

Pragmatic problem-solving for inclusive doctoral admission by Bing Lu, Rebekah Smith McGloin and Scott Foster



This blog post reflects on ongoing collaborative efforts to advance more equitable doctoral admissions between a group of UK institutions. It argues that transforming graduate admissions is not simply driven by competitive logic, nor by a search for a single, universal framework that can be applied across the sector. Instead, sector-level change emerges through collective, interactional, and often emotional work.

Inclusive postgraduate research (PGR) admission and recruitment have become an increasing global concern ([Posselt, 2016](#); [Bastedo, 2026](#); [Boghdady, 2025](#)). Drawing on ongoing collaborative work between a group of UK institutions, this blog post reflects on collective efforts to advance more equitable doctoral admissions. We argue that inclusive doctoral admission is not a competition to produce an exhaustive, finished framework, but an ongoing process of collective problem solving, one that requires humility, openness, and sustained commitment across institutional boundaries.

PGR students are strategically vital to the UK's research capacity, innovation and future academic workforce. PhD programmes increasingly function as the primary entry route into academic careers and shape who is able to imagine themselves, and be recognised, as future researchers. Within the doctoral lifecycle, admission is a particularly critical intervention point. Yet, compared with undergraduate or taught postgraduate recruitment, the mechanisms shaping PGR admissions have historically received less sustained scrutiny.

A report commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2014 highlighted that UK institutions primarily value academic attainment, the quality of research proposals, and evidence of prior research skills when selecting candidates ([Mellors-Bourne et al, 2014](#)). Since 2020, a growing body of UK-based scholarship has begun to highlight equity issues in doctoral selection ([McGloin & Wynne, 2022](#); [Oyinloye & Wakeling 2023](#); [Mateos-González & Wakeling, 2022](#); [Britton et al, 2020](#)), and has sought to explore the ascriptive nature of systems and processes that underpin doctoral recruitment and admission. Together, these studies identify a range of barriers. These include the persistence of 'elite pipelines', whereby attending a Russell Group university at undergraduate level strongly predicts access to elite postgraduate education, as well as the significant under-representation of British candidates from minoritised backgrounds at doctoral level, particularly within funded studentships. These patterns underscore the need to interrogate how merit, potential, and excellence are operationalised in practice.

The initiatives and the community of practice

Initiatives funded by Research England and Office for Students, including the *Equity in Doctoral Education through Partnership and Innovation* (EDEPI) programme, represent important attempts to push forward the agenda of inclusive PGR admissions in English Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). In 2022, EDEPI conducted a national survey on PGR admissions practices in UK HEIs. The study identified ten key barriers to inclusive admission in its final report [EDEPI Postgraduate Researcher Admission Framework](#) and led to the development of the [Postgraduate Researcher Competency-Based](#)

[Admission Framework](#). This framework deliberately shifts focus away from previous institutional prestige and historical academic attainment towards the specific skills, experiences and competencies which demonstrate future potential for doctoral research.

From 2024, EDEPI has fostered an inter-institutional Community of Practice involving a group of international and UK institutions to explore approaches for enhancing inclusive PGR admissions collectively. Within this community, three institutions engaged as case studies to trial new approaches to evaluating applicants beyond conventional academic metrics, building on the Competency Framework. Through regular facilitated discussions, shared reflective practices, collaborative webinars and a jointly organised symposium on *Fostering inclusive doctoral admission*, participating institutions work alongside the EDEPI team to explore challenges and embed equity-driven principles into their PGR admissions processes.

Key learning from collective work

One of the most important lessons drawn from this collective institutional effort is that, while institutions hold different conceptions of fairness and merit shaped by their unique contexts, they nonetheless share a commitment to addressing persistent equity issues. This aligns with the findings of the sector survey ([Smith McGloin et al, 2024](#)) which found an overwhelming commitment to inclusive practice, an awareness of the need for change and huge complexity in existing processes with multiple stakeholders and drivers. This work is neither straightforward nor purely normative; it is complex, negotiated, and deeply pragmatic.

For example, in staff training workshops, academic colleagues described their deliberate efforts to apply equity principles when making departmental admissions decisions. Professional services staff, meanwhile, highlighted their role in carefully matching applicants' proposals and disciplinary backgrounds to appropriate departments, ensuring that applications reach the review stage rather than being filtered out prematurely. Where resistance or hesitation arose around the introduction of yet another 'framework', this was less about rejecting equity goals and more about uncertainty regarding feasible, appropriate, and sustainable implementation.

Debates around distributive fairness versus procedural fairness illustrate this tension clearly ([Boliver et al, 2022](#)). Graduate admissions are not objective measurements of worth but sites of intense organisational boundary work, where judgements about potential, fit, and excellence are continuously negotiated. These discussions echo longstanding sociological insights into academic evaluation. [Lamont \(2009\)](#), for instance, argues that in real-world academic review, excellence and diversity are not *alternative* principles but *additive* ones. Staff involved in PGR admissions are often guided by pragmatic, problem-solving considerations, caught between institutional principles, personal commitments, and procedural constraints. Panels are typically required to reach consensus on a limited number of candidates within tight timeframes, and these practical pressures shape how fairness is understood and enacted.

Within this 'black box' of academic decision-making, Bourdieu's *Homo Academicus* is frequently cited to explain how scholars' legitimate visions of high-quality research and defend disciplinary boundaries, with conflicts often most pronounced among those occupying similar positions. Our collective work over the past 12 months, however, suggests a more nuanced picture. Admissions staff, both academic and professional, are motivated not only by positional interests but also by a shared, pragmatic curiosity about how to solve persistent problems together. The Community of Practice created space for dialogue, uncertainty, and learning, enabling participants to reflect on their own assumptions while engaging with others' institutional constraints. Transforming graduate admissions, then, is not simply driven by competitive logic, nor by a search for a single, universal framework that can be applied across the sector. Instead, sector-level change emerges through collective, interactional, and often

emotional work. A recent WonkHE article, [*How to level the PhD playing field*](#), posed a critical question: does the sector have the collective will to move beyond well-intentioned initiatives towards the structural changes required to address inequities among PGRs?

The experiences emerging from EDEPI offer cautious but promising evidence. They demonstrate how institutions with differing histories, resources, and institutional affordances can nonetheless work together pragmatically to enhance admissions practices. Inclusive doctoral admission, in this sense, is not a finished model to be adopted but an ongoing process of collective problem solving, one that requires humility, openness, and sustained commitment across institutional boundaries. Through the established Community of Practice, the EDEPI framework has also begun to attract interest from institutions in international contexts, despite differing governance structures, as a means of collectively developing equity-oriented approaches to PGR admissions through shared learning.

Closing summary

Inclusive PGR admissions require ongoing, collaborative work, as shown through EDEPI's efforts to help institutions rethink how fairness, potential, and merit are assessed. Colleagues across academic and professional roles demonstrate that excellence and diversity can be mutually reinforcing when supported by reflective practice and shared experimentation. Future progress depends on refining competency-based approaches, tracking applicant journeys, expanding training and co-creation, and translating these insights into clearer sector guidance and policy.

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