'Singing your tune': Genre structure and writer identity in Personal statements for doctoral applications

Yuan-Li Tiffany Chiu
University of East London, UK

Abstract
Personal Statements are considered as an academic promotional genre that students will usually have to compose as part of their application for graduate study. Yet, relatively little research has explored this type of text across institutional contexts. The present study looks into the personal statement and also explores the perspectives of writers who composed these texts in the context of PhD admissions. The text data were drawn from 21 PhD students at one UK- and one US-based university with the aim to explore rhetorical patterns of structure of the student personal statements following genre analysis. Student interviews were used to complement the results of text analysis to better understand how they present and position themselves in their texts. The findings reveal that the rhetorical moves and the discoursal construction of writer identity are associated with their sense of writer positioning, sensitivity to target audience, and the context for this act of writing. The findings have implications not only for writing pedagogy but also for future research to investigate the different and often implicit features of the personal statement across different disciplines, programmes, and institutional contexts.

Keywords: Personal statement; genre analysis; PhD admission; institutional context; writer self-representation; writer identity

1. Introduction
The Personal Statement has been referred to as a type of academic promotional genre in admissions (Brown, 2005). It serves as a part of the application for admission to higher education institutions in which applicants are often expected to convey personal information such as their motivation about the course and relevant experience that make them suitable to study at the target institution. Most postgraduate university applications require applicants to submit personal statements along with other application documents. For example, for doctoral applications submitted to US-based universities, students are usually required to submit their personal statement, application form, a resume, letters of recommendation, transcripts of their undergraduate degree(s), 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 IELTS (International English Language Testing System) or TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) results. For doctoral applications submitted to UK-based universities, students are often asked to submit their application form, a personal statement that is often incorporated as part of the application form, research proposal, references, transcripts of each academic degree(s), and IELTS or TOEFL scores.

Although some of the books and websites have provided useful tips and advice on writing the personal statement, authentic and discipline-specific statements are relatively difficult to obtain as applicants do not have an open access to graduate student application documents (Barton &

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Brown, 2004). Indeed, the personal statement has been considered as an example of 'occluded genres' that are "typically hidden, 'out of sight' or 'occluded' from the public gaze by a veil of confidentiality" (Swales, 1996, p. 46). Few studies on the personal statement have adopted a genre-based move-step analysis and revealed various rhetorical features in personal statements across different programmes of study (e.g., Barton, Ariail, & Smith, 2004; Bekins, Huckin, & Kijak, 2004; Ding, 2007; Samraj & Monk, 2008). Although the existing studies have provided valuable insights into disciplinary epistemological assumptions, few studies, if any, appear to have focused on the conventions associated with the personal statement across institutional contexts. Also, compared with the undergraduate study via the Common Application in the US and the UCAS system in the UK, and its filtering processes, there is no nation-wide system of applications and admissions for postgraduate studies. This present study hence looks into the successful personal statements in the context of PhD admissions to education programmes in one UK- and one US-based universities. To better understand the intentions and meanings students bring to the act of writing, the perspectives of student writers who composed these statements are also investigated to complement the results of text analysis.

2. Discoursal construction of writer identity in the Personal statement
The personal statement, like many other academic promotional genres such as prize applications, thesis acknowledgements, and bio statements, is concerned with what Hyland (2012) called 'self-aggrandisement'. To take thesis acknowledgements for example, it is argued that "they not only offer an opportunity to give credit to institutions and individuals who have contributed to their thesis in some way ['thanking move'], but are also a means of establishing a claim to a scholarly identity" (Hyland, 2012, p. 72). In this sense, the kind of reflective and promotional genres are not only practiced as merely a means of revealing personal information and presenting ideas, but also of strategically creating meanings, and constructing certain writer identities in the way it can be seen as credible and valid to those whose judgements we value (Hyland, 2011).

Given the purpose of the personal statement in admissions, it can be argued that applicants may strive to present and position themselves in the way that the admissions committee would desire. As such, the personal statement can be seen as a means of self-representation and self-identification. For instance, Brown (2004) revealed that "successful applicants [to a doctoral psychology programme in the US] tend to project their future research endeavours and demonstrating their commitments to scientific epistemology" (p. 242). In other words, the successful applicants dedicated more space to emphasise their identity as a research scientist than the rejected candidates. Ding (2007) also found from academics at two US-based medical schools that successful personal statements usually "go beyond a basic desire to help people" as accounts such as 'I enjoy helping people' may be considered as a kind of cliché (p. 372). Instead, the academics preferred to read about applicant's intellectual capacity for achievement and commitment to medicine/dentistry as a physician/dentist. Being compassionate may therefore be expected and medical applicants should also demonstrate academic as well as professional identities. The personal statement genre is also related to other promotional genres. For instance, in his work on the prize application genre, Hyland (2012) revealed that applicants tend to construct their identities as a competent academic and disciplinary insider through moves such as the accounts of disciplinary values and demonstration of research expertise. Here the personal statement for university applications and prize applications can be seen as 'colonies' of promotional genres (Bhatia, 2004) in that they share a broad communicative purpose: a

promotional intent. Bhatia (2004) further stated that although genres may share some general communicative purposes, "most of them will be different in a number of other respects, such as their disciplinary and professional affiliations, contexts of use and exploitations, participant relationships, audience constraints and so on" (p. 57). As such, it can be inferred that variations can be enacted within the colony of promotional genres in accordance with situated contexts where the genre is practised and generated.

In the context of postgraduate university applications, the personal statements are usually short in length (around 750 words) and so applicants have to carefully consider what content to include as well as how to best present themselves. As Bekins et al. (2004, p. 56) put it:

> [It is] the promotion of oneself through discourse in structured and selective content, reflective of the common ground between the writer and the discourse community's epistemology, ideology, as well as kairos (rhetorical timing).

This view signifies the importance of portraying their positive relevant selves in text (Bhatia, 1993) as admissions tutors may wish to see particular identities that fit with the epistemological orientation within their specific academic discourse community (Chiu, under review). A writer's way of conveying himself/herself in writing is in part associated with what Ivanič (1998) termed as 'discoursal self' in that it concerns "the immediate social context in which the writing takes place, particularly the way in which writers' representations of self are shaped, nurtured or constrained by their anticipation of known or imagined reader(s)" (p. 215). In other words, the discourse characteristics of a particular piece of writing may shape writer positioning in terms of the way they wish to sound. For instance, writers may be happily willing to 'own' an aspect of identity called 'aspiring selves' which are temporarily constructed in writing to fulfil a particular communicative purpose even though it is not a writer's genuine self-reflection and has not yet been embodied in them at the time of writing (Ivanič, 1998; see also Handel, 1987 – 'prospective self'). This speaks to the unstable and inconsistent nature of writer identity, which is a continuous (re)constructing process. This is especially the case when the power of readers overshadows that of the writers, as in the case of admissions where 'rhetorical paradox' (Paley, 1996) and 'inherent imbalance of knowledge' (Brown, 2004) occur as students have not yet gained entry into their target academic community and hence are not yet familiar with the disciplinary and institutional epistemologies and requirements.

As applicants are often given only brief instructions on the university's website, it can be said that there is a certain degree of freedom in terms of content selection and ways of presenting their information. Hyland (2015) brings attention to the relationship between the concepts of 'proximity' and 'positioning' in which the former refers to certain norms and rhetorical conventions of community practice that provide broad guidance of 'the ways things are done' whereas the latter highlights the fact that there is a room for flexibility and individual creativity. Hyland (2015, p. 2) further states that:

> Engaging in disciplinary genres does not involve stepping into a pre-packaged self as individuals can use the options available to *position themselves* in terms of a personal stance and interpersonal alignments. Genre constraints are simultaneously the enabling conditions for originality.

Consistent with this view, the notion of writer identity in this study is conceptualised as the process of 'identification' and 'positioning' which connotes the fluidity and complexity of identity as being socially constructed. The word 'identification', stemming from the verb 'identify', is also used by Ivanič (1998) to better illustrate the dynamic nature of how people align themselves with "sets of interests, values, beliefs and practices" (p. 11) and represent themselves in a particular context and to their awareness of being seen by others. Ivanič (1998) also highlighted multiple and conflicting identities that were brought to the act of writing by L1 mature students who had returned to university after an absence of several years from the academic community. These students faced tensions amongst issues of 'accommodation', 'opposition', and 'resistance', while composing their writing *for/in* a new academic discourse community (Chase, 1988; see also Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Viete & Le Ha, 2007). Such tensions may engender 'ambivalent feelings' for student writers when they attempt to position themselves in writing against their consideration of assessor expectation and academic convention within a specific academic context (Ivanič, 1998). As the student participants in Ivanič's (1998) work were active members within a particular academic community, it is thus not entirely clear whether the discoursal construction of writer identity in relation to contradictions and ambivalence would also be in existence in the case of student outsiders who write *to* get into a target academic programme. In order to explore the discoursal construction of identity in writing, the current study considers 'discourse characteristics' of a particular piece of writing, with a particular focus on what is said (moves) as well as to consider the 'social interaction surrounding these texts' (Ivanič, 1998) that has led the writers to position in the way they wish to be perceived. As genre is very much context-driven, it can be inferred that student writers may approach their personal statements differently in accordance with a specific context. The consideration of UK- and US- based contexts is informed by Russell, Lea, Parker, Street, and Donahue (2009) article that discussed writing and literacy practices in terms of institutional position of writing in various educational systems across countries. Informed by their discussion, the focus of the current study on the two distinct educational contexts provides a range of empirical opportunities to investigate the personal statement genre. This study aims to explore the following questions:

- What are the rhetorical moves of the successful personal statements for application to doctoral education programmes at the two focal universities?
- How do students represent and position themselves in their doctoral personal statements?

3. The study
3.1 Participants and data
The data used in this study comprised 21 doctoral students, both home and international, aged between 23 and 45, from education programmes in one UK (n=9) and one US (n=12) higher education institutions. I approached these students via email as listed on the institution's website while a few were recruited through personal contact. The majority of the participants were in their first (and a few in their second) year of doctoral studies at the time of the research. As such, their recollections of personal statement writing practices were more recent, especially when compared to those who have reached the final stages of their studies. Both institutions were considered as elite and research-intensive. Here, it should be noted that in order to help

contextualise and broaden the scope of my findings, I recruited a range of students within Education research (see Table 1).

Table 1 Student participants at the focal UK and US-based institutions

UK-based institution			US-based institution		
Student pseudonym	Nationality	Research areas	Student pseudonym	Nationality	Research areas
Denise	British	Education Policy	James	American	Curriculum
Alicia	Chinese	Language and Literacy	Dana	American	Educational Linguistics
Amber	Chinese	Language and Literacy	Samantha	American	Educational Linguistics
Anna	Creek	Language and Literacy	Kevin	American	Education Policy
Flower	British	Language and Literacy	Tommy	Chinese	Education Policy
Maria	Greek	Language and Literacy	Denny	American	Higher Education
Taya	Chinese	Language and Literacy	Emily	American	Higher Education
Brian	British	Science Education	John	American	Higher Education
Trevor	Turkish	Science Education	Alice	Canadian	Language and Literacy
			Debbie	American	Language and Literacy
			Erica	American	Language and Literacy
			William	American	Language and Literacy

Twenty-one doctoral personal statements were collected, provided electronically by participants during recruitment. I interviewed students individually at their respective institutions, for an average of 45 minutes. Some students had more than one follow-up interviews with me as they had much information to offer and were very willing to share their views and experiences of personal statement. I conducted all the interviews in English, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. In order to gain insights into the students' assumptions and their self-positioning and representation in their personal statements, two stages of semi-structured interviews were conducted. I designed a flexible interview schedule which allowed to explore the beliefs, attitudes, and reasons that underpinned the accounts offered by participants. The first stage was centred on the general questions about the students' perceptions of the personal statement and the writing strategies. The second stage of the interview focused on the students' comments on their own personal statements ('talk around text'), in which the students were encouraged to elaborate the ways in which their personal statements were written. I brought hardcopies of their statements to the interviews on the day for the second stage of the interview. Sample interview questions are as follows:

- What do you think is the purpose of personal statement for postgraduate study applications?

- How important do you think the personal statement is compared with other admissions documents such as academic transcripts, letters of recommendation, etc?
- What contents do you think are important to include in your statement?
- What do you think your potential readers would like to see in your statement?
- What, if any, difficulties did you encounter when writing your statement?
- What strategies and resources did you adopt while composing your personal statement?
- How did you compose your statement? Could you describe your writing process?
- Could you explain why you included particular information in your statement? Could you comment on your statement? ('talk around text')

3.2 Data analysis

I analysed the personal statements through the lens of move analysis (Swales, 1981, 1990). A 'move', as Swales (1990, p. 140) puts, can be viewed as a rhetorical component from one part of a text to another. In other words, "each move represents a stretch of text serving a particular communicative (that is, semantic) function" (Upton & Cohen, 2009, p. 588). On the other hand, a 'step' (some researchers use the term 'strategy,' see Bhatia, 1993; Henry & Roseberry, 2001) is viewed as varied approaches to realise a broader move. In line with these views, the analysis of moves in this study is mainly concerned with the rhetorical function of the moves. As I also drew on Samraj and Monk's (2008) work for the development of move-step categorisation and definitions in the focal personal statements, two suggested moves, Introduction and Conclusion, are also associated with the their location in the texts. For example, the Introduction move often appears at the beginning of a text. I also used other works, including Bekins et al.'s (2004) and Ding's (2007), to help establish the description of the modified coding protocol based on the focal doctoral personal statements. Here it should be noted that given that these existing studies on the personal statements were not based on the doctoral personal statements, the list of moves and steps identified in these existing studies were employed as the starting point for my analysis; this list is not a definitive and exhaustive categorisation and is not intended to be used as a checklist against my data. Specifically, the analysis process of identifying moves and steps was rather iterative which involved reading the texts carefully from one to the other, determining rhetorical function of text segments, and moving back and forth between the data and the ongoing move-step classifications to identify and (re)define functional units which represented a particular communicative purpose. The move-step structure was established until no new functional units identified, in which constant redefinition and refinement of the moves were applied. I used *Nvivo 10* to help organise and analyse the personal statements. To enhance its inter-rater reliability, two personal statements were analysed and coded by my colleague, using the established categories from existing studies as a working reference, as mentioned above, in which the categories produced were then compared with the categorisation already identified by me to fine-tune and verify the coding categories. This process is to ensure my coding system "is fairly transparent, coherent and understandable, as opposed to an idiosyncratic, opaque system of interpretation devised by a single researcher" (Joffe & Yardley, 2004, p. 63).

Table 2 below illustrates the moves and steps derived based on the doctoral personal statements in this study, alongside the descriptors to indicate their communicative functions. It is noted that the list of move-steps in Table 2 does not suggest that all the personal statements were written in this sequential order. In fact, the moves of 'Relevant background' and 'Reasons for applying' are often intertwined and weave through different parts of the texts.

Table 2 Moves and steps in the doctoral personal statements within Education

Moves	Descriptors
Move 1: Introduction	Applicants provide their personal experience as a kind of narration or observation in the field of study to contextualise their research interest and decision to apply.
Step 1-A: Synopsis of personal background and experiences	Applicants describe their relevant background and experiences to contextualise their research interests. This step may include personal belief, attributes and observation towards a specific topic in the field of Education.
Step 1-B: Generalisations about the profession or discipline	Applicants state a general observation on current situations and development in the discipline.
Step 1-C: Research interest	Applicants state their research interests.
Step 1-D: (Future) Goals or decision to apply for a specific programme/institution	Applicants state their goals or decision to apply for the target programme/institution. This step may include the appeal of the programme in terms of the institution, supervisors' research interests, and courses and areas of expertise offered.
Move 2: Relevant background	Applicants express their relevant background and credentials related to the field to indicate their suitability ('match') for the programme and establish a relevant self.
Step 2-A: Education/Academic achievements and experiences	Applicants reveal academic achievements related to the proposed field of study.
Step 2-B: Work/Professional experiences	Applicants discuss professional experiences (e.g., internship, teaching).
Step 2-C: Research experiences	Applicants review relevant research experiences (e.g., research seminars, conferences, research projects, publication).
Step 2-D: Research interest	Applicants state their research interests and reveal their understanding of their proposed research topic and field of study.
Step 2-E: Language and cultural proficiency	Applicants state their good understanding of the language and culture in relation to the research project they propose to pursue.
Step 2-F: Background such as travel and family	Applicants portray their background in terms of travel or family.
Step 2-G: Personality	Applicants express their personal qualities or characteristics that they believe to be appealing to the target programme (e.g., determination, ingenuity).
Move 3: Reasons for applying	Applicants explain reasons for pursuing the proposed doctoral study.

Step 3-A: Gap in applicant background	Applicants state a gap in their background as a reason for their decision to pursue the degree (e.g., gap in educational background).
Step 3-B: Personal development and ambition ('positive gains')	Applicants describe positive gains from pursuing the degree that will help them to achieve their future (career) goals.
Step 3-C: Programme and university attributes/understanding	Applicants describe the appeal of the programme. This may include accounts regarding applicants' contact with the faculty in the target institution (e.g., campus visit, email communication).
Step 3-D: Personal observations/experiences/self-reflection	Applicants give reason for academic/research interests based on their observations, experiences and self-reflection.
Step 3-E: Disciplinary and research reasons	Applicants express their reasons for pursuing the degree from the perspective of research/discipline.
Move 4: Extra-curricular information	Applicants mention activities that are outside of the formal curriculum of school or university education (e.g., a great passion in music).
Move 5: Conclusion	Applicants refer to the university's reputation or emphasise the uniqueness that makes them a qualified and attractive candidate.
Step 5-A: (Future) goals and/or prediction of future success	Applicants restate the goals and promising anticipation for success. Applicants' research interests and potential contribution to the field may also be noted.
Step 5-B: Self-promotion/evaluation	Applicants make effort to promote themselves by stating the qualities (e.g., personal characteristics) or highlighting relevant accomplishments.
Step 5-C: Understanding of the proposed study/programme	Applicants describe their understanding of the proposed study, faculty research expertise and modules offered by the programme.
Step 5-D: Praise for the academics/ programme/institution	Applicants praise the institution that they apply for.
Step 5-E: Contribution to the courses	Applicants state their potential contribution to the target programme.

In this study, I viewed the interview data as subsidiary to complement the results of the text analysis. I coded the interviews using *NVivo 10* to help sort and organise data systematically, with the aim of identifying recurring/significant concepts in relation to writer identity and self-representation. Once the initial themes have been identified, I applied a process of "identifying links between categories, grouping them thematically and then sorting them according to different levels of generality" to develop "a hierarchy of main and subthemes" (Ritchie, Spencer, & O'Connor, 2003, p. 222). As an example, subthemes identified from student interviews such as 'naming a faculty' and 'naming a well-established scholar' can be grouped under the main theme called 'name-dropping strategy'. I then interpreted these concepts and themes, drawing on

the notions of writer identity, as outlined in Section 2, which provide useful lenses for the exploration of the ways in which students position themselves in their personal statements.

4. Findings

Table 3 below represents the frequencies with which the moves and steps are derived from both focal institutions as well as the total number of the personal statements that consist of any step(s) of each move. In this section, I discuss the key moves and steps using personal statement extracts and where necessary, students' interview excerpts (in *italics*) to complement the discussion. Other interesting themes identified from the interviews will also be noted at the end of this section.

Table 3 Moves and steps in student PhD personal statements from both institutions

Moves and steps	UK-based institution (9)	US-based institution (12)
Move 1 Introduction	9	12
Step 1-A: Synopsis of personal background and experiences	8	8
Step 1-B: Generalisations about the profession or discipline	1	3
Step 1-C: Research interest	0	6
Step 1-D: (Future) Goals or decision to apply for a specific programme/institution	4	7
Total of source coded	*21*	
Move 2 Relevant background	9	12
Step 2-A: Education/academic achievements and experiences	6	8
Step 2-B: Work/professional experiences	7	9
Step 2-C: Research experiences	5	8
Step 2-D: Research interest	2	7
Step 2-E: Language and culture proficiency	0	1
Step 2-F: Background such as travel and family	1	3
Step 2-G: Personality	3	1
Total of source coded	*21*	
Move 3 Reasons for applying	9	11
Step 3-A: Gap in applicant background	3	3
Step 3-B: Personal development and ambition ('positive gains')	8	7
Step 3-C: Programme and university attributes/ understanding	4	8
Step 3-D: Personal observations, experiences, and self-reflection	6	4
Step 3-E: Disciplinary and research reasons	1	2
Total of source coded	*21*	
Move 4 Extra-curricular information	3	0
Total of source coded	*3*	

Move 5 Conclusion	9	12
Step 5-A: Goals and/or prediction of future success	7	10
Step 5-B: Self-promotion/evaluation	5	5
Step 5-C: Understanding of the proposed study and programme	3	5
Step 5-D: Praise for the academics/programme/institution	2	1
Step 5-E: Contribution to the courses	1	2
Total of source coded	*21*	

Move of 'Introduction'

The Introduction move is usually the most crucial part of personal statements as it can determine the first impression of potential audiences (Barton et al., 2004; Ishop, 2008). In this move, applicants provide accounts that aim to grab the reader's attention as a kind of 'hook' (Bekins et al., 2004). As can be seen from Table 3 above, four rhetorical strategies are identified to fulfil this move. Most of the applicants (16 out of 21) described their relevant background and experiences to contextualise their areas of interest (Step 1-A):

> Having lived in several countries including the UK, Ireland, USA, France, Germany, Portugal and Italy, I have had the opportunity to learn and reach fluency in several languages […] has made me not only a keen language learner but also made me develop a great interest in languages both on a theoretical as well as on an applied level. (Maria, UK)

In this move, some applicants (11 out of 21) explicitly stated their decision to apply for a target programme in order to achieve their future goals. It should be noted that applicants may include more than one steps in their introduction move, as shown below:

> I am applying to the PhD program in applied linguistics at the *University of Putney* (pseudonym) in order to broaden my perspective of language acquisition in L2 learners. // More specifically, I am interested in English writing for specific purposes. // English has emerged as a lingua franca, used as a communications medium in an increasingly global world, both in social and professional contexts. As a result, the need to write effectively and concisely in English has become urgent and necessary. (Alicia, UK)

The above extract contains three steps. The first sentence clearly states the programme (applied linguistics) which the applicant wants to pursue (Step 1-D). The second sentence brings out the applicant's research interest though it is quite brief (Step 1-C). Further, she expressed a general observation and remarks on the issue of English as a lingua franca and further highlighted the needs of English writing for specific purposes (Step 1-B).

As can be seen from Table 3, it is important to note that no references are made for the aspect of 'research interest' (Step 1-C) in the students' statements at the UK-based institution, compared with those from the US-based one. The reason for this variation seems to be due to differences in the documentation that supports an application for both contexts. In the British context, two written documents – the research proposal and personal statement – are often required for a

doctoral application. Given the purpose of the research proposal, applicants tend to state their research interest in their proposal rather than in their personal statement (see Chiu, 2015). In contrast, students at US-based institutions would mostly convey their research interests and relevant personal information in their personal statement as it is usually the only document where they can write something different from the information offered in the other parts of application package. The difference in documentation across the two institutions also reflects the varied structures of the doctoral studies: in the US, doctoral students are often required to complete 2-3 years of course work before starting their doctoral dissertations, as opposed to the graduate study in the UK where doctoral students generally embark on their own research much sooner. However, in order to be accepted to US doctoral programmes, students need to have some ideas of what research they are interested in and include it in their statements (so as to be aligned with relevant faculty) but do not need to write a formal research proposal until sometime after the two years into the programme. In fact, interviews with the US-based students suggest that the personal statement as one of the important documents in an application package where they are able to explain their research interests and reasons for choosing their intended course of study, as shown below:

> *I think the personal statement is important, when you get to the level of doctorate is meant to align the applicant's interests with the faculties' interests, and if the faculty sees that there are common interests in research they would want to expand their family so to speak, and bring you in. But, um, if you were just the most fantastic student, had perfect scores on your tests, perfect grades, but your interests didn't align with the faculties' I don't know how they could bring a person in. (William, US)*

William's account brings out the importance of the personal statement, especially for a doctoral programme application where academics attempt to obtain the information about students' research interest for the consideration of their suitability within the institution.

Move of 'Relevant background'
The second move is the one where applicants establish relevant credentials by including their research, academic, and professional background to justify why the admissions tutors should consider them as qualified candidates. The applicants commonly indicate their education background that has influence on their areas of research interest. The high frequency of the education step is not surprising in the context of doctoral applications, given that the application prompt instructs applicants to describe their background, significant professional experiences related to their proposed programme of study, and important aspects of their academic achievement. When the applicants discussed their education background, many of them also mentioned their relevant working experiences during/out of their studies which have in part shaped their research interest. Another key step where the applicants stated their research-related experience is exemplified below:

> For my final year undergraduate thesis, my research was on immigration and cultural identity, with a specific focus on the maintenance of Chinese cultural values between first-generation Chinese immigrants and their British-born Chinese children. (Brian, UK)

The step of research experience has been widely considered as a crucial aspect in the context of doctoral applications. The student interviews suggest that they wanted to convince the academic readers that they possessed the identity of a committed student, a scholar and a researcher. One of the students responded when she was asked about the content that she considered to be important to include in her statement:

> *What I want to do, why I want to do it, my goals, um, with whom, so I put specifically people I admired at that university and how I kind of envisioned myself as a researcher, since I applied to research institutions and a research degree, and how I envisioned myself as a student and a scholar. (Samantha, US)*

Samantha's account reveals her attempt to position and envision herself as a scholar and researcher and that this can be associated with what Ivanič (1998) discussed as 'aspiring self' which writers may not 'own' at the time of writing but are aspired to become in due course. As commonly known, a sense of a student's identity as a 'researcher' is always desirable for PhD degree as this level of study is often considered as a long-term commitment and emphasises heavily on the research. This aspect of envisioned identity is enacted by applicants' perceptions and evaluations of what may be valued by the target audience and academic community. One of the students illustrated this point when he discussed how he structured his statement:

> *...I also definitely put in my personal statement that I wanted to be a faculty member ['academics'] when I left because I'd been told that you have to do that or else you don't get in. I didn't know at the time whether I wanted to be a faculty member or not – I still don't know that – and once you get in you can sort of 'ha-ha' talk about it, say, "I'm not sure what I want to do," but it's like, almost like a, if you say, "I don't want to be a faculty member," or "I'm not sure," it's almost like you get axed like instantly. This is what I've been told. (James, US)*

This can be seen as one of the cases in which the students attempt to include aspects that they think might meet academics' expectations even if the information they offer are not a sincere self-reflection. The construction of a researcher identity identified is consistent with what was found in the Electrical Engineering master's statements, as discussed in Samraj and Monk's study (2008).

In addition to applicants' conscious selection of 'what' information should be included in their personal statements, some students were also attentive to 'how' it can be discussed and presented in a way that will best meet potential audiences' expectations. When the students were asked about the purpose of the personal statement, one of them responded as below:

> *I think generally it's to demonstrate a certain academic, um, like an academic hat that you can wear, like that's not how I talk in real life, that's not how I talk to my family or to my friends, but they just need to know that I could talk like that, I have it in me to talk in this way, kind of intellectual style, where I can explain my research interests. I can explain myself in a way, in a style, in a manner that is, um, the accepted norm for this community. Because if I was to write a statement of purpose to um, let's say to join a bank or to like, you know what I mean, if it was a different community that I was speaking to, it would be a very*

> *different voice even if the document was the same. So I think the fact that I'm writing to professors, there is something they're expecting from you, they want to hear me talk like they talk. (Dana, US)*

Dana's account reveals a kind of 'academic' identity that she would like to portray through the way she conveyed her ideas in writing. The student acknowledged that there was a certain academic/intellectual style of talking that is valued in the target academic community. In fact, the personal statement has been considered as an important indicator of students' academic writing ability (Chiu, 2015). This is especially the case for the doctoral application at the focal US-based institution where the personal statement is often the only written channel to communicate their academic and research information (cf. UK context). Dana's attempt to adopt, in her words, an 'academic hat' is to reveal that she has the attribute that she thinks academics value and hence it shall position her as a suitable candidate for the community. The aspect of 'discoursal self' is noted when she made frequent reference to the reader expectation ('*they want to hear me talk like they talk*').

Move of 'Reasons for applying'
This move contains information on applicants' reasons to pursue the proposed study and more broadly, reasons for the commitment to the field of study. As can be seen from Table 3, five steps are identified in this move in which the step of personal development and ambition occurs more often than the others, as exemplified below:

> My objective is to be able, by the end of this research programme, to efficiently manage all multilingual challenges that I will face as a Greek Cypriot primary school teacher. Also, one of my ambitions is to become a pioneer in Greek Cypriot primary education […]. (Anna, UK)

The extract above reveals the student's account with regard to the positive gains from the programme. In this move, applicants also describe what is appealing about the programme in terms of the institution, supervisors' research interests, and areas of expertise offered, which makes them want to pursue the studies in the particular programme and institution:

> Now, I am looking for the opportunity to continue my training and interdisciplinary research. For this reason, I am pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Linguistics at the *University of New Wilson* (pseudonym), where I will be able to engage in research in an excellent academic environment where interdisciplinary research is apparent among the faculty. (Samantha, US)

Nine (out of 21) personal statements show reasons for applicants' academic interests based on their observations, experiences, or self-reflection. Here, it should be noted that the move of reasons for applying is usually tied with the move of relevant background. The example below exemplifies this connection:

> As a L2 learner and ESL teacher, I observed many challenges that students encountered when they were writing essays for specific subjects. I realized that to become successful writers in a given discipline, learners not only need to acculturate to the discipline, but also have to learn the most effective and appropriate language structures per that correspond to

> institutional convention. […] In order to help students successfully participate in a target community, I desire to specialize in language research, focusing on providing learners with language education to meet the requirements. (Alicia, UK)

The extract above shows the applicant's reasons for applying based on her previous observations and evaluations of students' writing practices as a L2 learner and ESL teacher. Such kind of 'introspective' statement is quite salient amongst the personal statements. Many students, in fact, stressed the importance of self-assessment of one's own personal experiences and how these have shaped their academic and research interest. One of the students responded when he was asked about the content he had chosen to include in his statement:

> *I think a very common method that people take is that they kind of extract from their personal experiences, their observations about the world, and you kind of assess all that and you figure out, well, where are a lot of my questions, right, where is there a void within the spectrum of my research interests and how might I make a contribution in filling that void and so, you know, comes from my assessment of my personal experiences, then that leads into what my questions are about. (John, US)*

This extract shows the student's attempt to provide introspective kind of accounts that concern the reflection of his past experiences rather than merely listing these experiences. This finding is consistent with those of Barton et al. (2004) in which the personal statements in residency applications emphasise much on self-reflection on previous experiences and of Hyland (2012) where the prize applications require the inclusion of evaluative claims derived from self-assessments.

Move of 'Conclusion'
In the conclusion move, the applicants often refer to the university's reputation, restate the future study goals or emphasise the uniqueness that makes them qualified candidates. Five steps are identified in this move. These steps are not completely independent from each other but may be embedded or overlap to some extent. One of the examples is shown as follows:

> Being granted the opportunity to learn in this superb academic institution will allow me to develop a variety of skills that will better prepare me to achieve my goal of being a researcher, language educator, and policy maker par excellence, // and although this programme will undoubtedly present me with many challenges, my achievements and dedication demonstrate that I am prepared for this graduate programme. (Alicia, UK)

The extract above comprises two steps: goals or prediction of future (Step 5-A), and self-promotion (Step 5-B). The first part of this sentence presents the applicant's potential achievement in the future. The second part shows the applicant's strong confidence in her capability of pursuing a PhD in her chosen field of study.

As can be seen in Table 3, eight personal statements contain the step of understanding of the proposed study and programme in their conclusion move:

> I am applying for a Ph.D. in Reading, Writing, and Literacy at the *University of New Wilson* because the programme is interdisciplinary, focused on urban education, and well-connected to Albany communities. A number of faculty in the department speak to my passions, namely teaching as listening and teaching as sensitivity to student positioning taking place under the surface of classroom interactions. I am particularly interested in researching curricula that incorporate African American language. My vision for education is the integration of youth culture, inquiry and critical problem-solving for greater civic empowerment of all students. (Erica, US)

It is interesting to note that many students expressed their awareness of their readers and the target discourse community in the interviews. This is often realised through the inclusion of the names of particular faculty members whom they would like to work with, and/or inclusive statements that concern the general academic audience in the target programme. One of the students responded when he commented on his concluding paragraph as well as other parts in his statement:

> *I did look at the website; I looked at some of the faculty members' publications just to give myself a better foundational knowledge of the work that they do because in my statement I did tie in each faculty member and sort of, um, gave evidence that my interests and work would complement theirs in some way. (James, US)*

The account above refers to the student's attempt to make a connection between his research interest and those of the targeted academic community. To establish this common ground, some students mentioned names of the academics in the field:

> To continue my research, I seek admission to a competitive graduate program with rigorous training in ethnographic research and linguistic anthropology with opportunities for cross-disciplinary studies with education. *University of New Wilson's* doctoral program offers a unique fit. I am particularly eager to work with Professor *Adam Smith* (pseudonym), whose work on the modern language-literacy change and South Asia has regional relevance for my work and Professor *Alexander Kara* (pseudonym), whose methodological approaches on social domain and trajectories are particularly suited to my research; I have already corresponded with both of them. […] I look forward to my future career as an educator, researcher and policymaker who will ultimately make a difference in the way language is taught in shifting cultures. I strongly believe that *University of New Wilson's* culture, faculty and resources will provide me with the support I need to make this vision a reality and help me to make significant contributions to the field, as well as the *University of New Wilson's* academic community. (Dana, US)

The extract above reveals the student's knowledge to the field of educational linguistics. The inclusion of this information is strongly associated with the student's consideration of what may be valued by her readers:

> *I make this reference to Adam Smith, Alex Kara (pseudonym) as well as other scholars elsewhere in my statement and I mean I'm basically referring to people in the Academy. Like the idea is that my audience knows who these people are and they're going to be like, "Oh*

yeah, she knows the same people that we know." ((laughs))… like there's a lot of other people whose work I appreciate but I can't mention everyone; I have to mention the people that my audience is going to care about. (Dana, US)

The strategy of the name-dropping in the students' personal statements seems to be effective to deliver this message, which supports the idea in Barton and Brown's (2004) article in which they noted that most of the successful personal statements are usually identified with some names of well-established people in the field or names of academics in the target academic community. Hyland (2011) also commented that "who we express a connection with or have relationships with says something to others about us" (p. 13), as also in the case of thesis acknowledgements where academic identity is constructed via the alignment of well-established scholars.

The opaque evaluations of personal statement
The students' awareness of the content selection and audience expectation appears to illustrate that the personal statement writing entails an element of 'gamesmanship'. Casanave (2002) also used the 'game' metaphor to illustrate the challenge of writing that students have to 'play' strategically in order to meet reader expectation. The 'opaque' nature of this particular text type often perplexes applicants:

… when I was writing it, like it's hard not to get, um, caught up in other people's expectations, so I tried really hard to match what I thought people might want, but at the same time I had to understand like I really have no control over that. Um, I can only try my best to be honest and present myself, um, the way that I want to be seen, but how they actually see me and how they actually read it, no idea, …I think that's the thing that actually scares me about the personal statement. (Samantha, US)

When the students were asked about their writing strategies and resources during their writing process, their responses reveal that they tended to utilise their social capital networks to obtain feedback on their drafts. For instance, some students consulted their families and friends who have had some experience of applying for postgraduate programmes and/or academics whom students have the relationship with based on their previous academic studies in order to gain insider perspectives. Some students also broadened their social capital by contacting academics within the target programme to express their research interests and intention of applying for admission.

Length of personal statement
It is noted that the average length of the personal statement is different in which UK-based ones are much shorter than the US-based ones. This may not be surprising as UK-based application also requires a research proposal where applicants can detail their research topic along with their personal statements. What is perhaps more important to this phenomenon is that the amount of information to include in the personal statement can be engendered by the extent to which the students know about their audience. Specifically, most of the students (7 out of 9) at the focal UK-based institution have certain connections to the academics in the target programme. Some of them have met their potential supervisors at academic conferences, or have communicated with them via emails. Four students also got assistance with their research proposal from their potential doctoral supervisor before completing their applications. Some had studied for their

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undergraduate and/or master's degrees at the institution where they wished to continue their study as a PhD student, as in the case below:

> *I did my undergraduate here so it was a bit different situation I think than if you're completely new here, you might be more concerned. I mean, since I did my undergraduate here, I already knew most of the people and they know me so they know my work, they know my interest, they know my strength, they know my weaknesses. (Flower, UK)*

The account above indicates that the student knew details of their potential supervisor's research expertise and that the academics may have known the applicant to a certain extent based upon their previous encounters with them. The student then felt it is unnecessary to provide as much information about herself as those who are completely new to the faculty or institution. In the cases of Flower as well as others where they have better ideas of their audience, the amount of information to include was determined by their assumptions about the readers' knowledge of the students themselves and thereby to "create a mutual frame of reference and ensure their purposes will be retrieved" (Hyland, 2015, p. 2). As such, although certain important moves such as relevant background which often occurs in the personal statement, these may not be perceived to have the same weighting by different applicants. Such a finding illustrates Hyland's (2015) argument that although the concept of genre has attempted to provide generic templates of rhetorical options ('proximity'), it is also believed that individual writers could appropriate and manipulate these available resources in ways that suit their unique needs and conditions ('positioning'). This also echoes what Bhatia (2004) has called as the 'versatility' of promotional genres, where the communicative purpose of a type of promotional genre can be more 'specific' (i.e. different genre levels such as 'genre', 'sub-genres') rather than 'general' (i.e. 'genre colony') in accordance with different contexts of use and practices.

Comparatively, although the students in the focal US-based institution had some connection with the faculty based on the email communication or face-to-face conversation during their campus visit, such a close connection during the application process is relatively less frequent in these cases. This is perhaps because of the heterogeneous nature of admissions process at both institutions. It is often the case that US-based institutions receive a large number of applications for postgraduate studies during the admissions period, compared with the British context, and such a competitive process appears to make it difficult for every applicant to work closely with the academics during the application procedure.

5. Discussion
The move-step analysis has revealed four main rhetorical moves in both institutional contexts – introduction, relevant background, reasons for applying, and conclusion – with extra-curricular information as an optional. Perhaps, however, it is more interesting to see the instantiation of steps used to realise each move and the amount of information for inclusion. Specifically, one of the key findings is the step of research interest which appears more frequently in the US statements than those in the UK, as a result of differences in the application documentation in both contexts. The other key finding is that the amount of the information to include in a statement seems to be much less in the UK, when compared with the US, as a consequence of their degree of acquaintance with the readers. In other words, this instance can be enacted by the student's degree of knowledge of discourse characteristics of a genre within a specific context

and of what to take for granted when the writers anticipate the meaning to be recovered by their readers.

One of the students' accounts regarding her attempt to demonstrate her ability to express ideas in a kind of 'intellectual style' (detailed in Section 4) points to an important research area that focuses on styles of self-representation that writers bring to their texts. In other words, the way in which students communicate their ideas in writing is just as important as the information that is considered to be desirable to include in their texts. Appleby and Appleby (2006) found that excessive self-disclosure can cause 'kisses of death'. Although students are invited to disclose their personal stories in their personal statements, the inclusion of too much detail about applicant personal life may shape their statements into a kind of 'autobiographical' piece of writing. As the personal statement is contextualised as a form of academic promotional genre, it merits further research to determine the 'personal' and 'narrative', as well as the 'academic' and 'research', aspects of the document. The US students' interview accounts also revealed the importance of conveying their proposed research areas and their attempt to portray a researcher identity in their personal statements. In this case, it can be argued that the personal statements submitted to US doctoral programmes may carry certain features that can be shared by the research proposal. Although it is commonly known that the personal statement is distinct from the research proposal, it can be inferred that in this respect, the boundaries amongst these two text types seem to be blurred. Future research shall investigate the aspect of intertextuality to unravel how different written discourses might connect and associate with one another.

The high level of student awareness of their audience found in this study has revealed the complexities surrounding the discoursal construction of writer identity. In the context of admissions, students may feel obliged to portray certain aspects of identity valued in the target academic discourse community ('aspiring self') even though they have not yet been 'owned' by writers themselves at the time of writing. Here it should be noted that although students may construct certain self-representation which is not a genuine reflection of themselves, the issues of 'conflicting identity' and 'ambivalent feelings', as identified in Ivanič's (1998) study in which students encountered opposition and resistance while composing their writing within a new academic discourse community, does not seem to occur much in the personal statement writing. This may be due to the fact that such a tension tends to occur when students have received the negative feedback on their work from their tutors. It can then be argued that it may not be the same case with the context of personal statement writing as student applicants are often not informed about what their target academic gatekeepers think of their writing in admissions. Ivanič (1998) also stated that "when people enter what is for them a new social context such as higher education, they are likely to find that its discourses and practices support identities which differ from those they bring with them" (p. 33). As the focal students in the current study were not active members within a particular academic community at the time of writing, there may not be a recognisable tension as they have not yet gained the chance to socialise in the target institutional setting. Here, it also raises questions: If students strive to present themselves in the best possible light in their personal statements, to what extent and in which way are they willing to conform and align with the dominant practices and discourses of the target academic community? How do students strike a balance between their genuine self-portrayal and envisioned identities that are mainly constructed to meet the expectation of the audience? These

questions point to the issues of agency and conformity, and stability and change, as suggested by Hyland (2015), which merit further investigation.

The detailed move-step structure derived based on the doctoral statements within Education research has also led to some pedagogical implications. Specifically, it provides an insight into some of the available rhetorical resources that prospective applicants might choose to adopt as they compose their statements. The aspect of institutional variation can also be brought to the classroom discussion where students are encouraged to explore implicit features of this genre and to be more aware of its writing conventions for specific contexts.

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