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Personal statement in PhD applications: Gatekeepers' evaluative perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores academic readers' views of the doctoral Personal Statements (PSs) written by student applicants across institutional contexts. The analysis was based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 19 faculty members involved in evaluating the PhD applications within Education at one UK-based and one US-based university. Data were coded by NVivo software and then analysed using methods drawn from critical discourse analysis and conversation analysis to unravel participant intended meaning. Results suggest that the situated knowledge of institutional settings where these academics are based will affect the ways in which they act and think in relation to particular forms of discourse. Specifically, the UK and US academics' interpretations of PSs and its associated evaluation practices are related to their conceptual understanding of the culture of doctoral level study and the structure of the admissions process in their own particular academic community. The paper concludes with some pedagogical implications and a discussion of potential areas for further study to investigate the 'academic' and 'rhetorical' aspects of the PS and to understand the different and often implicit features of the PS across different disciplines, programmes, and institutional contexts.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade, many studies in ESP/EAP have adopted a genre-based approach to analyse different types of academic writing in a particular context (Hyland & Tse, 2005; Swales & Leeder, 2012). In comparison with other academic publications, such as dissertations and research articles, Personal statements (PS, or known as the Statement of Purpose, SOP) for admission to higher education institutions have received relatively less attention. Applicants are often asked to provide information in their statements, such as reasons for pursuing the studies and relevant experiences and achievements while they may have little idea of what piece of information should be included within the given word limit, or what voice will best meet potential audiences' expectations. The PS, however, differs from the conventional student essay/assignment within an academic setting because it is written by students who have not yet become members of the target academic discourse community and it is this threshold level to the outsiders (Swales, 1990; pp. 24–27) that has intensified difficulty in composing this text.

Many postgraduate university applications in the USA and UK require applicants to submit PSs along with other application documents. For example, for doctoral applications made to US-based universities, students are usually required

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to submit several documents via an online application system, including their PS, application form, a resume, letters of recommendation, academic transcripts from previous higher education institutions that students have attended, an official copy of their standardised test scores for the GRE (Graduate Record Examination) and, if they are international applicants (with the exception of those who hold an undergraduate degree from a university where English is the primary language of instruction), they will also need to submit their TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System) results. For doctoral programmes in the UK, applicants are often asked to submit their application form, a PS that is often incorporated as part of the application form, research proposal, references, transcripts of each academic degree(s), and IELTS or TOEFL scores (if English is not their first language). A sample of student previous written work (usually 15–20 pages, 5000–7000 words) may be required in both contexts, depending on different programmes involved. Here, it should be noted that for PhD studies in the UK-based institutions, it is commonly the case that as soon as students are accepted into the doctoral programme of study, they will be expected to work on their individual research project. A research proposal is required before entry, which covers areas such as proposed research topics/questions, theory, methodology and timescale, albeit it tends to be fine-tuned as students commence on their project. Unlike the UK doctoral applications, doctoral students at US-based universities are not generally expected to conduct their independent research project as soon as they begin a course of study. They usually need to undertake a number of course units in the first two years, and work with faculty members within the department as a research and/or teaching assistant.

The existing studies on the PS have mostly adopted Swales' rhetorical move-step analysis and/or discourse analysis to identify rhetorical features. It is clear that different textual features and rhetorical structures are identifiable across different programmes of study. For example, Brown (2004) examined the PSs by students that were admitted, against those who were rejected in the context of clinical psychology doctoral admissions. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods, he coded and analysed a selection of 18 PSs (9 successful and 9 unsuccessful). The findings revealed that the successful applicants dedicated more space to expressing their research aims and constructing research scientist identity, and included far fewer details of personal lives. Brown (2004) reported that one interviewee stated that strong candidates are those who "think like a scientist" (p. 251). In contrast to the results outlined in Brown's study, Bekins, Huckin, and Kijak (2004) found that the PSs for medical school applications tend to focus more on applicants' practical experiences and how those experiences have contributed to their career choice, rather than on research-oriented information. In other words, the use of retrospective kind of accounts that concern students' reflection of their past experiences appears to be desirable as examiners tend to use this type of information to gauge applicant interests and qualities for succeeding in the medicine programmes. The results of Bekins et al.'s study were consistent with those of Barton, Ariail, and Smith (2004) in which they looked at 169 PSs for medical residency applications at a US-based university. Barton et al. (2004) revealed that applicants' attempt to present themselves in the way that will match between applicants' relevant selves (e.g., a memorable self, an accomplished self) and the reader reception is a complex process.

Further, the variations of PSs across disciplines have been examined by Samraj and Monk (2008) in which they analysed rhetorical structures of the PSs submitted to three master's departments at a US-based university (Linguistics; Business administration; and Electrical engineering) and interviewed disciplinary specialists to complement the results of the text analysis. The results indicated that the generic structure of PSs from the three disciplines consists of similar rhetorical moves but differ in the associated steps. Unlike Brown's (2004) study on the doctoral programme in psychology, Samraj and Monk (2008) revealed that the 'step of research focus' is not so apparent in their PS corpus apart from the Engineering statements. Amongst the few studies, Ding (2007) appears to be the one (if any) focussing on both move analysis and an analysis of lexical features of the PSs in which 30 online PSs (20 successful and 10 unsuccessful or unedited PSs) from medical/dental schools were collected from public websites. The findings suggested that compared with successful PSs, unedited ones tend to include irrelevant personal stories which do not make an explicit connection between their stories and the purpose of applying for medical schools.

Although these studies have contributed to the understanding of disciplinary epistemology, other challenges that applicants often face are the opaque admissions process in which the different and often implicit considerations of academics, based on departmental and institutional conditions, may influence the way the applications are evaluated. For instance, Samraj and Monk (2008) have pointed out that some of the faculty whom they interviewed stated that "the quality of the statement would generally be in line with the judgments that the admissions committee reached based on the other admission information such as graduate record examination scores and letters of recommendation" (p. 199). Feak also commented that writing a PS is a "tough thing, because it filters into all sorts of things other than just the [Personal Statements], things like trying to understand the admissions process in general" (cited in Barton & Brown, 2004, p. 11). It is also believed that the evaluation practice can vary depending on the structure of the individual programmes. For instance, Brown (2004) stated that the adoption of 'mentor system' within the psychology department has given faculty members the power to choose their own students and hence positioned the PS an important role for the judgement about an applicant's suitability and matchness rather than merely using the GRE score that was previously the greatest indication of a successful application. As such, the role of the PS in admissions may not be straightforward, which echoes Lea and Street's (1998) views in that "what constitutes valid knowledge within a particular context, and the relationships of authority that exist around the communication" (p. 170) have affected the process of meaning-making given to students' writing and often these assumptions remain implicit to student writers.

On the basis of this discussion, it can then be argued that the PS has to be understood with respect to other complex issues such as reader expectations, institutional practices, power relationships and epistemological assumptions for specific level of

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