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Challenging Structural Barriers in Doctoral Education: Strategies for Compassionate, Equitable, and Inclusive Research Cultures and Communities

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Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

Doctoral education (DE) continues to be shaped by structural inequalities that restrict access, participation, and progression for underrepresented groups. This study draws on a systematic literature review to explore how institutional policies, and academic practices can foster compassionate, collegial, and inclusive doctoral environments. The review identifies persistent challenges, including socio-economic, gender, and racial inequities; exclusionary academic cultures; limited support systems; and supervision practices that fail to accommodate the diverse needs of doctoral candidates. It highlights global efforts to address these barriers through equity-driven reforms, inclusive research cultures, digital and technological inclusion, and the integration of social justice and decolonial perspectives. The study underscores the importance of fostering belonging, care, and collective responsibility within DE. By challenging deficit discourses and structural exclusions, this research contributes to debates on how universities can reimagine their engagement with society and promote equity, compassion, and collegiality at the heart of DE and academic communities.

Full paper

Introduction

Doctoral education (DE) has long been positioned as a driver of knowledge production, social mobility, and academic community-building. Yet, persistent inequalities continue to shape who accesses, participates in, and benefits from doctoral training, reinforcing

exclusionary academic cultures that risk reproducing wider societal disparities (Marvell, 2022; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2012; Wakeling & Laurison, 2017). Public and political discourse often portrays DE as elitist, disconnected, or complicit in perpetuating inequality, overlooking the everyday acts of care, collegiality, and collective effort that underpin academic communities.

Scholarship has called for a reimagining of DE as a more compassionate, equitable, and socially just space, capable of fostering belonging and meaningful engagement (Ahmed, 2007; Connell, 2013). In line with this debate, this study draws on a systematic literature review to explore how policies and academic practices in DE can challenge exclusionary structures and promote inclusive, collegial, and community-oriented environments.

Methodology

This study draws on data from a systematic literature review examining the global drivers and structural dimensions influencing doctoral education at macro- (global), meso- (national and supranational), and micro- (institutional and programme) levels. The review followed PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021) and included searches in Scopus, Web of Science, and EBSCO, conducted between 30 September and 8 October 2024. Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2014 and 2024, in English or Portuguese, were considered; grey literature and non-peer-reviewed materials were excluded.

The search initially identified 2,037 articles. After removing duplicates and applying screening criteria, 282 articles were selected for full-text analysis. Data were extracted using a reading grid and analysed through categorical content analysis. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) emerged as a key global driver within this broader review, identified in 50 articles. To ensure clarity and conciseness, the findings section focuses on DEI and refers to the number of studies addressing specific challenges and strategies, rather than listing individual citations. Representative examples are cited where appropriate.

Findings

The review confirms that doctoral education continues to be shaped by socio-economic, gender, racial, and institutional inequalities, which restrict access, participation, and progression for historically excluded groups. These challenges are documented in at least twenty studies, spanning contexts such as South Africa, Brazil, and the United States. Efforts to address these barriers have focused on policy reforms, inclusive academic cultures, and equitable support systems — for example, gender equity initiatives in Sweden, community-based mentoring programmes in the United States, and targeted funding schemes in South Africa. In response to these structural barriers, the literature

identifies several strategic approaches to promoting equity and inclusion in doctoral education. These include context-sensitive policies aimed at reducing gender disparities in STEM fields, addressing racial underrepresentation, and mitigating socio-economic disadvantage throughout the doctoral journey.

Ten studies emphasise the need to nurture compassionate research cultures through initiatives such as peer mentoring, inclusive supervision practices, and institutional mechanisms that foster collegiality and a sense of belonging. Digital and technological inclusion is addressed in eight studies, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Strategies include hybrid programme models, improved digital infrastructure, and targeted support for international, part-time, and remote doctoral candidates. Finally, four studies explore the integration of social justice and decolonial perspectives, highlighting strategies such as the inclusion of Indigenous and non-Western epistemologies in curricula and the co-creation of research agendas with historically marginalised communities.

Conclusion

This review highlights a growing global recognition of the need to address structural inequalities in doctoral education. These inequalities—linked to socioeconomic status, race, gender, and institutional culture—are well documented and continue to affect access, progression, and outcomes (Blanden et al., 2023; Marvell, 2022; Wakeling & Laurison, 2017). In response, the literature identifies several strategies to promote greater inclusion, including structural reforms, compassionate and culturally responsive supervision, the integration of diverse epistemologies, and digital innovations for accessibility (Bearman et al., 2024; Milana et al., 2021; Silva & Marcuccio, 2019). While these approaches reflect increasing commitment to equity and collegiality, institutional action often remains fragmented and shaped by national and political pressures (Ahmed, 2007; Connell, 2013). Addressing systemic barriers requires sustained, embedded interventions that centre care, justice, and collective responsibility. By synthesising international research, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to inform inclusive and justice-oriented doctoral education. It offers evidence to support reform and reinforces the view that DE can be reimagined as a space of belonging, critical engagement, and social transformation.