

Chopra, P., Nichol, L., Bell, R., Warren, V.V., Kaur, A., Noman, M., Wen, B., & Foster, S. (2026) Supervisory relationships with doctoral students, in Polkinghorne, M., Taylor, J. & Knight, F. (Eds.), *Innovative Approaches to Doctoral Supervision*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, pp. 36–60. ISBN: 9781035340279. doi: [10.4337/9781035340286.00010](https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035340286.00010)

Chapter 2 – Supervisory Relationships with Doctoral Students

The following four case studies focus on supervisory relationships with doctoral students and consider inclusivity, cultural calibration and the development of successful relationships. Each case study represents the personal experiences of the authors.

Case Study 2.1: Inclusive and Equitable Doctoral Supervision

PRITI CHOPRA

Introduction

There are different visions of supervisory relationships with diverse doctoral students that can vary locally (within higher education institutions), nationally and globally (van Rooij *et al.*, 2021). This case study offers principles for practice in supervisory relationships that may contribute to more inclusive and equitable doctoral journeys for students living with experiences of intersectional inequalities and inequitable formal learning provision (Crenshaw, 2016). These principles for practice are aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDGs 4, 10 and 16 (United Nations, 2015). SDG 4 places an emphasis on quality education rooted in inclusion, equity and lifelong learning, which is essential in doctoral supervision and enhances student experience.

SDG 10 advocates the reduction of inequalities which doctoral supervision can facilitate through empowering the voice, visibility and agency of historically marginalised, underrepresented and under-recognised groups of students working to complete their doctoral studies. SDG 16, with its focus on building inclusive institutions, frames the context, culture and accountability of doctoral supervision experiences, and promotes the need for sustainable inclusive and equitable processes and practices (United Nations, 2015). Rooted in this alignment, supervisory relationships may create spaces and opportunities for doctoral students to develop and strengthen their research processes and practices to their best ability, and so enrich their contribution to knowledge, within an increasingly inclusive and interconnected world (Manathunga, 2017).

Conceptualising Equity and Inclusion Through a Postcolonial Lens

Currently, doctoral education, in the United Kingdom context, is marked by barriers to access and participation for historically marginalised groups of people (Smith McGloin *et al.*, 2024). Research-informed advocacy for developing more inclusive environments, within higher education institutions, is increasingly being promoted to support the equitable socialisation of doctoral students (Handforth, 2022). This may contribute to preventing experiences of imposter syndrome (Sverdlik *et al.*, 2020). It can build psychological safety, resilience and confidence (Gunasekera *et al.*, 2021). It also helps to facilitate growth in academic identities for doctoral students (Sverdlik *et al.*, 2018; Wu *et al.*, 2024).

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Conceptualising equity and inclusion through a postcolonial lens, can contribute to a deeper understanding of the historical marginalisation and oppression minoritised groups of people have experienced. This lens enables principles for equitable practice in doctoral supervision as it can create an empowering space for the self-recognition and self-representation of historically marginalised groups of people in their production of knowledge (Bhati, 2022). It shapes intellectual and attitudinal tools that can pave pathways for transforming structures of understanding to create inclusive cultures and environments within which supervisory relationships are situated (Sayed, 2002). For example, a postcolonial conceptual lens may create space for transforming a doctoral student’s epistemological invisibility, within supervisory relationships imbibing hegemonic practices, through a commitment to, in Spivak’s words, “the ethical stance of making discursive room for the Other to exist” (Spivak 1988, p.6).

Empowerment, leading to the possibility of equitable and inclusive relations, “is not realised in terms of subject positions determined by the other rather it is a posture of autonomy adopted in the desire to create new spaces to self identify and self represent within the hegemony of structural and systemic realities” (Spivak, 1996, p.289). Rooted in this conceptualisation, principles for practice in supervisory relationships entail validating and legitimising the voice, visibility and agency of diverse doctoral students through democratic, participatory and enabling professional supervision processes and practices rooted in an ethics of care (Sidhu, 2015).

Establishing and Maintaining a Working Alliance

My intersectional socio-cultural identity markers position me, amongst other aspects, as a racially minoritised, heterosexual, spiritual, able-bodied female in my fifties. When I first started working as a supervisor, during 2012, I initially drew on my own experience of supervision. I had successfully completed my PhD under the guidance of an exemplary supervisor and had benefitted from an empowering supervision experience. I experienced my supervisor as a professional with strong values of integrity, equality, equity, intercultural awareness and openness, whilst maintaining high expectations for academic rigour, critical thinking and contribution to knowledge. My supervision process nurtured and encouraged my growth as an autonomous researcher. I wanted to imbibe this in my practice and apply what I had experienced in supervisory relationships with my own students.

My supervision experience contributes to my approach for building rapport with doctoral students and resonates with Heyns *et al.*’s (2019) suggestion for moving towards person-centred research supervision practices as a ‘healthful’ process of enabling students to flourish. Shaped by person-centred principles, I demonstrate the ability to provide a safe learning environment, and maintain boundaries, in an effective professional working alliance. Feedback from students reinforces the idea that my relationship with them contains warmth, positive regard, empathy and congruence (Heyns *et al.*, 2019).

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From the onset, I listen to doctoral students so that I can gain understanding of their expectations, needs, priorities and vision for support. I maintain flexibility and adapt as I recognise that their requirements for support can evolve as they make progress and/or encounter challenges. Listening to students with diverse learning identities and lived realities, has created a shift in my understanding of what constitutes an effective supervision process that is flexibly responsive. Sverdlik *et al.*, (2018, p.363) maintain that “a comprehensive understanding of the doctoral experience focusing on students’ physical, psychological, and emotional well-being is warranted to provide a well-rounded perspective on the challenges faced in graduate education”.

Awareness of Contextual Factors

Working with, and across, differences feature very strongly in supervisory relationships that I have formed with doctoral students. They have recognised that I demonstrate the ability to think appropriately about difference, diversity and power, and this has emerged as my strength during supervision work. I am continuing to develop my ability to engage with intercultural learning, and unlearning positions of privilege, that prevent my ability to listen to the socio-culturally contextualised voices of diverse doctoral students when they are articulating their felt lived experience in their research process and learning journey (Wu *et al.*, 2024). I recognise that listening, hearing and understanding is always on a continuum and never absolute or complete (Gunasekera *et al.*, 2021).

My own doctoral supervision experience was based on being a full-time student, immersed completely in my development, with no additional responsibilities. This did not resonate with the lived experience of many students who shared their struggles, with time constraints, created by their personal and professional roles and responsibilities. My learning about the realities of diverse students invited me to reflect on my approach to agreeing expectations and developing milestones during the supervision process. For example, one of the first part-time students that I supervised, to successful completion, was in his sixties, had a range of professional responsibilities and devoted substantial personal time to caring for his partner who had restricted mobility and suffered a long-term illness. It was frustrating and overwhelming for him to experience my highly energised and enthusiastic endeavours to discuss his achievements of a long list of research milestones. He shared his feelings of frustration and anxiety with me.

Following reflection and consultation with co-supervisors, I negotiated and co-created flexible ground rules, expectations and realistic timeframes responsive to his needs. With consideration for his wellbeing, this involved him working towards milestones in bitesize chunks, accompanied with strategies for his exploration of literature, methodology, and development of research, at a pace that he identified as realistically achievable. His focus, motivation and perseverance were shaped by his autonomy and sense of progress in his research journey. It was a cherished occasion when, five years later, he submitted his thesis and wrote to say:

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“Thank you for your unwavering help and guidance over the years” (*Anonymous student*).

Inspired by his journey and what he taught me about working across difference, I continue to adapt supervision strategies and approaches to the expressed needs and agenda set by individual doctoral students. Depending on the requirements of students, I normally meet them once every four to six weeks. They could also contact me via email anytime during my working days/hours and, generally, responded the same day.

The number of times I read a draft depends on the doctoral student. For instance, some students may start by creating a very brief draft of a section in a chapter, under a specific thematic focus, with an approach to writing like a stream of consciousness. They may only expect feedforward that will enable them to discuss and bounce ideas. They may maintain a regular flow of correspondence over several weeks as they read and develop their ideas or, in another context, engage in data analysis. Others may only want to contact me once they feel satisfied with completing a draft and I may only meet them once they make an appointment to discuss written feedforward that I have provided. My normal turnaround for reading students’ writing can be within two to ten working days depending on the length of the material sent to me and the date agreed with the student and supervision team.

Challenge and Support

Challenge and support are integral components within my supervisory relationship with diverse doctoral students. A core aspect involves developing awareness of research limitations, multiple perspectives and enhancing validity, reliability and rigour within the research process (van Rooij *et al.*, 2021). I encourage students to draw on peer support, self-support and support services, resources and training available within the university and externally that are free of cost. I strive to create a supervision environment, process and relationship where students feel safe and comfortable to share vulnerabilities that impact their research process and journey.

I expect them to maintain faith in their ability to take on the challenge of their research journey. I do invite students to set their agenda and to maintain a record of supervision meetings. I also ask them for feedback on their experience of supervision meetings and invite their feedback on my practice. This helps me to enhance my equitable practice in being responsive to diverse students’ learning identities and requirements for supervision. Following completion, students have maintained contact with me, and I am accessible to them when they require academic references to support their career development and progression.

Conclusion

Principles for practice shaping my supervisory relationships with diverse doctoral students, that enable inclusive and equitable learning journeys, are about placing the focus on agreeing student-led goals, and by helping them to recognise their own resources for

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achieving these goals, and through their ability to recognise, and overcome, the barriers to accessing sources of support (Handforth, 2022). Shared goals prioritise students' own exploration and understanding of working through and managing their own feelings, thoughts, practices and processes both within their own present, and also to prioritise immediate areas of concern and/or further development. It involves establishing and maintaining a working alliance that is situated in awareness of contextual factors and provides sustained challenge and support for academic growth.

The supervisory relationship, in such terms, as mentioned previously, entails validating and legitimising the voice, visibility and agency of diverse doctoral students through democratic, participatory and enabling professional supervision processes and practices rooted in an ethics of care (Sidhu, 2015).

Case Study 2.2: Building Successful Supervision Relationships

LYNN NICHOL, ROBIN BELL AND VESSELA WARREN

Introduction

Our experience of doctoral supervision indicates that effective supervision requires supervisors to understand and work within diverse and sometimes competing cultural environments. We will explore how four manifestations of culture: international, disciplinary, internal and practice, are evident in the doctoral supervision space, and we will articulate what approaches can be utilised to build effective supervisor-student relationships, enabling students from different contexts to thrive. Our case study gives an opportunity to understand how cultural expectations can provide a supportive framework to consider and develop strong supervisory relationships. For each manifestation of culture, we will summarise key areas of learning from the literature, before exploring our personal experiences and concluding with further suggestions for practice.

International Culture

Education is deeply rooted in national culture (Chan and Drover, 1997), which might cause academic culture shock for international students (Ward *et al.*, 2001), as students and educators have misaligned expectations of their roles in the learning process (Bell, 2020). When it comes to supervising international doctoral students, Wang and Li (2011) suggest there can be a tension between telling students what to do and guiding them through the process and journey. This is likely to be particularly pronounced where students are more familiar with education in which the educator is expected to be the purveyor of knowledge, rather than a facilitator in the educational journey (Bell and Cui, 2023). Differences in expectations can lead to challenges in the supervision process, making careful communication, feedback, and awareness of cultural sensitivities important (Brown, 2007; Wang and Li, 2011).

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Many of the doctoral students we have supervised have experienced most of their education outside the UK, giving us the opportunity to support doctoral students from Africa, continental Europe, and Asia. There have been challenges along the way. To help frame responsibilities and expectations we find it valuable to discuss roles and expectations early in the supervision relationship. This can be supported by agreeing clear milestones and action throughout the journey, building trust and understanding. It is important to be aware of the language used in feedback, as some students seek more explicit direction, whilst others would prefer general discussion to find their own path. International students in particular can benefit from wider engagement in research and the research community, and so wider mentorship in this area, and support in building networks, can act as an effective reassurance mechanism.

Disciplinary Culture

Conducting multidisciplinary research can be challenging due to disciplinary specialisation, learning and engagement with different methods, and communication with different audiences (Strober, 2006). Supporting students to work with multi-disciplinary research, and realise its opportunities, can also be challenging. The supervision team must navigate different terminologies and ensure there is no misunderstanding and miscommunication along the journey (Eigenbrode *et al.*, 2007). Where a supervision team is built from individuals from different disciplines, there can be challenges around agreement and communication between the supervisors due to varying communication styles, expectations, and norms within a given discipline (Bromme, 2000). Project management concerns may arise as different approaches to developing research and a thesis might exist. As multidisciplinary research may not fit neatly into a field, engaging within a community and finding examiners can potentially be problematic, along with finding a publishing venue towards the end of the doctoral journey (Rhoten and Parker, 2004).

We have supervised both multidisciplinary PhD and professional doctorate students, bringing together education, humanities, health and computing. Supervising multidisciplinary research provides opportunities for supervisor development enabling learning about new topics and methodologies. In multidisciplinary supervision, a team approach has been our norm, providing the opportunity to work with colleagues from different departments. It is important to develop a common language when providing feedback to ensure that it is clear to the student, as to how they could move forward. We have found ourselves in a position where members of the supervisory team communicate less explicitly than in our discipline and we find that the teams need to specifically discuss their approach before beginning work with the student, and then to reflect on it throughout.

To inform methodological discussion it can be valuable for the supervisors to engage with methodological literature in alternative disciplines, to learn some of the nuances in other disciplines being brought into the research. Furthermore, it can also be helpful to determine early on which field the research will be targeting to ensure that this is considered when developing and writing up the research. Mentorship across the supervision team can be

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valuable to develop a sense of research culture, and to help the student to build networks in the relevant topic areas.

Internal Culture

There are a growing number of students who embark on a doctoral programme whilst concurrently working as an academic in the same institution (Madikizela-Madiya *et al.*, 2020). Denicolo (2004) articulates that working as, or with, dual-status students, deserves to be treated as a special case with dilemmas and minefields for both students and supervisors. Higher Education, with its non-positional leadership approach, creates an environment in which it is quite possible for a supervisor, outside of the supervisory activity, to be led by a student who holds a programme leadership role (Denicolo, 2004). There may be dilemmas involved in the disclosure of information in doctoral performance monitoring, and staff appraisal, and a greater knowledge of the ‘political agendas’ may result, especially if supervised by their line manager (Watson, 2012).

Ethical considerations may arise if supervisors, or students, do not feel empowered to challenge a colleague (Denicolo, 2004). In common with many part-time students, there is evidence of a lack of control of scheduling work related tasks, such as teaching, which impact on their ability to progress their research and attend development opportunities. Supervisors suggest that dual-status students require more support than other doctoral students to say ‘no’ to other duties. There is also evidence that supervisors expect students to accept the impact of their own scheduling on their ability to engage with them. Dual-status students are often late entries into academia, with professional experience not often associated with Early Career Researchers (ECRs) but limited academic experience. This can therefore create greater vulnerability, imposter syndrome, never mind the feeling of an existential threat to their academic career through failure or withdrawal from the programme (Smith *et al.*, 2019).

Despite such challenges, both students and supervisor recognised many positives of working with colleagues. Dual-status students identified having greater choice, even ‘hand-picking’ their supervisory team (Smith *et al.*, 2019). They benefitted from a greater understanding of the research culture, as well as deep discussion through more informal contact (Denicolo, 2004, Smith *et al.*, 2019,).

Our experience suggests that adopting approaches to supervision that mirror Lee’s (2008) emancipation, and relationship conceptualisation, of doctoral supervision are key in working with dual-status students. We question whether it is even appropriate to label such relationships as supervision with its hierarchical associations, and in such circumstances adopting a coaching approach, built on collaboration between colleagues, may prove to be beneficial (Nichol *et al.*, 2018).

Being a good colleague is not necessarily the basis for being a good supervisor. It is essential for all parties to be mindful from the very beginning of the unique nature of dual-status working, and explicitly discuss the potential conflicts on the research. Asking a colleague

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whether they conceptualise their doctoral programme as work or self-development may help all parties elucidate the nature of the relationship they seek with supervisors, and the university, and where they see the responsibility for the allocation of time in both personal and work schedules.

Practice Culture

There has been a significant growth in professional doctorate programmes (Bourner *et al.*, 2001). Students joining these programmes tend to come from the industry, they are experienced practitioners, and some are serving in senior roles. They often have limited research experience, and some do not have recent academic experience as they have completed their master's degrees quite some time ago, or they may even have a non-traditional academic background (Pásztor and Wakeling, 2018).

These doctoral students tend to focus their research on challenges within their own work settings (Bell and Warren, 2023) as professional doctorates additionally contribute to practice, as well as theory, by providing new knowledge for the work-related context (Wildy *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, these students are faced with bridging work-related and research culture. Meyer *et al.* (2007) suggests that students may have limited understanding of research at the early stages of their doctoral studies. Whilst they are experienced professionals, they need to make the shift to becoming a researching professional (Fenge, 2009) and learn to grapple with tensions between theoretical/practical expectations and contributions (Prøitz and Wittek, 2020).

In our experience, professional doctorate students are confronted with a steep learning curve as they move from a position of an experienced professional to a researching professional. Supervisors can play a key role in facilitating this transition and support students' culture adjustments. It is helpful to make students aware of the strengths of their work, and the areas of improvement, so that they become conscious of robust academic standards and expectations.

Early discussions with doctoral students can often revolve around complex and contentious academic subjects with which they might not be familiar, and it is vital to help them relate these to their work-related environment. Defining the scope of the research project to meet professional doctorate expectations is challenging, but fundamental, in establishing a viable, doable, well-defined project at an early stage. When the project is more defined at a later stage, supervisors can encourage students to become more autonomous and ultimately, to become the subject expert themselves.

Conclusion

Our four cultural manifestations create a diverse context for doctoral supervision, however some of the practices we suggest are common to all manifestations. Supporting doctoral students who may feel initially marginalised, to engage with the wider research community and develop networks, can provide informal support and reassurance. Setting expectations

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through explicit discussion of roles and responsibilities, consistent approaches to feedback, and agreeing clear goals and milestones, helps create a transparent and open environment for supervision as well as a framework to enable a student to understand their doctoral work. Creating an open environment will also allow supervisors and students to reflect regularly on any potential issues requiring action.

Working in these diverse settings also requires us, as supervisors, to reflect and challenge our own practice. It requires us to consider potential cultural sensitivities, and possible conflicts of interests. We need to be willing to engage with colleagues and practices from the workplace, or from outside our immediate discipline and familiar research methodologies and so see the value that alternative thinking can bring to research.

Case Study 2.3: Cultural Calibration in Supervisory Relationships

AMRITA KAUR AND MOHAMMAD NOMAN

Introduction

The quality of the supervisory relationship with doctoral students significantly impacts the process and outcome of a doctoral degree. The experiences resulting from these relationships are essential for the student's socio-emotional and intellectual development as an independent researcher. Moreover, they guide supervisors' practices as they progress in their careers. Building these relationships in cross-cultural settings where doctoral students or supervisors are from different cultures may require mindful considerations.

In this case study, we as authors, who have supervised doctoral students in cultures other than their own, co-reflect and share our experiences of supervisory relationships with students. We aim to provide detailed examples of our supervisory practices to demonstrate how these were calibrated in response to the student's individual characteristics and social and institutional cultures. Additionally, we present the analysis of lived experiences as a way of further learning to establish effective supervisory relationships with students.

Our Positionality

Case Study Author 1: Amrita - I major in educational psychology and currently teach psychology to undergraduate and postgraduate students at a Sino-American institution in China. In 2022, I received recognition from UKCGE for supervision practices. During my tenure at a public university in Malaysia, I supervised and graduated several Malaysian and international doctoral and master students. At present, I am supervising three doctoral and one master's students at the same university. I regularly serve as an examiner for doctoral and master theses and research about doctoral supervision practices.

Case Study Author 2: Noman - My academic expertise lies in the field of Educational Leadership. Throughout my professional journey in Malaysia and China, I have had the privilege of supervising and guiding graduate students to successful completion of their

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degrees. Currently, I am supervising four doctoral students. I consistently strive to enhance my supervisory practices through regular reflection and actively seeking feedback from my students. This process has enabled me to adapt and refine my approach, ensuring that I can effectively support and nurture the academic growth of my supervisees.

Guiding Principles

Relationships are at the heart of teaching and learning at any level of education (Hamre and Pianta, 2001). Particularly for doctoral education, the quality of the supervisory relationship with students significantly impacts the process, and outcome, of a doctoral degree. In our academic career, we have worked as international academics in Higher Education institutions in Malaysia and China, and thus, all our thesis supervision work has been in foreign and multicultural contexts.

Supervising doctoral students from diverse cultural backgrounds has necessitated a consistent adaptation of our supervisory approaches to suit the cultural context of our supervisees, which in turn helps us establish healthy and productive work relationships. While adapting supervisory approaches to build a positive working relationship, we remain mindful that each supervisee has their own unique set of qualities and needs. This understanding encourages us to adopt an open-minded and adaptable stance when supervising, allowing our methods to be appropriately tailored. Overcoming the initial challenges, these experiences have imparted invaluable insights into fostering meaningful supervisor-student bonds that transcend cultural barriers.

Among the various values guiding our supervisory practice, one that stands out as fundamental is intentionally establishing a guiding framework that shapes our supervisory relationship in a conducive manner. Every teaching and learning activity, especially at the doctoral level, is a collaborative effort in which students and supervisors work hand in hand toward a common goal (Hockey, 1994). To navigate this partnership effectively, a prescribed framework that is flexible, yet sets clear operating conditions, is essential. Our supervision practice framework is based on four major components, these being:

1. Autonomy,
2. Communication,
3. Structure,
4. Support.

Fostering autonomy enables students to develop independence, critical thinking, and a sense of ownership over their research, which are essential skills for their academic and professional growth.

Effective communication, characterised by timeliness, consistency, and flexibility, is crucial for establishing a productive supervisory relationship and resolving potential dichotomies between autonomy and structure. Providing a structured framework helps guide students through the complex process of doctoral research, ensuring they stay on track and make steady progress.

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Offering support, through guidance, feedback, and resources, creates a nurturing environment that empowers students to overcome challenges and so reach their full potential. In the next section, we illustrate applying this framework in our own supervisory practices.

Autonomy

Most of our supervisees come from a teacher-centred education system, and collectivist cultures where teachers hold power over essential decisions related to teaching and learning, instruction to learn is prescriptive, and adhering to teachers' decisions is a sign of respect. Our provision of autonomy plays a crucial role in fostering a non-threatening supervisory relationship, allowing students to freely share their perspectives, voice opinions, and engage in dialogue, even when it involves disagreements.

Amrita: In the first few meetings after their enrolment, most students like me to speak about their proposal instead of taking the lead in describing their research plan. I break this habit by asking them open-ended questions, showing that I am more interested in listening than speaking.

Noman: As a supervisor of graduate students, particularly those from China, I am often approached with requests to suggest research ideas or directions. I firmly believe that the research concept and problem formulation should originate from the students themselves, while I offer constructive suggestions, understand their ideas, and direct them toward relevant resources that can aid in refining their conceptual framework and research methodology.

We both believe that the hierarchical dynamic between supervisor and doctoral student can sometimes hinder critical thinking and questioning abilities or discourage pursuing less conventional paths.

Doctoral research has innumerable occasions when important decisions must be made that can set the path for the rest of the study. This includes a possible change in methodology, ways of recruiting participants or even choosing variables of interest. Allowing students to make those decisions, with mutual discussion, empowers them to take risks and explore areas outside their comfort zones.

Amrita: Recently, a doctoral student who had already defended his proposal was unsure of his theoretical grounding as it did not reflect his major (educational technology) direction. He hesitantly discussed his concern with me, which I thought was entirely reasonable. Making such huge changes after the proposal defense can be challenging both for the supervisor and the supervisee; however, we both explored suitable theoretical frameworks to guide his study and will soon contact the panel to approve changes.

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Noman: I actively encourage students to challenge established norms and explore alternative approaches. For instance, when one of my students who was facing difficulties in collecting data through planned conventional methods wanted to use popular social media platforms for data collection, I supported her. Similarly, when another student expressed interest in incorporating an unconventional variable from another field in her study, I supported her in finding ways to do what she wanted while maintaining methodological rigour for her research.

We have come to believe that trust is key for both supervisors and supervisees in enacting autonomy as it acknowledges that doctoral students are mature adults who bring content knowledge along with diverse perspectives from their professional and personal lives. In one of our studies, we noticed that if supervisors listen to students, respect students' interests, encourage self-initiation, and are amenable to changes suggested, students have a more positive experience (Kumar and Kaur, 2019), and these positive experiences contribute to healthy dynamics between both parties.

Communication

While fostering autonomy is a crucial aspect of our supervisory approach, effective communication is essential for successful doctoral supervision responsibilities. Effective communication, characterised by timeliness, consistency, and flexibility, plays a crucial role in resolving potential hazards such as miscommunication and misunderstandings, among others. Regular meetings and follow-ups allow us to provide guidance, set milestones, and monitor progress, while still affording students the freedom to explore their ideas and make independent decisions within the established framework. Additionally, we collaboratively develop clear expectations, timelines, and research plans, which serve as guideposts for the doctoral journey, fostering a sense of structure and accountability without compromising autonomy.

Amrita: For instance, I prefer informal and easily accessible communication channels to foster a comfortable environment for [students] to express themselves. While formal emails may seem restrictive, personal messaging allows for a more immediate and personal connection, facilitating instant feedback and rapport building. Most of our communication is held on iMessage and WhatsApp.

In the Chinese cultural context, sharing one's WeChat contact holds significant symbolic meaning, marking the beginning of a close, trusted relationship. This gesture carries a deeper connotation than simply exchanging contact information, as it signifies a willingness to engage in a more personal and accessible form of communication. Generally, teachers in China are hesitant to share their WeChat IDs with students, as they prefer to maintain a formal and structured relationship, avoiding the potential for disruptions or queries at odd hours.

Additionally, there is a perceived notion that communicating via WeChat is an unofficial mode of interaction, potentially blurring the boundaries between the professional and

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personal spheres. However, this traditional mindset can inadvertently create a sense of distance and reinforce hierarchical barriers between teachers and students.

Noman: In my supervisory practice, I make sure that my students are connected through WeChat. By exchanging WeChat contacts with my students, I aim to foster an environment of openness, accessibility, and trust. This gesture signifies my willingness to engage in a more personal and collaborative dynamic, transcending the traditional hierarchical boundaries between supervisor and student. It represents my commitment to being available for open communication, guidance, and support, beyond the confines of formal academic settings.

Structure

While fostering autonomy is a crucial aspect of our supervisory approach, providing a structured framework is equally vital to ensuring consistent progress, rigour, and quality in research and thesis writing. Balancing autonomy with structure is not only feasible but also essential for successful doctoral supervision. To strike this balance, we undertake several intentional practices.

Regular meetings and check-ins allow us to provide guidance, set milestones, and monitor progress, while still affording students the freedom to explore their ideas and make independent decisions within the established framework. Additionally, we collaboratively develop clear expectations, timelines, and research plans, which serve as guideposts for the doctoral journey, fostering a sense of structure and accountability without compromising autonomy.

Noman - For example, I advise my students to approach their work as a narrative that needs to be conveyed in an engaging and logical manner. They must first create a structured storyline, with each section meticulously planned. Developing a concise two-page 'storyline' before commencing the writing process helps them maintain focus and prevents digression during the thesis writing phase, a common challenge faced by many students.

Support

Supervisory practices differ significantly from formal classroom settings, creating a unique ecosystem where personal spheres frequently intersect with professional obligations, such as supervising and academic endeavours like conducting and disseminating research. Acknowledging and supporting students through personal challenges is crucial in maintaining the quality and efficacy of supervision. Integrating psychosocial support into supervisory practices is a valuable approach to cultivating a nurturing environment conducive to academic development and growth.

Most doctoral students are mature adults; therefore, it is often challenging for our supervisees to develop emotional intimacy, particularly when there are gender and cultural

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differences. However, over the years, we have consciously reminded ourselves that it is acceptable to discuss our personal lives as they are intricately intertwined with the supervision process and its outcomes.

Amrita: One of my doctoral [students] was facing financial difficulties, parental health concerns, and a divorce in her close family, all of which directly impacted her work. Despite her intentions to give her best to research and writing, these personal challenges were evident. Recognising the importance of acknowledging and addressing such challenges, I ensured that before inquiring about her work progress, I asked about her family's well-being. Additionally, I lent an empathetic ear whenever she wished to share something personal.

Several similar incidents reinforced the need for this approach. We ensured that our supervisory interactions were not only focused on academic progress but also included inquiries about the well-being of our supervisees. To create a supportive environment, we opt for supervision settings that are less formal and more inviting.

Outcomes

Incorporating the elements of Autonomy, Communication, Structure, and Support yields meaningful outcomes for doctoral students' intellectual development and their journey toward becoming independent researchers. Experiencing autonomy and respect from their supervisor instils a sense of competence and accountability in students, empowering them to make critical decisions, take ownership of their work, and explore unconventional paths. The structured framework, developed collaboratively through effective communication, provides guidance, sets milestones, and monitors progress while affording freedom to explore ideas. This balance supports values such as rigour, timeliness, and integrity, preparing students for future independent research endeavours.

Effective communication, characterised by timeliness, consistency, and flexibility, plays a crucial role in resolving potential dichotomies between autonomy and structure, fostering a productive supervisory relationship. Receiving personal and social support fulfils students' social-emotional needs, fostering trusting relationships not only with their supervisors and institution but also with their own work and identity. The nurturing environment created by acknowledging personal challenges, and providing psychosocial support, empowers students to overcome hurdles and reach their full potential.

As doctoral students progress in their careers, these holistic experiences of autonomy, structured guidance, open communication, and personal support may shape their approach to supervision, perpetuating a cycle of supportive mentorship in academia. This proactive approach to providing social support has had a significant impact, fostering a sense of trust and openness between supervisors and students. It not only helps address personal challenges but also enhances overall experience and productivity in research endeavours.

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Conclusion

This case study provides insights into the dynamics of supervisory relationships in cross-cultural contexts. By calibrating our supervision practices through the principles of autonomy, communication, structure, and support, we aimed to establish an environment that nurtures the holistic development of our doctoral students.

This framework fosters intellectual growth, and research competence, and cultivates a sense of trust, openness, and personal well-being. As international academics experiencing diverse cultural contexts, our journey has highlighted the importance of adaptability, empathy, and contextual sensitivity in shaping supervisory practices that transcend boundaries and empower students to thrive as independent researchers. We believe that this case study contributes to the ongoing discussion on effective supervision, emphasising the profound impact of culturally responsive mentorship on the doctoral experience.

Case Study 2.4: Productive Strategies for Relationship Development

BO WEN AND SCOTT FOSTER

Introduction

The supervisory relationship is a critical area of focus within Higher Education (HE) research, as it not only impacts the progress and outcomes of research, but also significantly affects the emotions, mental health, and overall well-being of doctoral students (Buirski, 2022; Nachatar Singh, 2022). Despite the plethora of strategies proposed to enhance the supervisor-student relationship (Corcelles *et al.*, 2019), many doctoral students continue to encounter challenges at different stages of their academic journey when attempting to cultivate productive relationships with their supervisors (Nachatar Singh, 2022). Factors influencing the development of these relationships may be attributed to diverse cultural backgrounds, previous educational experiences, communication skills, and differing academic expectations (Buirski, 2022; Nachatar Singh, 2022; Alebaikan *et al.*, 2023). As such, exploring strategies for fostering productive supervisor-student relationships holds significant implications for HE institutions.

Doctoral students, from my personal experiences, often face considerable hardships at various stages of their doctoral journey. These may include selecting a research topic and establishing research objectives in the early stages, navigating data collection and analysis in the middle phase, and completing the thesis in the later stages. These academic challenges not only hinder the formation of a strong supervisory relationship early on but can also weaken or even disrupt established relationships during the middle and late stages, thereby exacerbating students' mental health difficulties. Therefore, any discussion on developing supervisor-student relationships must consider the distinct challenges encountered at each stage of the doctoral journey. This case study seeks to offer effective strategies for fostering productive supervisor-student relationships, drawing on several lived experiences throughout the three stages of doctoral study.

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Early Stage

I had limited research experience before starting my PhD, and I was unfamiliar with key aspects of research, such as defining research aims and objectives or understanding methodologies. My initial expectation was that my doctoral studies would resemble my master's programme, where lecturers provided research questions and hands-on guidance. However, on the first day of my PhD, when my supervisor asked me what research topic I was interested in, I had no clear response. My lead supervisor clarified: *'I would like you to know that this is your PhD, not mine. I hope you are able to lead the research project. Next time, I hope you can tell me about your topic and why you are going to investigate this topic'*.

At that point, I experienced a sense of disappointment regarding my professional relationship with her, as I was uncertain about how to proceed because of my supervisor's lack of engagement toward my work. Subsequently, my lead supervisor instructed me to conduct an extensive literature review over the next two months and to prepare a presentation on the research topic for the upcoming supervisory meeting. Although I did not fully comprehend the rationale behind her request, I complied, as my personal value holds that the guidance of a teacher should be trusted.

Over the following two months, I conducted an extensive review of the literature on knowledge management. As I delved deeper into the journal articles, my research question became clearer, and I gradually narrowed down my topic toward the field of knowledge sharing. At the second supervisory meeting, I presented my research rationale, and although my research question still required refinement, my lead supervisor was satisfied with my progress. I realised that she wanted me to pursue a topic I was genuinely passionate about, rather than undertaking a project that I might lose interest in later. This experience helped me understand the importance of independent research, which is critical for my current academic career, and it improved my relationship with my supervisor.

Also, it is significant that the lead supervisor has a clear plan for supervising doctoral students. In my sixth month, my lead supervisor suggested me to commence the ethical application process. I initially thought this was premature, as most of my doctoral student peers typically started this process after their transfer from Year One to Year Two. However, my lead supervisor emphasised that the ethical application would aid my understanding of both the methodology and the overall research process. Unlike the current streamlined online application system, the ethical application process in 2019 involved numerous documents and forms. At first, I struggled to understand why this process needed to be initiated so early.

As I worked through the ethical application, I identified several unclear aspects and errors in my methodological approach. This led me to attend more training sessions and engage with additional textbooks and journal articles on qualitative methods, ultimately guiding me to redesign my research process in detail. Throughout this time, my lead supervisor provided

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valuable feedback on my ethical application forms and supplementary documents during each supervisory meeting. The entire process took five months, and in retrospect, I came to appreciate my supervisor's experience and her decision to start the ethical application early. This approach allowed me to collect the first-phase data during my first year, which facilitated a more efficient research timeline, leaving ample time for the middle and later stages of my PhD.

This experience, including the redesign of my research process and receiving continuous feedback from my supervisor, significantly enhanced my understanding of the methodological choices and techniques for data collection and analysis in qualitative research. This foundation proved crucial for the subsequent phases of data collection and analysis during the middle stages of my PhD. Additionally, regular discussions and meetings fostered a more informal relationship with my supervisor. We occasionally met in a café, and this less formal interaction shifted our relationship from a manager-subordinate dynamic to a more collegial, friendly one. In my view, cultivating an informal relationship between supervisor and doctoral student can foster mutual understanding and improve the efficiency of discussions and overall productivity.

Middle Stage

In my second year, I advanced to the second phase of qualitative data collection in China. Before this, my supervisor had devised a strategy for paper publications and participation in international conferences for my doctoral studies, and I had confidence in her planning. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 disrupted the data collection process and significantly impacted the progression of my PhD. The pandemic made it challenging to conduct interviews within the case study organisation, as participants were unable to work from home effectively. More critically, the prolonged lockdown took a toll on my mental health, leaving me distracted from my studies and resulting in limited progress over a span of four months.

During this unforeseen situation, my supervisors maintained regular online meetings with me, expressing concern for my physical and mental well-being. They reassured me during each our meeting, stating, *'It's okay to slow down the research for now because our primary concern is your health. Please prioritise your well-being while in China.'* Their empathy and care deeply moved me, as I had been feeling self-critical about my slow progress and feared their dissatisfaction. Rather than critiquing me, they offered compassionate and constructive support for my mental health, much like family members. As a result, my trust in them grew significantly.

After returning to the UK in 2020, I experienced a racial hate crime off-campus. The incident left me fearful of leaving my residence, and I confided in my supervisor, whom I trusted the most. She promptly arranged a meeting to help me feel secure, and with my permission, she reported the incident to the faculty, seeking various forms of support, including psychological and police assistance. The faculty took my case seriously, frequently checking on my emotional well-being and security several times a week. The swift and compassionate

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response from my supervisor helped alleviate my distress and fear, enabling me to recover and resume my work more quickly.

This experience highlights the importance of supervisors prioritising the mental health of their doctoral students and offering appropriate guidance. The mental well-being of students plays a critical role in ensuring the continuity of their research. If mental health issues are neglected and not addressed promptly, students may require a longer period to recover and return to their academic work.

Final Stage

In the final phase of my doctoral studies, there was a change in my lead supervisor due to the retirement of my previous one. The new lead supervisor had previously served as my third supervisor within the supervisory team; thus, he was already familiar with my research. His approach to supervision was notably stricter and more efficient. Initially, I was scared of him.

Upon assuming his new role, my supervisor established a clear timeline for my graduation, assigning specific, quantifiable tasks each month. For example, he expected me to complete two chapters in a month. Initially, I felt stressed by the demanding tasks and tight deadlines. However, to my surprise, his structured approach enabled me to complete my final thesis within three months. I have since adopted his method of breaking tasks into measurable units, which has greatly improved both my efficiency and time management skills.

Simultaneously, I had concerns about my career prospects following graduation. I lacked experience in teaching and additional research within academia, as well as any publications. I shared these concerns openly with my supervisor. He advised me to first obtain an Associate Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy and guided me in identifying relevant conferences and target journals from the Association of Business Schools in my field. Before completing my thesis, he suggested that I familiarise myself with the aims and objectives of these journals, specifically the types of articles they preferred, and especially if they were quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method. I undertook a review of the papers already published to learn lessons. Nevertheless, he recommended that I delay writing any empirical articles until completing my thesis, as the writing styles for doctoral thesis and journal articles are significantly different, and managing both simultaneously could negatively impact my mentality.

By following his advice, I was able to accomplish these tasks without feeling overwhelmed and instead felt energised by the process. Thanks to his effective supervision, I not only completed my doctoral studies but also discovered my career path as an academic. Through this journey, our relationship developed into one based on mutual trust and productivity, and I no longer felt scared of him.

One of the aspects I appreciated most was his invaluable guidance during my job search. After expressing my aspirations to work in HE institutions in the UK, he helped me revise my

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CV and cover letter, listened to my presentation, offered advice for job interviews, and even wrote reference letters on my behalf. I was fully aware that these tasks were beyond his formal duties, but he undertook them because of his warm-hearted nature, like a candle illuminating the way for others. Without his dedicated support, I would not have secured my current academic position.

Even after starting my role at my current institution, we have maintained a strong connection. To me, he is no longer just a supervisor but more like an older brother. The productive relationship between supervisor and doctoral student, even after graduation, evolved into one marked by mutual emotional connection, transcending the professional scope of collaboration on research or publications. Over the course of several years, through shared experiences, whether enjoyable or challenging, the supervisor has become the person I trust most in both academia and in this foreign country.

From a student's perspective, maintaining a productive relationship with a supervisor requires understanding their roles and challenges from their standpoint, keeping lines of communication open, and sharing your expectations with them. Therefore, mutual understanding and open communication are critical to fostering and maintaining a productive supervisor-student relationship.

Conclusion

My lived experience during the doctoral process highlights several strategies for establishing, developing, and maintaining a productive supervisor-student relationship at various stages. In the initial stage, the foundation of the relationship is built through mutual understanding between supervisors and doctoral students. Fostering an informal rapport can enhance this understanding, thereby improving the efficiency of discussions and overall productivity. Additionally, supervisors must devote adequate time to offering patient guidance, particularly because students, especially international ones, often lack a deep understanding of research at the outset. Consequently, supervisors must exercise patience and provide a clear plan for the student's academic and professional development, tailored to their prior educational background (Buirski, 2022; Nachatar Singh, 2022; Alebaikan *et al.*, 2023). Even for less experienced supervisors, creating a well-defined plan to support doctoral students through different stages is essential.

In the middle stage, doctoral students inevitably face various challenges, both in terms of the research process and personal circumstances, influenced by external factors (Corcelles *et al.*, 2019). Supervisors play a critical role in supporting students' mental health by offering timely and empathetic guidance (Buirski, 2022; Nachatar Singh, 2022). Focusing solely on research progress while neglecting students' mental well-being can be detrimental, as students' health forms the foundation for ensuring the success of their research.

During the final stage, doctoral students often experience considerable pressure related to graduation and the job search. While providing additional support for job placement may fall outside the formal scope of a supervisor's duties, their advice and insights can be

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instrumental in helping students navigate the job market, aligning their career choices with their personal and professional needs. Moreover, the supervisor-student relationship often transcends the traditional professional framework of collaboration on research or publications (Nachatar Singh, 2022), evolving into a more holistic and enduring connection. Throughout the doctoral journey, it is equally important for students to understand their supervisors' perspectives. Supervisors face numerous challenges in balancing their own teaching and research responsibilities. Therefore, open communication and mutual understanding between both parties are critical components in sustaining a productive supervisor-student relationship.

In conclusion, while each doctoral student's experience with their supervisor is unique, the strategies outlined above can serve as useful guidelines for both supervisors and students in identifying effective approaches to relationship-building, development, and maintenance throughout the doctoral process.

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