

291 Is Decolonising HE making headway in Professional and Education Doctorate Supervision and Examination Processes: survey findings from UK Higher Education.

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Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

Intercultural communication in high stakes circumstances can go fatally wrong due to small differences in how speakers use contextualization conventions. Misreading these conventions can lead to unconscious bias and thus play a role in perpetuating institutional forms of disempowerment of marginalised groups. Decolonising knowledge generation is central to decolonising higher education, yet nowhere are the stakes higher for supervisors to "teach to the test" than in PhD completion. Supervisory practice is heavily influenced by perceptions of expectations in examination processes. We explore relationships between examination and supervisory practices, and the roles that regulatory frameworks and relational networks play in reinscribing existing elite relations or disrupting them. Our paper reports on survey findings from an exploratory-explanatory sequential design. We contrast reported practices to address inequalities with available audit data, looking at a range of support mechanisms that would change awareness of intercultural contextual factors and the thesis examination context itself.

Full paper

As Gumperz and Gumperz seminal text alerted us (1996), intercultural communication in high stakes circumstances can go fatally wrong due to small differences in how speakers use contextualization conventions. Misreading these conventions can lead to unconscious bias and thus play a role in perpetuating institutional forms of disempowerment of marginalised groups. These conventions are habitually outside people's awareness and yet are generally relied on to interpret others' way of speaking. Research in job interviews, medical qualification exams and other gate keeper contexts has established these dynamics are impactful. Less is known about doctoral examination in the social sciences and related professional fields, such as Professional Doctorates and Education Doctorates, though this has had more research focus in Australia (Devos and Sommerville 2012, Lovat et al 2004, Holbrook et al 2008, Holbrook et al 2020) than in the UK (Nir and Bogler 2021). Decolonising knowledge generation lies at the heart of decolonising the curriculum (Manthalu CM and Waghid, Y 2019), yet nowhere are the stakes higher for supervisors to "teach to the test" than in the PhD completion process (Denicolo and Park 2013, Byram and Stiachova 2020). Changing these norms to be more sustainable, more respectful of wider communities of wisdom (Varner et al 2021) and more attuned to the PhD candidate's own journey (Devos and Sommerville 2012) are crucial aspects where we can learn from each other (Roland and Jones 2020, Majee and Ress 2020). However, supervisory practices cannot be unpicked from examination processes. Supervisory practice is heavily influenced by perceptions of expectations in examination processes (Kerry et al 2022).

We examine, here, the relationship between examination and supervisory practices, and the roles that regulatory frameworks, and relational networks play in reinscribing existing elite relations (Shahjahan 2011) or disrupting them. This paper reports on findings of a survey of post graduate coordinators, sr. academics, and regional graduate school coordinators on the regulation and support mechanisms in place for supervision and examination across HE in the UK. Responses were compared to publicly available information on university websites and through such equity programmes as Athena SWAN (Pearce 2017). The survey comprises the first part of a larger exploratory-explanatory sequenced model (Creswell and Plano 2017) project that includes student and supervisor interviews and focus groups that seek their views on survey and discourse analysis findings in comparison to their own experiences.

The survey used an exponential non-linear snowballing technique (Frank 2014) to recruit academics through SRHE special interest groups and other more informal networks of academics with responsibility for post graduate education management in the UK. Particular care was taken through the recruitment process to create a diverse demographic

database of respondents to include members of BME groups and diverse gender groups in a trustworthy and transparent manner (Tuck and Guishard, 2013) as their intersectionality is of importance.

Respondents were asked about intercultural communicative competence and unconscious bias training for supervisors, the mechanisms in place to ensure cultural sensitivity of examiners and to diversify examiner recruitment, to audit examination practices to learn from any issues of discrimination that may arise within examination procedures, and systems and procedures in place to support early career academics to develop supervisory and examination recruitment and facilitation practices. Finally, their views on how each of these components may address needed culture change within supervision and examination practice were sought. Analysis included thematic, discourse analysis (Fairclough 2013) and descriptive statistical components (Creswell and Plano 2017).

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