

Incorporating Academic Mobility in Supervisor Development Programme – learning from migrant supervisors’ experience

Bing Lu

University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

This paper explores how doctoral supervisor development programmes (SDPs) in UK universities engage with inclusion, particularly in supporting migrant academics —those who earned their PhDs outside the UK. Drawing on a qualitative study, data were collected through observations and interviews with nine supervisors and four academic developers across three institutions. Findings show that while developers aim to create inclusive, dialogic spaces, supervisors often hesitate to share concerns shaped by different doctoral cultures. Supervisors reported needing more explicit guidance on UK PhD norms to align their diverse academic experiences largely unacknowledged. It is found that institutional norms often limited the integration of global perspectives. The study argues for a shift from viewing migrant supervisors through a deficit lens to recognising the pedagogical value of their diverse backgrounds. The author's current collaborations with CDTs to co-create inclusive training resources illustrate how academic mobility can enrich supervisor development.

Full paper

Purpose: This paper explores the provisions of the doctoral supervisor development programmes provided by UK institutions. With the expanding scale of doctoral education and the surging diversification of academic workforce, how migrant doctoral supervisors learn from the professional programmes to supervise doctoral students is an under-research area. This paper aims to examine how inclusion is considered in UK institutions’ supervisor development programmes (SDP) to support academics’ learning of supervision, especially for those who have obtained their own PhDs outside UK.

Methodology: This paper draws data from a SRHE-funded project investigating migrant supervisors and academic developers' views on the supervisor development programmes they attended. The central research question is: how do migrant academics in UK institutions learn to supervise doctoral students through supervision training programmes? This qualitative study recruited nine supervisors and four programme developers/trainers from three UK institutions' supervisor development programmes. Data were collected through observational notes from supervision sessions and post-session interviews with both trainers and supervisors to understand their perceptions of the programmes. Lee's (2008) supervision framework was employed to analyse the data.

Findings:

Academic developers – facilitating a welcoming and diverse space

Interviews with academic developers revealed varied accounts regarding the provisions of supervisor development programs, including their aims, content, formats, resources, and institutional policies. Generally, academic developers find incorporating inclusion in supervisor development programme is important but is also challenging to address. It was generally shared by academic developers that SDP should provide supervisors a welcoming space where they could articulate their concerns and questions they have encountered about supervision. To achieve this goal, Community of Practice (Hill & Vaughan, 2018) is a popular approach adopted in the design of supervisor programmes. Findings also indicate that academic developers' direct involvement in supervision practice as well as their own academic mobility trajectory shape their design and delivery of the SDP.

Supervisors – how to supervise UK PhD students?

Interviews with supervisor participants revealed a strong willingness to learn, varying understandings of doctoral programs, and concerns about over-regulation. Compared to academic developers' perspective of empowering supervisors to speak up in a community of practice as an important function of SDP, supervisors do not often find it appropriate to raise questions specifically related to their own supervision experience, considering the private nature of supervision and codes of practice as supervisors. For migrant supervisors, even they have very different understanding of supervision milestones influenced by their own doctoral training experiences (e.g. qualification exams in the US system), they do not often flag up this difference, and they do not often feel the difference is acknowledged by the institution. Migrant supervisors generally expect to figure out what PhD

programmes mean in the UK context, including policies that regulate doctoral programmes and the local academic culture that defines the success of doctorates.

Academic mobility - an essential aspect of inclusion

Interview accounts reveal that the academic mobility backgrounds of both trainers and supervisors shape the structure and the delivery of SPDs. At the same time, gaps were identified in explicitly addressing the diverse experiences of migrant supervisors. SPDs are shaped by national, institutional, and organisational norms, but these norms are often taken as universal when academics' global experience is insufficiently acknowledged. This study argues that academic diversity could have been more explicitly recognised in SPDs to recognise supervisors' varied academic experiences in the context of doctoral education to make a real pedagogic impact (Shaikh, 2009)

Conclusion: Migrant academic staff have specific training needs and expectations towards institutional professional programmes (Hosseini & Rao, 2020; Kinchin et al., 2018). Incorporating internationally mobile supervisors' diverse experience in an inclusive SPD agenda, institutions can better integrate global knowledge to enhance supervisor competence and support. This also reduces the chance that academics compromise their own knowledge about PhD programmes and supervision, facilitating a better transition experience for migrant supervisors when they cross borders.

Implications: The project lead is currently working with two UK universities' CDT centre to co-create inclusive supervisor development resources to support supervisors' development. The project's findings are embedded in the process of co-creation, demonstrating the legacies of this project and how academic mobility is increasingly valued by CDTs in their design of academic development resources.