

Guidance for ACCE Candidate Selection Panel

Background

The ACCE DTP aims to recruit students with the potential to thrive under a PhD system and become exceptional scientists.

We have developed our recruitment process with the aim of alleviating barriers that many students experience in the PhD recruitment process. To do this we have designed the process to reflect the key qualities we believe make an excellent PhD student - **commitment**, **passion** and **creativity** - and designed criteria that, we hope, allow us to recognise and reward these qualities in the candidates.

A key part of this is to recognise that many of the classically recognised signs of 'excellence' (awards, grades, published papers, low/unpaid work experience) depend largely on what opportunities or challenges a student has experienced. Access to opportunities is not equal, and largely track with issues of diversity:

- Students who experience systematic discrimination throughout their education, due to race, gender, sexuality, or disability have often had to work harder to achieve parity with those who have not^{1,2,3}.
- Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and/or who are the first in their family to attend university, are likely to have less financial security, less access to mentoring and support, and less knowledge of academic systems^{4,5}.

Thus 'traditional' metrics of excellence do not accurately reflect talent and potential across all students. Unsurprisingly, a disproportionate number of UKRI funded PhDs are awarded to white, able-bodied, affluent students. In this process we hope that we have expanded our criteria to accommodate a more multifaceted view of potential and talent. Please bear these goals in mind when reviewing student applications.

A. Supervisor/Project Sift Process

Broadly, primary supervisors are limited to 3 standard studentships throughout ACCE2, although the specific requirements differ across ACCE institutions, so prospective supervisors should check with their institutional leads before preparing any proposals. Only one project proposal may be made per lead supervisor per year, although individuals can be co-supervisors on multiple projects within and between years.

All proposals are assessed based on fit to ACCE remit, with a focus on the biological components of the natural environment; proposals that fall outside that remit will not be advertised. However, projects are not restricted to supervisors from a biology department.

In years when too many proposals are submitted than can be advertised, proposals will be assessed according to the [sift criteria](#), with proposals scoring lowest across all criteria being unlikely to be advertised.

¹ [The Broken Pipeline – Barriers to Black PhD Students Accessing Research Council Funding](#)

² [Advance HE Equality in higher education: statistical report 2019](#)

³ [Wanelik, et al., *Ecol. Evol.* **10**, 6870-6880 \(2020\)](#)

⁴ [Fournier & Bond, *Wildl. Soc. Bull.* **39**, 819-821 \(2015\)](#)

⁵ [Gardner & Holley, *Equity Excell, Educ.* **44**, 77-92 \(2011\)](#)

B. Panels for candidate selection (application shortlisting and interview)

Panels are organised per institution.

Each panel should consist of a minimum of **3 home panel members** who will rank students at paper selection and interview. In addition, one panel member from a different institution should act as **external chair** to oversee fairness, equity, and consistency at both stages of the process (see below).

Panel members should be chosen to be **as diverse as possible**. Note, this often focuses on gender and race but should also consider background (first generation academics), disability, sexual orientation, nationality and career stage. However, caution should be taken not to disproportionately overburden panel members from underrepresented groups.

Panel members with a **conflict of interest** (e.g. submitting a candidate to the panel) should not participate in the discussion of that candidate and should either mute themselves and turn off their camera, or leave the meeting temporarily. To ensure that there are always enough panel members the panel should not consist of members co-supervising the same student. Where two panel members have a conflict of interest (e.g. two candidates competing for one place are both supervised by someone on the panel), the chair may be asked to involve themselves in ranking, or if it is known beforehand that more than one panel member will have a conflict of interest at some point, the panel would be increased to 4 people.

The role of the **external chair** is to:

1. Monitor EDI issues either arising in candidates' applications or arising in the discussion. The chair should read applications and flag any that raise significant challenges in proforma Q5 if they are not highlighted in the discussion.
2. Ensure consistency in the shortlisting and interview processes across the institutions.
3. Ensure smooth-running of the interview (welcome the candidate, manage introductions, explain the process, keep things to time, wrap up, etc.).
4. The chair is primarily there to act as an observer, and so is not involved in ranking the candidates. However they can be part of the discussion, and contribute their opinion, when asked to by the panel, for example due to conflict of interest, or impassable disagreement among the panel members.

C. Paper application shortlisting:

Panel members should rank applications following guidance in the rubric ([appendix 1](#)).

Ranking applications

- Allow time for comprehensive reading of the rubric/guidelines before reading application documents.
- Read all applications before ranking to get an idea of the general standard of applications, making notes on each application as you go, to avoid those read first disproportionately being scored higher due to lack of comparison with other applications.
- Allocate equal amounts of time to reading each candidate's application (e.g. if you had 20 applications and 3 hours available, the time could be allocated as 5 minutes to read the rubric/guidelines, 10 minutes per application, and 15 minutes for ranking). Spending an equal amount of time on each application is essential to avoid time-based bias. Plan your time before starting, and set a timer if you need to to keep yourself in check.
- Allow time for breaks, especially if there are lots of applications to read, to prevent tiredness or mood from affecting assessment of applications.

Panel members should be provided with training on the selection approach prior to the panel meeting.

Panel members will read and rank candidates based on their CV and proforma, and produce a ranking of suitable candidates. This should be collated by the panel chair and discussed as a panel.

Discussion should begin with identifying candidates to certainly put forward to interview and those to certainly not put forward, where there is a clear consensus among panel members. The majority of time can then be dedicated to discussion of “middle” candidates and candidates for whom there are significant differences in opinion between panel members. Where candidates are otherwise ranked equally, any barriers that candidates have overcome, or where candidates are flagged as being from an underrepresented group, should be brought into consideration.

CASE status of projects and ECR status of supervisors should **only** be used to separate candidates as a **last resort**, as this makes decisions on the basis of the merits of the project rather than of the candidate themselves. However ACCE has a commitment for 40% of all studentships to be CASE funded, and so CASE projects should be favoured when candidates are otherwise deemed to be equal or a consensus on student quality cannot be reached.

It is recommended that at least (but not significantly more than) 2 students should be interviewed per studentship place available.

Given constraints on numbers of international candidates that can be awarded across the DTP, the Management Board will impose a nominal cap* on the numbers of international places available at each institution, in proportion to the number of nominal (NERC-funded FTE) studentships available there. Institution shortlisting panels should seek to interview around 2 students per nominal international place.

*These nominal caps at each institution may be modified post-interview, depending on the number of international students being offered, and accepting, places across the DTP (as the NERC-imposed constraint of 30% applies at the DTP level).

D. Interview:

Panel members should score applications following guidance in the rubric ([appendix 1](#)).

The same principles as described in Sections B and C above apply for interviewing. Each panel should consist of a minimum **3 home panel members** who will rank students, an **external chair**, and a **student representative**. The candidate's potential supervisor should **not** be present.

Panel members should be chosen to be **as diverse as possible**. Note, this often focuses on gender and race but should also consider background (first generation academics), disability, sexual orientation, nationality and career stage. However, caution should be taken not to disproportionately overburden panel members from underrepresented groups.

Where there is a conflict of interest (e.g. a panel member is a potential supervisor) the panel member is removed from the interview panel and takes no further part in the discussion of that candidate.

Interviews should be 30 mins involving:

- A 7-minute presentation (either pre-recorded or live) on a completed research project. This could be one they have been involved in or a paper they have found very interesting (note that candidates should ideally present on their own work, but this isn't possible in all cases).
- A set of predefined questions from the panel.

Panel members should rank the candidates based on the criteria in the rubric ([appendix 1](#)), drawing on evidence from both the paper application and the interview.

All ranked candidates are discussed using the range of category scoring by each panel member to highlight any large discrepancies; this can lead to some limited modification of the categories following reflection of the quality of candidates.

Candidates around the cut off are discussed. Where a panel member has to step out (e.g. due to a conflict of interest) discussion can include the opinion of the external panel chair.

Where candidates are otherwise ranked equally, any barriers that candidates have overcome ('context' information provided in response to Q5 of the proforma), or where candidates are flagged as being from an underrepresented group, should be brought into consideration.

CASE status of projects and ECR status of supervisors can be used to help separate closely-ranked candidates. CASE status of projects and ECR status of supervisors should **only** be used to separate candidates as a **last resort**, as this makes decisions on the basis of the merits of the project rather than of the candidate themselves. However, as with the shortlisting process, ACCE has a commitment for 40% of all studentships to be CASE funded, and so CASE projects should be favoured when candidates are otherwise deemed to be equal or a consensus on student quality cannot be reached.

The **international status of candidates** should not be taken into account during the ranking process. However initial offers should be made ensuring the institution is within its nominal international cap as set by the Management Board. If an international candidate is ranked above a home candidate, but the nominal cap for international offers has already been reached then any remaining offers should go to the next-ranked home candidate, and the international candidate should be placed on the reserve list. Subsequently institutional constraints on international students may change depending on numbers of offers and acceptances of international candidates across the DTP as a whole, in which case international candidates on the reserve list may then be offered a place as appropriate. However this will require discussion at DTP Board level first, to assess the position across the DTP as a whole.

To facilitate possible inter-institutional ranking of international candidates, **all interviews of international candidates should be recorded**. An independent cross-institutional ACCE panel will then be convened to decide on international candidates to be offered up to the overall DTP international cap.

Appendix 1: Selection Rubric

How to use the selection rubric

This rubric is designed for assessment of applications based on CV and ACCE proforma responses and interview. Applicants are ranked using an **equity minded holistic review** process supported by the rubric below. This involves assessing the candidate's **potential** as a PhD student based (bearing in mind a PhD is a training degree) on their **capabilities and achievements**, in **light of their experience**.

Candidates should be assessed for each element in the rubric equally - there are differential weightings of the categories - the rubric should be used as the **evidence-base** to provide a holistic assessment of each application for subsequent ranking.

Candidates have been asked to provide **context** for their applications which may affect how you assess their 'on paper' accomplishments. For example:

- A candidate who has had to overcome significant barriers to their progress in order to achieve what they have may be ranked higher than an otherwise similar applicant who has not had to overcome such obstacles. See below for further guidance on interpreting information provided in this regard.

Applications should be assessed on the basis of the paper application in the first instance (see notes in rubric highlighting the relevant questions in the proforma). Notes should be retained (please find a template below) and expanded for candidates who move on to interview. For the paper application shortlisting, any information on the rubric pertaining to interviews should be disregarded.

Panel members are asked to sort applications into 4 grades based on the **potential** they show for a PhD –

- 'Unsuitable' – does not meet the standard for an ACCE candidate in one or more areas e.g. cannot be assigned 'suitable' in all criteria.
- 'Suitable' – meets the criteria but does not stand out, e.g. they are weaker in one or more areas.
- 'Excellent' – strong candidate who shows potential to be a very good student.
- 'Outstanding' – classified as outstanding in most areas. Shows exceptional commitment or already displaying the qualities of a PhD student (e.g. initiative in research).

The 'Suitable', 'Excellent' and 'Outstanding' applications will then be ranked individually and these rankings discussed as a panel to determine which candidates should be put forward for interview. **Candidates deemed 'Unsuitable' by any criterion should be excluded from further consideration.** Please retain your notes on each section. Note that it is important for the holistic review process not to determine ranks based on numeric scoring (e.g. by assigning values to the rubric). It might save time to focus ranking efforts on the 'Suitable' and 'Excellent' groups.

Understanding context: proforma Q5 "Is there anything else you would like to tell us that can help to frame your application?"

Systemic prejudice, financial hardship, lack of access can limit the capacity for a student to 'impress' on paper. Many examples of 'excellence' are dependent on opportunities which are not accessible due to circumstances, such as lack of accommodation for disability or having caring responsibilities, and not evenly shared due to prejudice or implicit bias against minority groups. For example, students from minority ethnic backgrounds starting with the same A level grades as their white peers are more likely to drop out and on average achieve lower grades.

Applications from candidates who may be affected in environmental science due to protected characteristics ([age](#), [disability](#), [gender reassignment](#), [marriage and civil partnership](#), [pregnancy/maternity](#), [race](#), [religion](#), [sex](#), [sexual orientation](#)) or have experienced significant barriers should be considered with this in mind, after the initial rankings have been carried out, and their ranking increased relative to otherwise comparable candidates who have not faced those barriers.

How to use references

References should be treated with caution in the knowledge that referees' enthusiasm/tone can differ very widely, and references often say more about the referee than the applicant. **References should be used to highlight issues that may prevent the student from being successful** – but otherwise will not be taken into consideration.

Applications where references raise red flags should be considered carefully.

Factors to disregard

Degree subject should be taken into account for relevance. Awarding institution should **not** be taken into account (we do not believe it is possible to blind this).

Unconscious Bias

Unconscious bias appears when we make judgements based on instinct rather than analysis, reaching decisions influenced by background, cultural environment and personal experiences⁶.

Unconscious bias is often connected to equality characteristics but also goes beyond that (e.g. relating someone's accent to their perceived intelligence or perceived trustworthiness). It can take the form of positive bias towards our 'ingroup' or negative bias towards an 'outgroup'.

The key concepts of unconscious bias are introduced in this short video from the Royal Society:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVp9Z5k0dEE

Unconscious bias can manifest in many ways during recruitment decision making. For example:

- Confirmation bias: You may already have an idea in mind of what an ACCE PhD student should look like, and unconsciously look for someone who fits that mould.
- Affinity bias: You may view people with similar interests, backgrounds or experiences as you more favourably. For example, you may unconsciously favour candidates who attended the same institution or did the same degree as you. Or, candidates whose research topics are similar to your own research area may give the interview presentations you understand best, not necessarily due to the candidate themselves, but due to your own area of expertise.
- You may be unconsciously biased when it comes to names from different cultural backgrounds to your own, or foreign qualifications you are not familiar with.
- There are many other forms of unconscious bias.

⁶ [Royal Society Unconscious Bias Briefing \(2015\)](#)

Unconscious bias cannot be entirely removed but its effects can be mitigated through awareness:

- Question any unconscious biases you may have. You can take implicit association tests (e.g. implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/user/uk/uk.static/takeatest.html) to discover areas in which you may be unconsciously biased.
- Don't rush your decision making and ranking. Quicker decisions are more likely to suffer from unconscious biases. Make sure you have taken in all the information before you make your decision.
- Reconsider the reasons for your decisions.
- It is easier to detect biases in others than in yourself⁷. Shortlisting and interview panel members should be encouraged by the panel's chair to call out bias when they see it in another panel member, to ensure the right decision is made.

⁷ psp.sagepub.com/content/28/3/369?

Criteria	How to assess	Suitable	Excellent	Outstanding
Academic achievement and commitment to science	Take the highest grade awarded at either BSc or MSc/MRes in relevant subject. If no grades are available (e.g. MbiolSci) use Y3 & predicted grades. Assess whether the student has gone over and above simply completing their degree. Examples of this include but are not exclusive to - A. Opportunity-linked examples: - Contributed significantly to a submitted/published paper. - Awarded grant funding (e.g. travel grant) or prizes. - Taking on summer lab work. B. Alternative examples: - Undertaking part time year-round or vacation work to fund their studies. - Overcoming a significant barrier to access or progress (caring responsibilities, disability, illness, being part of protected group that is underrepresented in academia). - Participating in departmental or university culture (e.g. membership of committees, 'BioSoc' roles, engagement in EDI work) or outreach. - Work in the sector (e.g. technician).	Achieved/predicted 2.1 or equivalent. A 2.2 can be considered where applicants can demonstrate excellence in alternative ways (*requires University approval). Student has successfully completed a relevant degree.	Achieved/predicted 1st class degree or equivalent in relevant subject. Evidence of engagement with science beyond their degree or a strong determination to complete their studies. e.g. they have taken up multiple opportunities to expand their experiences e.g. they have overcome significant barriers in order to pursue their degree e.g. they pursued their research interests outside of the degree system	Evidence of exceptional engagement with or determination to continue their career in science. This could be evidenced by a major achievement (going above and beyond) or through numerous examples.
Knowledge/passion creativity and grasp of science	Candidates should show enthusiasm for science and be able to describe a piece of science/answer questions on it. Look for evidence they can 'see beyond' a study and suggest suitable (if not feasible!) changes or extensions. Be able to explain the broader context relating to the study - why is it important?	Has an understanding of the subject described and can describe the hypothesis/background and findings.	...and conveys enthusiasm and describes importance/relevance, and can give insightful answers which show a firm grasp of the subject area.	...and is able to critique the project and/or suggest reasonable modifications or advances, and shows a deep level of subject knowledge in

	Based on interview presentation and related questions, and proforma Q4 “Tell us about a recent piece of science that excited you. If you could repeat it, how would you do it differently?”	Can give answers to follow up questions.		presentation and questions. Demonstrates creativity or adaptability in identifying alternative approaches or improvements. Clear understanding of the importance of the research in a broader context
Alignment with and engagement in PhD project	Is there evidence that they have an understanding of, and interest in, the specific project they have applied for and the wider field in which it is embedded? Assessed by looking at a) prior interest (e.g. modules, projects, engagement beyond degree), b) proforma Q1 “What inspires you about the project you have applied for?”, and c) interview questions relating to the project applied for.	Able to articulate an interest/passion for the broader research field.	... and some evidence of genuine interest and engagement in specific project being applied for. e.g. additional reading e.g. ideas of how they might approach the project in general, or what broad challenges they would need to overcome.	... and strong/insightful engagement with the specific project (see examples in excellent box) e.g. additional reading and awareness of the wider context e.g. ideas of how they might approach the project more specifically , such as a clear description of how they would tackle the first scientific question, or what specific challenges they would need to overcome. PLUS awareness of how the project relates to the wider field.

Skills/preparedness for the PhD	Assesses broad awareness of the general characteristics required to complete a PhD, and specific skill sets needed for the focal studentship. Assessed by questions relating to existing skills and training needs, and skills listed in the proforma Q2 “Describe how your skill set matches the Essential and Desirable skills for the project, and the more general skills required for a PhD. If you don’t currently have specific skills, please describe, with examples, your aptitude to learn new skills”.	Has required skill set for a PhD generally, e.g. numeracy, writing, team work, independent work. Some awareness of skills required for a PhD/the project.	..and skills match majority of ‘<i>essential</i>’ skills for specific project. OR Some awareness of skills they might need to develop. Can articulate how their skills relate to the project/a PhD. Some evidence of ability to learn new skills.	...and skills match some ‘<i>desirable</i>’ skills for specific project. OR Strong awareness of skills they want to develop. Clear/strong evidence of ability to learn new skills.
Presentation and communication (interviews only)	Quality of the presentation and answers. Note that many students are nervous. This should be taken into account. Candidates can be given the option of prerecording their talk to avoid this. Candidates will also be given an indication of the types of questions they will be asked at interview.	Can effectively communicate their project and answer questions.	Presentation contains key details (background, hypothesis or aims, findings). Able to answer questions clearly without rambling. Sticks to time.	Presentation contains key details (background, hypothesis/aims, findings). No superfluous detail. Sticks to time. Answers questions clearly, elaborating where useful, but sticks to the point throughout

Candidate name:

PhD project:

Candidate context:

Category	Suitable	Excellent	Outstanding
Academic achievement and commitment to science			
Knowledge/passion creativity and grasp of science			
Alignment with and engagement in PhD project			
Skills/preparedness for the PhD			
Presentation and communication			