

## **How can the NWCDTP better support non-traditional students to undertake a PhD?**

In September 2024, I received some amazing news: I had been selected as an Application Support Fellow for the NWCDTP! The aim of my 9-month Fellowship was to review the provision already offered to applicants and students by the NWCDTP and make recommendations to further support those from “non-traditional” backgrounds going forward. These included mature, part-time, and disabled students, as well as those from a Global Majority background.

I was delighted to be working with two other Application Support Fellows: Excy Hansda and Nan Song. Both Excy and Nan had their own remits (which you can read more about in their individual blogs) but we also had plenty of cross-over issues to discuss. Excy, Nan, and I met on a regular basis to discuss our planned activities and ensure nothing was missed. We also identified several opportunities where we could work together. One really successful example of this was splitting the three online application support workshops run by Jerome, between the three of us. This ensured that there was a PhD student available at each workshop to discuss our experiences and answer any questions the potential applicants had, without it taking too much time out of our individual Fellowships and PhDs.

From October to December 2025, I carried out 18 interviews with current students and alumni from across a wide range of research areas and universities across the NWCDTP. Our discussions covered a whole host of issues from their thoughts on the clarity of the application process, right through to the benefits of undertaking placements and other activities for which the NWCDTP offers funding. I was honestly blown away hearing about the students’ experiences, their dedication to their research, and the incredible ideas they had to support future students.

These interviews resulted in a significant amount of data and a big challenge for me was how to identify key themes from across the interviews and from these, develop recommendations for the NWCDTP. My own research is primarily quantitative, so one of my first actions was to teach myself how to use the qualitative data analysis software, NVIVO. This was a valuable learning experience in itself and is something that I will use going forward, especially to pull out key themes from existing literature for my literature review.

This Fellowship resulted in 24 recommendations. These recommendations included the need to clarify the many acronyms found across academia, which can make it seem quite inaccessible to those who had been away from studying from some time. Blogs were highlighted as an important source of information, which has resulted in several new ones being written by the other Application Support Fellows and I (including this one)! Another key consideration to come out of these discussions was the need for online alternatives to in-person only workshops and the option for asynchronous delivery. This led to a recommendation to develop a resources section on the website where students could access recorded webinars and workshop materials at a time that best suits them. It was also great to hear some extremely positive feedback about the applicant mentoring programme that Excy was developing. I probably don’t have enough space to cover all the recommendations in this blog but I just wanted to say a massive thank you to everyone who took time to take part in this. Your support was invaluable!

As someone who cares passionately about increasing accessibility to academia and supporting non-traditional students as much as possible, this Fellowship was a great opportunity for me to really make a difference in exploring the issues important to NWCDTP students and improving provision going forward. Thank you once again for this incredible opportunity!