

97 “Maybe in Portugal this is the correct way to ask the question, but in Angola you cannot do it like that”: International doctoral students’ perspectives on the qualities of supervisors

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Although there is a greater diversity of international doctoral students (IDS) enrolling in PhD Programs worldwide and the role of supervisors in doctoral journeys is crucial, research on IDS’ perspectives on the qualities of supervisors remains an understudied area. This contribution explores the perspectives of IDS from the Community of Portuguese Language Countries, attending the PhD Program in Education at the University of Aveiro (Portugal), regarding the qualities of a good supervisor. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 IDS from Angola, Brazil, East Timor and Mozambique. Results from thematic analysis show that IDS value intrapersonal, interpersonal and communicative qualities associated specifically to pursuing a doctorate overseas. Within those, they underline: knowledge of their origin contexts (cultural characteristics, research traditions); acknowledgment of the influence of those contexts in learning/research approaches; and flexibility regarding students’ variety of Portuguese language. Findings highlight the importance of supervisor professional development for intercultural doctoral supervision.

Full paper

The greater diversity of students enrolling in PhD Programs worldwide has posed several challenges to supervisors and institutions. Although research has been addressing international doctoral students’ (IDS) journeys focusing on their motivations/expectations (Xu & Grant, 2017) and challenges in taking a PhD overseas (Pinto, 2021), IDS’ perspectives on the qualities of supervisors remain an understudied area, namely in Portugal.

Doctoral supervision is a complex task requiring a set of disciplinary and transversal qualities: discipline knowledge, research skills and methodological expertise, communication skills, interpersonal and intrapersonal competences, digital skills, management skills and contextual knowledge (Baptista, 2013; Buirski, 2021; Chiappetta-Swanson & Watt, 2011; Dimitrova, 2016; Fillery-Travis et al., 2017; Halse, 2011; Holmes et al., 2020; Wang & Byram, 2019). The qualities put forward in the literature seem adequate to supervising IDS, but as highlighted by Adrian-Taylor et al. (2007) supervisors are central in IDS’ journeys since these “tend to have fewer social supports to help them cope with the many challenges they face while studying abroad” (p. 92). Challenges are related to adjustment to a new social/academic reality and to the encounter of different academic, research, epistemological and communicational cultures (Pinto, 2020). In this context, supervision arises as an intercultural contact zone “... where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (Pratt, 1992, p. 4). Intercultural doctoral supervision has been defined as a social and relational space where different cultures meet and where supervisors acknowledge students’ prior intellectual, cultural and personal histories (Manathunga, 2014).

In Portugal, HEI have received a growing number of international students from the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP). The increase of CPLP students is visible not only at graduation and master levels but also in doctorate Programs (DGEEC, 2021). This trend is perceived at the University of Aveiro, one of the Portuguese HEI in which CPLP doctoral students have a higher weight. In 2021, the PhD Program in Education, ministered at the Department of Education and Psychology, was attended by 87 IDS (53% of the total number of students) and of those 78% were from the CPLP, especially from Brazil, Angola and Mozambique.

This study aimed at understanding the perspectives of CPLP IDS, attending the PhD Program in Education, regarding the qualities of a good supervisor. Participants were 11 IDS (aged between 33 and 60 years) from the CPLP: six Angolan, three Brazilian, one East Timorese and one Mozambican. Their mother tongues were:

Portuguese (five students), Kimbundu (two), Nhungué (one), Umbundu (one), Kikongo (one) and Indonesian (one). The interviews were submitted to thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013) and the following overarching themes concerning the qualities of a good supervisor emerged: intrapersonal qualities; interpersonal and communicative qualities; academic and research qualities.

Results show that IDS value intrapersonal, interpersonal and communicative qualities associated to their condition of “foreign students” such as: acknowledgement of the influence of their cultural, linguistic, educational, professional and personal backgrounds in research development, flexibility regarding their variety of Portuguese language and their integration in the host institution. Specifically, IDS underline that their supervisors should know their origin contexts as to cultural characteristics, research traditions, and educational backgrounds, requiring supervisors to acknowledge the influence of these in approaches to learning and research. In this context, being flexible, available, emotionally supportive and empathetic are crucial supervisors’ qualities which highlight the importance of personal supervisory interaction, especially if we consider IDS’ feelings of solitude and distress (Pinto, 2021). These feelings are often sharpened by a sense of invisibility in the host institution which makes IDS value supervisors’ ability to promote their integration and help them to develop a sense of belonging. Another important issue is the need for supervisors to be flexible regarding IDS’ variety of Portuguese language. For many of them, Portuguese is their second language and they speak different varieties of Portuguese. This poses challenges as to oral and written interaction with supervisors and as to thesis writing.

Findings emphasize the need for institutional reflection and discussion on the intercultural dimension of doctoral research and supervision. It is up to Portuguese universities to promote this, involving their management structures, doctoral schools, directors of doctoral programs, supervisors, and students. A shared reflection-action can enhance the creation of “dialogic spaces” (Robinson-Pant, 2009) where the encounter of different ways of thinking, learning and researching can empower all those involved. This reflection-action has to encompass an institutional responsibility in the investment in supervisors’ professional development as to intercultural communicative skills and skills to supervise across languages and cultures.

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