



POSTGRADUATE RESEARCHER COMPETENCY-BASED ADMISSIONS FRAMEWORK

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Equity in Doctoral Education through Partnership
and Innovation (EDEPI)

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The Postgraduate Researcher Competency-Based Admissions Framework has been developed as part of the Equity in Doctoral Education through Partnership and Innovation (EDEPI) project, led by Nottingham Trent University in collaboration with Liverpool John Moores and Sheffield Hallam Universities.

The EDEPI project is funded by Office for Students and Research England to widen access to and participation in research for racially-minoritised groups.

EDEPI seeks to tackle inequality at scale by framing PGR admissions in the context of the competencies required to successfully undertake PGR study, reducing over-reliance on narrower measures related to degree classification and previous degree-awarding institution.

Last year, the EDEPI project, in partnership with the UK Council for Graduate Education, carried out a comprehensive survey to explore current PGR admissions practices. Based on the analysis of this study, ten barriers in the PGR admissions process for individuals who were from racially-minoritised groups were identified. One key barrier was the use by some supervisors of applicants' Master's degrees and the degree-awarding institution as the main assessment criteria. This was considered a potential barrier to access for some individuals from racially-minoritised groups because of systemic inequalities in access to higher-tariff universities, attainment gaps at undergraduate level, and unequal access to loans for postgraduate study.

We are grateful to the many respondents who provided extremely useful feedback throughout the consultation, and to Prof. Jane Ching for her detailed and helpful comments on the draft Framework. We want to thank our PGR representatives for their scrutiny and feedback throughout the development of the Framework. We also wish to thank LJMU's EDEPI Steering Group, NTU's Directors of Doctoral Programmes and SHU's Doctoral Team for their support and guidance.

HOW TO USE THE FRAMEWORK

The Framework is designed to be a systematic and adaptable tool to support rigorous and inclusive recruitment and selection processes for postgraduate researchers. It can scaffold the entire recruitment process, including written application and interview.

It acknowledges the uniqueness of each doctoral research position – be that a defined project or a broader research area – guiding the selection panel to articulate and assess the desired attributes and behaviours in a successful candidate for that position in advance.

The Framework comprises three broad domains: comprehension and evaluation; delivering results, and socio-emotional competencies. Some competencies may be tested in the written application, whilst others are explored at interview.

A bank of questions, mapped to the domains and competencies within them, provides interviewers with a quick, easy, standardised way to prepare a question set that covers the breadth of the framework.

In a competitive interview - for studentship funding, for example - answers may be compared against a pre-determined rating system (ordinal or high/medium/low rated).

The Framework can also be used to guide discussions after interview, or as part of a final decision-making panel. This can support an equitable process when multiple interviews are held simultaneously with different panels across a larger cohort-based doctoral programme, for example.

REVIEW

The framework is being piloted in 2023-4 at Nottingham Trent, Liverpool John Moores and Sheffield Hallam Universities. Surveys and interviews will be conducted with staff to capture experiences of PGR recruitment and admissions throughout the pilot year.

If you would like to use this framework in your own institution, please contact edepi@ntu.ac.uk.

EDEPI COMPETENCIES FRAMEWORK

COLLECT, ORDER, EVALUATE AND REVIEW RESULTS OBJECTIVELY, AND COMMUNICATE WITH CLARITY

COMPREHENSION & EVALUATION

ANALYTICAL & PROBLEM SOLVING

Recognise connections and patterns in information/data, text or artefacts

Evaluate information/data, text or artefacts for credibility and accuracy

Make evidence-based judgements based on analysis of information/data, text or artefact

Explain the value/potential contribution of the research to knowledge and those who will benefit

COMMUNICATION

Communicate in writing with clarity and precision using evidence to support your assertions

Tailor communications appropriately to different audiences

Present information and ideas verbally, using active listening

Consider impact of research and how it might reach the widest audiences

PLANNING & ORGANISATION

Grasp and order information coming from multiple sources

Set, maintain and ensure a clear direction for a project or activity

Anticipate, think ahead and identify next steps in a project or activity

Adjust objectives and deadlines appropriately as new ideas or issues emerge

ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR PERFORMANCE AND SEEK HELP WHEN NECESSARY

SOCIO-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES

MOTIVATION

Show how you plan to actively engage with policy, practice, publications in your proposed area of research to keep up to date

Understand your own personal motivations and demonstrate how these will drive your research

Recognise and take up opportunities for improvement

Willingness to engage fully in the chosen area and contribute to conversations and debates in that field

CURIOSITY

Show that you want to ask challenging 'why' questions about your topic

Be prepared to deepen your investigation to shed new light on information/data, text or artefact

Be willing to think deeply about complex ideas and theories in the context of the topic

Value but be prepared to question the knowledge of others

RESILIENCE

Take positive steps to maintain a positive work/life balance and seek help when challenges occur

Willingness to admit to errors and challenges and seek appropriate support

Adjust approaches and responses when faced with change or setbacks

Demonstrate the courage to engage with complex ideas and viewpoints

GENERATION AND DELIVERY OF OUTCOMES TO A HIGH STANDARD AND COLLABORATION

DELIVERING RESULTS

INTEGRITY

Be prepared to carry out your project with rigour and integrity, being committed to a compliance with ethics policy

Understand the importance of treating data or information confidentially and responsibly

Be alert to and challenge your own biases and assumptions

Show that you respect diverse points of view and can treat others, and their views, with fairness

WORKING WITH OTHERS

Work effectively with collaborators and supervisors, treating each with respect and keeping them informed of progress

Actively listen to others, share information, and propose suggestions and solutions

Respond appropriately to guidance and feedback from supervisors and collaborators and take action to improve

Seek out and make use of opportunities to collaborate, support others and/or make a positive contribution to your discipline or community in the context of your proposed research project

INDEPENDENCE

Autonomously meet deadlines and objectives for your own research project

Take responsibility for identifying the technical, personal or professional skills required for a task and take action to develop those skills appropriately

Take initiative to suggest ideas for improvements, sharing ideas in a constructive manner

Reflect on challenges and successes, and make and implement an action plan to maintain or improve your performance

COMPETENCIES FRAMEWORK INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

► COMPREHENSION & EVALUATION

COLLECT, ORDER, EVALUATE AND REVIEW RESULTS OBJECTIVELY, AND COMMUNICATE WITH CLARITY

ANALYTICAL & PROBLEM SOLVING

What do you think are the main challenges involved in doing this research project, and how would you overcome them?

What relevant skills and experience do you have which you feel would help you undertake this research project?

Do you have an example of a time when you were able to identify errors or spot missing information?

Can you tell us about an experience when you solved a problem or proposed a solution? Describe the project or situation which best demonstrates your analytical abilities.

Tell us about a job or setting where great attention to detail was required to complete a task. How did you handle that situation?

Have you ever had a situation where you had a number of alternatives to choose from? How did you go about choosing one?

Give me an example of when you were responsible for an error or mistake. What was the outcome?

COMMUNICATION

How do you think this research project will benefit people outside of academia?

How would you summarise your research project for someone who is not familiar with it?

Tell us about a time when your communication skills improved a situation.

How do you like to discuss ideas?

Describe a situation where you felt you had not communicated well. How did you correct the situation?

What is the most challenging written task you have done? Describe the most significant written document, report or presentation which you had to complete.

How do you go about explaining a complex technical problem to a person who does not understand technical jargon?

Tell us about a recent successful experience in making a speech or presentation. How did you prepare?

Tell us about a time when you disagreed with someone and you still found a way to get your point across.

Tell us about the most effective presentation you have made. What was the topic? What made it difficult? How did you handle it?

What kinds of oral presentations have you made? How did you prepare for them? What challenges did you have?

PLANNING & ORGANISATION

What do you need in order to start a doctorate?

What timescale have you set for your project and how do you propose to keep to it?

What are your skills gaps? How can we make sure you build the skills you need to do the doctorate?

Tell us how you keep your interest in your topic up to date.

When you have a lot of work to do, how do you get it all done? Give an example.

Have you ever been overloaded with work? How do you keep track of work so that it gets done on time?

COMPETENCIES FRAMEWORK INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

► SOCIO-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES

ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR PERFORMANCE AND SEEK HELP WHEN NECESSARY

MOTIVATION

What do you think would make you a good doctoral researcher?

What is exciting about the prospect of doing a doctorate?

When do you work the hardest and feel the greatest sense of achievement?

What opportunities do you think the doctorate will give you?

What do you need to support your career plans?

Why is your research necessary?

What would you say are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?

Have you conducted a research project as part of your undergraduate or postgraduate education?

What goal have you set for yourself that you have successfully achieved?

CURIOSITY

What do you think makes an effective doctorate?

How do you think your previous experience and skills will help you to deliver this project?

What excites you about your project?

Tell us about a time when you identified a new approach to a problem.

How do you troubleshoot?

Why is this project important to you?

Is there something you've been meaning to try, but haven't yet?

What do you do when you don't know something?

If you had to identify one area you have always wanted to improve upon, what would that be?

RESILIENCE

How do you work best?
What environment is most likely to see you thrive?

What is the academic discipline in which you see your project sitting? How will you go about becoming part of that academic discipline community?

What do you do to cope with uncertainty?

Describe a situation where you demonstrated that you can constructively handle setbacks.

Give us an example of a challenge you faced and say how you overcame it.

Tell us about a time that you made a decision and then changed your mind.

Tell us about a time when you achieved success even when the odds were stacked against you.

What do you do when priorities change? Give one example of when this happened.

What do you do when your schedule is suddenly interrupted? Give an example.

Tell us about a time when someone criticised your work. How did you respond?

COMPETENCIES FRAMEWORK INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

▶ DELIVERING RESULTS

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR GENERATING AND DELIVERING OUTCOMES ON TIME AND TO STANDARD

INTEGRITY

What are the risks to your project and how will you mitigate them?

Will your project make a difference to your field?

How did you come up with your project proposal?

How do you propose to process and store your findings so that you are compliant with policy?

What ethical issues would you expect to encounter during this project?

Have you ever worked in a situation where the rules and guidelines were not clear? Tell me about it. How did you feel about it? How did you react?

Describe a time when you were asked to keep information confidential.

Tell us about a specific time when you had to handle a tough problem which challenged fairness or raised ethical issues.

Describe how you have handled sensitive information in a past experience. What strategies would you utilise to maintain confidentiality?

What have you done to further your knowledge/understanding about diversity?

WORKING WITH OTHERS

What experience, if any, do you have of working with members of the communities that are the focus of this project?

Tell us how you advise or keep others updated on the status or progress of your project.

What do you do when you find it difficult to work with someone on the same team?

Can you give an example to explain how you have looked at an issue from different sides?

What do you think are the benefits of teamwork?

Tell us about a time when you built rapport quickly with someone under difficult conditions.

What, in your opinion, are the key ingredients in maintaining successful working relationships? Give examples of how you made these work for you.

What do you do to show people that you are listening to them?

Tell us about the most effective contribution you have made as part of a group or project team.

Tell us about a time when you had to adapt to a wide variety of people by accepting/understanding their perspective.

INDEPENDENCE

Tell us about a time you had a difficult target to achieve. What happened and how did you work towards this?

How are you planning to become more autonomous/independent in your learning?

Describe a situation where you were asked to do something that you'd never attempted previously.

What is one thing that is most important for you to successfully complete your doctoral programme?

How can you further build your skills to deliver this project?