MIGRANT SUPERVISORS LEARNING TO SUPERVISE IN THE UK-AN INCLUSIVE PERSPECTIVE

SRHE Newer Researcher Award Report 2024

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Acknowledgement

Summary

This study investigates how migrant supervisors learn to supervise doctorates through supervisor training programmes in UK institutions. Through investigating different stakeholders, this study focuses on how supervisors respond to the mandated and/or optional training sessions through a design that aims to elicit reflective accounts based on the notes they kept when attending the development sessions. This study generates three findings, 1) offering an overview of how various stakeholders shape the provisions of supervisor development programs in the UK, 2) highlighting the importance of fostering inclusive communities of practices in supervisor development programme, and 3) acknowledging migrant supervisors' barriers in learning from supervisor development programmes when mobilising between degree structures. This project offers some practical recommendations as well as indicating the future research directions at the end.

Keywords: migrant supervisors, supervisor development, inclusive community of practice, barriers in learning

1.0 Introduction

This research project aims to find out how institutionally implemented supervisor development programme support supervisors' learning of supervision in UK Higher Education Institution (HEI)[1], with a specific focus on supervisors who received their own doctorates from a non-UK university. This project aims to find out whether there exist some institutional norms that regulate supervision practices and whether the professional programmes include any elements directed at those that are less familiar with the HE policies in UK. Through investigating three supervisor development programmes in three UK HEIs[2], this project aims to provide implications for the development of inclusive supervision training programmes which support supervisors' professional development.

1.1 Background

With the expanding scale of doctoral education, there is scant knowledge about how supervisors learn to supervise increasingly diverse doctoral students on various doctoral programmes (Manathunga, 2005; McCulloch & Loeser, 2016). In the UK context, how supervisors learn from professional programmes about how to supervise doctorates is a relatively under-researched area[3]. Johnson (2014) suggested that the supervisor professional programme initiatives need a focus on more comprehensive preparation of supervisors beyond the regulation and compliance issues. Given the large and growing UK HEI sector, there is little evidence examining the pedagogic impact of migrant academics in teaching and research (Shaikh, 2009), and there hardly exist studies that specifically investigate supervisors with international higher education background. With the surging diversification of academic workforce, this study investigates if migrant academics with research supervision responsibility are disadvantaged in terms of learning from the professional programmes provided by UK HEIs.

1.2 Terminology

This project involves a few terms that need to be defined at the beginning.

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[1] UK HEI can be categorised into different types, including the medieval universities (notably Oxford and Cambridge), the various member institutions of the University of London and the Universities of Wales, the 'civic universities' founded around 1890, the colleges founded after the World War II that later were upgraded to universities and finally the former 'polytechnics' are called frequently now 'post-1992' or 'new' universities (Teichler et al., 2013).

[2] In 2022/23, 223 UK HE providers reported staff data to HESA.

[3] While this report was being developed, there launched a new national programme – Next Generation Research SuperVision Project (RSVP) bringing together experts from more than 20 universities and research institutes, alongside various industry partners to transform doctoral supervision.

The first term is *migrant supervisor*, which refers to those who have obtained their own PhD degrees from non-UK institutions and are currently working in UK institutions with supervision responsibility. This definition moves away from the migrant/native dichotomy that might easily lead to confusion as they mean different things to different individuals (Beerkens, 2023; Shaikh, 2009; Kinchin et al., 2018; Khattab & Fenton, 2016). Focusing on degree-awarding countries indicate an emphasis on supervisor mobility, which would be unpacked in this report.

The second term is *supervisor development programme* (SDP), referring to any forms of training, communities of practices and networks initiated and implemented by the institutions that aim to support academic development with a particular focus on supervision-related scholarship and skills (Lee, 2018). Different institutions name these programmes varyingly, and this study adopts SDP as an umbrella term referring to these institutionally implemented programmes with various approaches.

2.0 Methodology

This qualitative study identified a unit of supervisors plus trainers on the same programme and investigated three SDPs in three UK institutions. The study design includes observation of the supervisor development sessions and post-session interviews with supervisors and the facilitators. This innovative design aims to examine different stakeholders' views on institutionally provided academic development programme, offering a comprehensive understanding of provisions of these programmes under investigation. Besides observation and interviews, this study also examined the available resources that support these programmes, including pre-session modules, the content, modes and accessibility of these resources. This study aims to address the following overarching research questions with three sub-questions:

How do migrant academics in UK institutions learn to supervise doctoral students through supervision training programmes?

- *What are the provisions of the professional development programmes for supervisors?*

- *What moments/events during the supervision training sessions do migrant supervisors find salient or less familiar due to their own educational background?*

- *How do migrant supervisors find the training programme relevant to their own supervision?*

Ethics approval of this study was obtained through Warwick HESSREC in March 2024, with participant information leaflets and consent forms sent to and signed by the agreed participants prior to any research activities. The fieldwork took place from April to July 2024. During this period, the researcher observed three in-person academic

development sessions and two online sessions. These sessions were a mix of mandatory and optional for the academic attendees, ranging from 7 to over 20 participants per session. All sessions had supervisor attendees who had obtained their doctoral degrees from non-UK institutions (Table 1).

	Participant	Gender	PhD received country	Discipline	Career status
Institution 1	1	woman	US	Statistics	Professor
	2	man	Norway	Physics	Professor
Institution 2	3	man	US	Computer Science	Assistant professor
	4	man	US	Social Science	Assistant professor
	5	woman	US	Business	Assistant professor
Institution 3	6	woman	Denmark	Sociology	Assistant professor
	7	woman	US	Psychology	Assistant professor

Table 1: Demographic details of migrant supervisors

It was identified that the educational backgrounds and mobility experiences of the facilitators shaped the design and delivery of these programs (Table 2). This emerged from both the researcher's observations and post-session interviews which will be expanded later in the report.

	Participant	Gender	PhD supervision experience	HE degree received country	Institutional requirement
Institution 1	1	woman	Yes	UK	optional
Institution 2	2	man	Yes	Italy	mandatory
	3	man	No	UK	mandatory
Institution 3	4	woman	Yes	UK	optional
	5	woman	No	UK	optional

Table 2: Demographic details of supervisor development facilitator

3.0 Findings

This section includes three subsections, each addressing one sub-research question. The analysis is informed by pre-existing categories, concepts and frameworks in relevant research fields, including doctoral/supervision research, supervisor development and academic mobility. Built on previous studies and collected data, this study constructs supervisor mobility as both a research lens and research subject. This concept recognises various degree structures between countries and investigates specifically about how knowledge enabled by doctorate degree is mobilised from one country to another.

3.1 Research excellence and/or teaching excellence

Interviews with academic developers revealed varied accounts regarding the provisions of supervisor development programs, including their aims, content, formats, resources, and institutional policies (mandatory or optional).

A key finding is that a community of practice (Hill & Vaughan, 2018) is commonly adopted as a rationale for designing and facilitating these programs in all three institutions, though maintained in distinct ways. In some institutions, current

supervisors lead thematic discussions on doctoral supervision, fostering peer support as a valuable resource (Wittek et al., 2024; Jara, 2020). Other institutions manage supervisor support through dedicated professional teams without necessarily requiring the facilitators to have direct supervision experience. This variation reflects differing program provisions, with an implicit focus on promoting either research or teaching excellence. These efforts show that institutions are seeking systematic approaches to engage doctoral supervisors in professional development activities to cultivate their 'supervisory competencies' (Pyhältö et al., 2024).

For example, when the emphasis is on research excellence, facilitators often share personal supervision experiences to guide others on best practices for supporting doctoral candidates through milestones like the upgrade exam and viva. This focus on research-oriented supervision does not always align with an emphasis on pedagogy. One facilitator noted the potential bias supervisors may have about what they need to learn and from whom:

'If I ask supervisors what kind of mentor they want, they'll probably say someone in the same discipline. That might not be the best thing, but their instinct is to look for somebody who is like them. And that's really understandable because that's where trust comes from, right? But what if we have an issue if all supervisors are stuck, and all supervisors are finding it hard?'

The educational backgrounds and mobility experiences of facilitators (see Table 2) also influenced their understanding and practices in supporting supervisor development. All interviewed facilitators recognized the limitations of their perspectives and promoted expanding communities where supervisors, professionals, and central university services could collectively contribute their expertise. One facilitator suggested the benefit of establishing *'a dedicated community of practice for academic supervising'*.

In conclusion, the provisions of supervisor development programs are shaped by various internal stakeholders, from local CDTs/DTPs to individual facilitators. Facilitators acknowledged the influence of external bodies and their accreditation (e.g. SEDA accreditation, UKCGE supervisor accreditation) but engaged with them to varying degrees, often aligned with institutional priorities. This study identifies that while an expanding community was clearly valued by all the participants, inclusion also deserves more consideration in the context of supporting research supervision, to be expanded in the next section.

3.2 Facilitating a diverse community

Interviews with supervisor participants revealed a strong willingness to learn, varying understandings of doctoral programs, and concerns about over-regulation. Overall, participants held reasonable expectations for the academic development programs, but they valued the environment where they could learn through interactions with

peers. Some participants highlighted the benefits of reflective practices during sessions that allowed them to examine their own supervision methods. These findings align with the community of practice approach promoted by academic developers, as discussed in the previous section.

Participant notes from the sessions indicated a clear interest in acknowledging diverse perspectives within these programs. One participant remarked, '*I liked how different participants (supervisors) pointed out diverse angles.*' In the follow-up interview, the participant explained that they had benefited from discussions with attendees from various disciplines, career stages, and international backgrounds. Migrant supervisors were found to understand doctoral supervision differently, influenced by their own educational experiences. This variation included differing views on the objectives of doctoral programs, supervision challenges, the supervisory relationship, and processes related to recruitment and assessment. For example, among the seven supervisor participants, five had earned their doctorates in the United States. They all mentioned how 'advisors' used in the US context as an equivalent of 'supervisors' in the UK context indicates different power relationship affecting supervision practice.

In addition to questions about national norms governing PhD programs, some supervisors expressed concerns about over-regulation. One participant, who had over 15 years of supervision experience, noted, '*Trying to have a rule for everyone, specifically across the whole department and even the university, is bound to fail.*' In a post-session interview, the facilitator acknowledged the value of input from those new to supervising in the UK but cautioned against the risk of '*creating a group that speaks only to its own concerns and isn't engaging with a more diverse community of professionals.*'

In summary, this section underscores the varied backgrounds and expectations that migrant supervisors bring to training programs, highlighting the importance of fostering inclusive practices that respect these differences in supervisor development programme.

3.3 Reflection is good, and additions

Post-session interviews with migrant supervisors revealed that they had engaged in various forms of supervisor development, both formal and informal. Retrospectively, many participants realized that their learning about supervision had begun during their doctoral studies. This early learning meant that many participants experienced a transition in their supervision practices as they moved across borders. Such mobility could disrupt their learning due to differences in degree structures.

A few existing studies have examined how migrant academic staff learn from institutional professional programs (Hosein & Rao, 2020; Kinchin et al., 2018) and their specific training needs, such as practical sessions to demystify commonly used jargon

in the UK higher education sector. In this study, migrant supervisors expressed a clear interest in understanding how their prior study and work experiences could be effectively adapted to the UK context. One supervisor commented:

'PhDs are trained so differently in the UK and in the US. My basic expectation is that at least I will get to know how to supervise UK PhD students. I'd like to know what the requirements are here. I guess there is nothing like a qualifying exam in the UK. Also, what would the post-PhD situation be like here?'

One supervisor, who joined their institution at a senior position 15 years ago when mandatory supervisory development sessions were not required, remarked that they 'could have needed' such training. Other participants acknowledged that there were more supervisor development offerings now, which they found 'actually very useful'. These positive reflections were largely attributed to their newfound awareness of the scholarship on supervision after attending development sessions. The recent UKCGE survey report (2021) also called for more practice regarding reflecting on supervisory practice.

However, some participants questioned the limitations of reflective practices, especially when these practices were increasingly framed as promoting teaching excellence. Certain participants did not find these practices sufficiently relevant to their supervision, which they perceived as being predominantly research oriented. This issue ties back to the teaching/research dichotomy mentioned earlier, showing how some migrant supervisors remain less informed about the value placed on teaching excellence in the UK. Their previous experience with doctoral education often centred around celebrating research outcomes.

In summary, while migrant supervisors appreciate learning opportunities that acknowledge and integrate their previous experiences, they also note a gap in how reflective practices align with their expectations and perceived roles. The tension between teaching and research-oriented supervision reveals a potential area for adapting training to better meet the diverse needs of supervisors.

4.0 Implications and Recommendations

Based on the findings showcased in section 3.0, this project formulates a few implications and recommendations for the purpose of better supporting migrant supervisor working in UK HEIs (Table 3). To generate these recommendations, the researcher also asked all supervisors and facilitators what they would expect from an inclusive supervisor development resource looks like. These implications could also broadly benefit all supervisors who feel a need to improve their supervision skills through continual professional development.
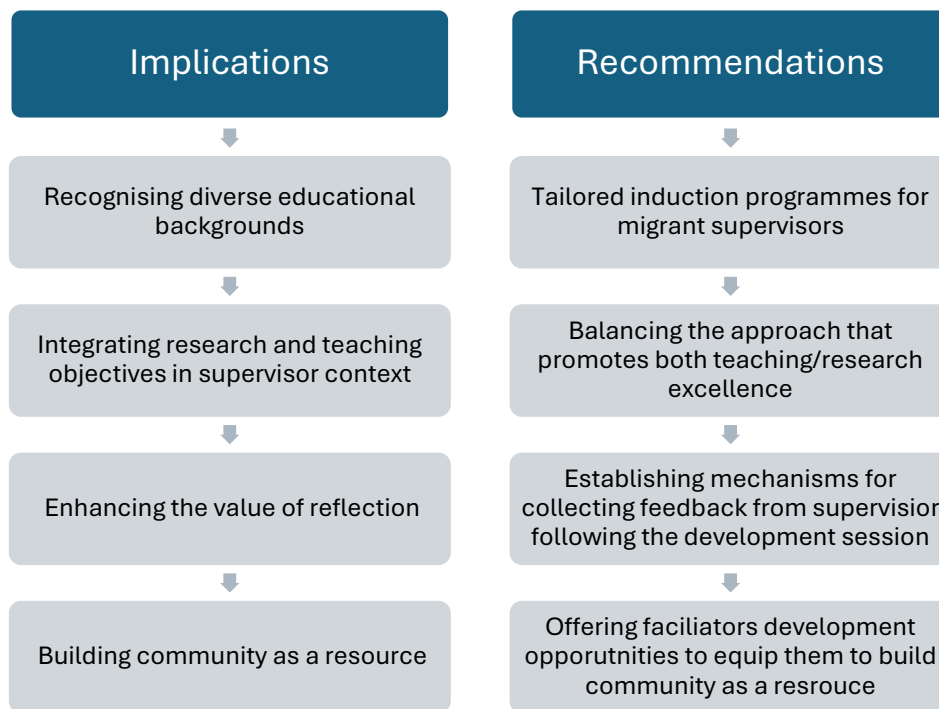
Implications	Recommendations
Recognising diverse educational backgrounds	Tailored induction programmes for migrant supervisors
Integrating research and teaching objectives in supervisor context	Balancing the approach that promotes both teaching/research excellence
Enhancing the value of reflection	Establishing mechanisms for collecting feedback from supervisior following the development session
Building community as a resource	Offering faciliators development opporutnities to equip them to build community as a resrouce

Table 3: Implications and recommendations drawn from the data

5.0 Contributions and next steps

The recommendations presented in section 4.0 will inform the next step of this project, creating an inclusive supervision development resource, accessible via a website or embedded to an existing resource. This resource aims to provide a window for policy makers, academic developers, supervisors and doctoral students to learn about the intricacies and mechanism around professional supervision development programmes.

By highlighting the unique experiences of migrant doctoral supervisors, this study contributes to enhancing understanding of inclusive supervisor development programmes that acknowledge diverse supervisory backgrounds. Institutions can use these insights to enhance their supervisor training programs, ensuring that they are better tailored to the needs of a global academic workforce. Furthermore, the research can support policies that promote internationalisation in UK HEIs, contributing to the diversification of supervisory practices and fostering a more inclusive academic culture (Cleggs et al., 2024).

As for future research directions, this project opens several avenues. One direction is to expand the study to include a larger sample of migrant supervisors across different regions and types of UK institutions. This would allow for a broader understanding of how academic supervisors trained in various international doctoral communities experience their role in UK higher education.

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