much more needs to be done.

² Various challenges exist in relation to underapplication, not the least of which is funding, which we do not have the scope to explore in this report.

Culture and communities of practice: Building coalitions to inspire and support reform

It is important to recall that YCEDE – and indeed the other projects funded as part of the same programme – did not arise from nothing. All five institutions had previously undertaken work in a similar space. Notably, three of the five are involved in more than one of the funded projects. Although each has a considerable way to go in pursuit of social justice and racial equity, at each university we have observed instances of committed leadership. For instance, the Educational Engagement and Student Success team at the University of Leeds has previously led a multi-institutional OfS project on race and postgraduate access and carried out other major unfunded initiatives (such as investigating ethnicity and attrition/attainment at Master's level). The YCEDE chair, Professor Udy Archibong, is Pro-Vice-Chancellor (EDI) at the University of Bradford, where she directs a range of initiatives on race inequality from a senior leadership position. Strong and committed leadership is, if not quite a prerequisite to success, certainly a highly enabling factor for one. Such leadership sets the tone and culture downstream.

Leadership and culture-setting has been seen in other ways in YCEDE. A key question considered in the design of the project was whether work around doctoral selection reform should be targeted at volunteers and 'change ready' academic departments, or at a more representative or random set of departments. In principle, the latter approach promised greater ecological validity. That is, were our experience to be replicable, we thought it would be more useful to work with both enthusiasts and sceptics or those who had not considered doctoral admissions reform for equity, since that is what we expected would be the case if expanding our approach more widely within the YCEDE universities or within the sector.

Conversely, our US partners at the Equity in Graduate Education Consortium recommended we work with enthusiasts to demonstrate proof of concept and to create a movement or momentum for change. Our experience supports the US advice. Reform by 'early adopter' departments has generated new ideas and approaches through the talents of participating colleagues and, crucially, provided credible examples from which other departments have drawn. A critical factor with the early adopters has been leadership committed to change. Staff who occupy PGR leadership

roles in schools, departments or DTPs (DLAs) / CDTs (DFAs) potentially have considerable influence over a range of localised discretionary matters. This can vary according to seniority, experience, personality, time in role and so on, but there are numerous examples of successful reforms being led by colleagues in such roles – both academic and professional staff. That work is made easier in departments with nominal resistance (or where those who resist are not in positions of leadership) or whose cultures are more open and less risk averse (noting of course that some of that culture is set by the external context, like the scarcity of studentships). We have also witnessed the benefit for local leaders who engage in more consultative processes for change. These are difficult and time-consuming but generally seem to have paid off in terms of reform to existing processes.

While leaderships' attitude to reform, disciplinary complexities, and workload pressures are all important contributors to culture, they occur within a prevailing context of Whiteness in many of the YCEDE universities whereby racially minoritised academics are underrepresented amongst academic staff, and considerably underrepresented among those in PGR leadership roles, be it at the institutional or departmental level, or in other units like DTPs (DLAs) and CDTs (DFAs). As we have previously highlighted, EDI initiatives, be they departmental, institutional or in consortia, tend to over rely on the labour of minoritised academic staff in the constitution of EDI committees or implementation of EDI initiatives. Considerations around culture must therefore be attuned to existing power dynamics, particularly in White-majority departments and institutions, while ensuring that the 'burden' of EDI work does not rest disproportionately on minoritised academics or professional staff.

In terms of culture across the sector, we have established a community of practice for our workstream which includes colleagues from across and beyond the consortium, in a range of units or in central services, and occupying a range of roles. Meeting quarterly, this group shares good practice, provides an open forum for discussion of issues, challenges and potential solutions and maintains the momentum, visibility and sense of progress.

Next, we discuss the levels at which we have observed change within YCEDE.

LEVELS OF REFORM – EXAMPLES FROM YCEDE

The above factors suggest that decisions about the levels at which to direct reform are not without constraints. In relation to selection reform, and selection criteria specifically, this requires careful consideration of the balance between centralised, prescriptive institutional policies and processes on the one hand and localised, flexible, departmental policies and processes, on the other. For instance, prescriptive approaches may prove challenging not only because of the absence of traditional command-and-control management in higher education institutions, but also because uniform approaches may be perceived as too generic and thereby irrelevant to local needs. On the other hand, our experience in YCEDE suggests that institutional and departmental size (i.e., of the doctoral school) and structure as well as disciplinary dimensions of inherent complexity are particularly important factors. The following highlights the three levels at which we have observed change, and the rationales underpinning these changes at their levels. We have not written directly about change above the institutional level (i.e. system change), since that is outside the purview of the YCEDE project, and indeed of the collective thirteen projects funded as part of the programme of which YCEDE is a part.

Institutional Level

One example of selection reform at the institutional level is the adoption of an institution wide admissions framework consisting of specific selection criteria with specified domains and competencies, alongside a set of interview questions from which assessors may choose. Developed as part of the EDEPI project (also funded through the OfS / Research England programme), the framework aims to foster equity in selection in line with YCEDE workstreams two's objectives by moving beyond grade or institutional criteria to assess social and emotional, relational, personal and other characteristics (Sheldon et al., 2024). Local variations are expected, though it is unclear the extent to which these may diverge from specified domains and competencies. The framework has been piloted in 2023/2024 at three similarly sized doctoral schools, with data collected and evidence gathered in its implementation. In 2021/2022, one of the institutions piloting the framework had 360 full time PhD students (and 307 part time). At the institution, research degrees are offered at 24 research centres across four broad research institutes in Health, Humanities, Social Science and Physical Sciences and Engineering. In this case, small institutional size, and by extension, doctoral school size and structure, appeared to be a key factor for the extent to which selection reform toggled between centralisation and localisation, with the institution adopting a more centralised, institutional approach rather than a local departmental or centre-level one.

Faculty Level

In 2021/2022, the University of York had more than 1,400 postgraduate research students, of whom 200 were part time, spread across 24 departments and 3 schools. In 2021/2022, the University of Leeds had more than 2,100 registered postgraduate research students across seven faculty-level graduate schools, each offering research degrees at multiple schools, e.g., the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures, on its own, comprises 11 schools and centres. At institutions with doctoral schools of such size and structure, even with allowance for local variation, specific institutional level admissions frameworks with specified domains and competencies as well as interview questions are unlikely to be appropriate for the needs of the institutions' diverse faculties, schools and departments. Other YCEDE partners with smaller numbers may find more traction with a more centralised approach. Here, Sheffield Hallam is, along with its involvement in YCEDE, also a partner in the EDEPI project.

Conversations with colleagues at the larger institutions suggest sub-institutional approaches which recognise institutional size (and as such, complexity) and institutional doctoral structures (i.e., faculty, school or departmental groupings and the disciplinary complexities within these groupings) may be a better fit. For example, faculty level processes with sufficient school or departmental flexibility may engender greater buy-in and allow for sustainability of reform. Specific to selection criteria, this may mean developing

a set of principles, rather than specific criteria, and enabling schools and departments to develop the criteria which best fits their disciplinary structures and nuances. It may even be possible to begin with a set of criteria for one department, which may be shared for others within the faculty to adopt or adapt as considered appropriate. As such, a principle-based approach does not preclude the ‘borrowing’ of criteria across departments, schools and disciplines; rather, it suggests a more flexible starting point for institutions whose sizes and structures are likely to render further specificity ineffectual.

Departmental Level

YCEDE has supported selection process and criteria reform at the ‘local’ departmental level, some of which have been ‘borrowed’ across disciplines as well as across institutions given similarities in typical application requirements, e.g., the research proposal. Even where institutional principles did not explicitly exist, departmental or school level approaches were underpinned by overarching ideas around equity, diversity and inclusion which could inform the creation of such institutional principles. As such, departmental processes may need not wait for explicit institutional principles before embarking on reform, though where institutional principles are generated after departmental reform processes have been initiated, a review of departmental processes for consistency with institutional principles would be critical.

Another ‘level’ of reform which falls outside of these institutional structures are those occurring within DTPs (DLAs) or CDTs (DFAs). Given the influence wielded by these schemes, particularly in terms of departmental alignment with DTP/CDT selection processes, reform within these extra-institutional structures may prove to be more than symbolic in influencing institutional/departmental doctoral selection reform. In all, our experience in YCEDE suggests that determining institutional level of reform requires deliberative consideration of institutional size, organisational structure (i.e., of doctoral school) and disciplinary complexities or nuances, among others.



CONCLUSION

This report has drawn on YCEDE's experience to share insights around doctoral selection reform. It has discussed key considerations around selection reform, including academic intellectual and philosophical resistance; disciplinary and funding complexities; workload and competing demands; and data or evidence-based issue diagnostics. Identifying the level at which to target reform is similarly critical and, drawing on YCEDE's experience, the report also discussed different levels of reform: institutional, faculty and departmental. In doing so, the report highlighted the importance of institutional size, organisational structure of the doctorate, and disciplinary peculiarities for reflecting upon the level at which reform may most appropriately be targeted and the extent to which such reform may be centralised or localised at a given level. Although the report has focused on reform at the point of doctoral selection, access to the doctorate may be further constrained or even predetermined by what occurs prior to selection, e.g., the informal engagements which occur during the pre-application stage, and what occurs after selection, e.g., opportunities for feedback which may influence future application attempts. Selection reform is thus a necessary component of a broader view of doctoral reform which also addresses systemic (e.g., funding, awarding gap, etc.) and sectoral-institutional (e.g., lack of good-quality data, underrepresentation of minoritised academic staff, etc.) issues.

YCEDE has occurred at a critical point in time, and it is difficult to overstate the combined positive effect of concurrent multi-agency and multi-level commitment to doctoral reform, e.g., by UKRI, funding councils, YCEDE institutions, DTP/CDT leadership as well as departmental / school leadership. The changes we have observed in YCEDE have been enabled by this commitment and their sustainability rests on the continuity of this commitment and its associated resources, even in light of current institutional challenges.

Fundamentally, the rationale for YCEDE's work is not simply social justice, i.e., the need to address the structural exclusion of racially minoritised persons from postgraduate research, but also questions of the quality of knowledge production through research. Especially in human-facing disciplines, there is recognition that a demographically narrow research student body leads to narrower research agendas and that new ideas and approaches often come from those with different cultural backgrounds and life experiences. As such, doctoral selection reform for equity is seen and understood as being about social justice *and* research excellence.

While this brief report does not represent an exhaustive synthesis of our work on doctoral selection reform, we hope it offers a useful starting point for thinking about such reform in diverse academic units, and the levels at which it may occur.



REFERENCES

- Lamont, C., & Nordberg, D. (2014). Becoming or unbecoming: Contested academic identities. In: British Academy of Management, 9-11 September 2014, Belfast. (Unpublished) <https://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/21215/>
- Marom, L. (2023). Resistance, performativity, and fragmentation: The relational arena of EDI/D in Canadian Higher Education. *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue canadienne de l'éducation*, 46(4), 1083–1114. <https://doi.org/10.53967/cje-rce.6071>
- Oyinloye, B., & Wakeling, P. (2024). British supervisors' conceptions of ideal and successful PhD attributes and their implications for equity in doctoral candidate selection. *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SGPE-11-2023-0105>
- Phillips, M. J., Dzidic, P. L., & Castell, E. L. (2022). Exploring and critiquing women's academic identity in higher education: A narrative review. *Sage Open*, 12(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221096145>
- Posselt, J. R. (2016). *Inside graduate admissions: Merit, diversity and faculty gatekeeping*. Harvard University Press.
- Posselt, J., Southern, D., Hernandez, T., Desir, S., Alleyne, F., & Miller, C. W. (2025). Redefining Merit Through New Routines: Holistic Admissions Policy Implementation in Graduate Education. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 47(1), 159–184.
- Rossinger, K., Posselt, J., & Miller, C. W. (2025). Reconstructing PhD Admissions Through Organizational Learning. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 1–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2025.2451609>
- Sheldon, J., SmithMcGloin, R., & Foster, S. (2024). *Postgraduate researcher competency-based admissions framework. Equity in Doctoral Education through Partnership and Innovation*. Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham. www.ntu.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/2315413/Postgraduate-Researcher-Competency-Based-Admissions-Framework-andGuidance.pdf
- Stone, P. (2013). Access to higher education by the luck of the draw. *Comparative Education Review*, 57(3), 577-599. <https://doi.org/10.1086/670663>
- Tate, S. A., & Bagguley, P. (2017). Building the anti-racist university: next steps. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 20(3), 289-299. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2016.1260227>
- UK Research and Innovation and Research England [UKRI & RE] (2021). *Diversity results analysis for UKRI funding data, financial years 2014-15 to 2019-20*. <https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/UKRI-300321-DiversityResultsForUKRIFundingData2014-20.pdf>
- Williams, P., Bath, S., Arday, J., & Lewis, C. (2019). The broken pipeline: barriers to Black PhD students accessing Research Council funding. *Leading Routes*. <https://leadingroutes.org/the-broken-pipeline>



Yorkshire Consortium for
Equity in Doctoral Education

To find out more, visit:

<https://ycede.ac.uk/>

info@ycede.ac.uk



For additional resources, visit:

<https://ycede.ac.uk/toolkit/>

Suggested citation: Oyinloye, B., & Wakeling, P. (2025). *Reforming doctoral selection for equity: Insights from the YCEDE project*. Yorkshire Consortium for Equity in Doctoral Education (YCEDE).