

Inclusive Supervision: Bridging the Cultural Divide

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Inclusive supervision is an approach to supervision that prioritizes multicultural competencies and an ethic of inclusion. Inclusivity in doctoral (or PhD) supervision is of key significance due to the collaborative nature of the relationship between supervisors and supervisees. Scant research has been conducted that considers the multiple, intersectional influences and their impact within this relationship. This study employs a rapid review method to synthesize findings on the research evidence encapsulating inclusive doctoral supervision. A search of academic literature spanning the last ten years (2013–2023) led to the inclusion of nine empirical, qualitative research studies on inclusive supervision. A synthesis of the findings resulted in five key challenges to inclusive supervision that diverse students face: power dynamics and feedback, a lack of belonging and support, a racial lens on academic competence, (mis)understandings of cultural differences, and communication and language barriers. In discussing these findings, we employ an intersectional lens and introduce a conceptual framework for an inclusive collaboration between supervisors and supervisees.

inclusivity

supervisor

PhD student

intersectionality

identity

Inclusive supervision is an approach to supervision that prioritizes multicultural competencies and an ethic of inclusion ^[1]. The concept of inclusivity is relatively recent; however, research has examined specific elements such as the importance of pastoral care from PhD supervisors for ethnic minority PhD students ^[2], the significance of PhD supervisors' beliefs and attitudes about the students' culture ^[3], and the general need for inclusive PhD supervision due to the increasing diversity among PhD students ^[4]. Many educational institutes have also developed their own 'toolkits' for inclusive supervision to direct and guide PhD supervisors to adequately support and address any challenges faced by diverse students (e.g., ^[5]). Much of the scholarly work in the field focuses on equipping PhD students with transferable skills for employment ^[6], student satisfaction and experience ^[7], and successful thesis completion ^[8].

These efforts provide a good foundation for understanding inclusive PhD supervision. Nevertheless, the significance of supervisory relationships in light of the multiple layers of complexity that arise from the diverse, intersectional identities (e.g., ethnicity, culture, religion, language, gender, sexuality, age, and disability) of students and their supervisors requires more focus to improve supervisory practice and move the field forward. The identities of the supervisor and the student are central to the supervisory relationship, with the role of the supervisor seldom receiving the attention it deserves. The importance of addressing intersectional identities in PhD supervision is highlighted in the quote below.

We do not leave our identities as raced, classed and gendered bodies outside the door when we engage in supervision: instead, our personal histories, experiences, cultural and class backgrounds and social, cultural and national locations remain present (some might say omnipresent). Culture, politics and history matter in supervision.

 (p. 368)

This paper enriches the available literature on supervisory relationships by foregrounding the impact of diversity on supervisory teams and students. In particular, we synthesize qualitative evidence on inclusive PhD supervision, focusing on how supervisors shape the experience of PhD students whose identities differ from their own. The roles of culture and context are explored insofar as they shape the norms of the student's interaction with their supervisor and factors that hinder PhD progression and completion. In this paper, culture encompasses both personal culture as well as institutional cultures that, instead of being supportive, promote an assumed neutrality or, worse, indifference.

The area of supervision is naturally vitally important for PhD students and for the continuing development of knowledge across disciplines. The discussion in this paper, informed by the contributions of three authors with diverse academic and personal backgrounds and identities, highlights elements that contribute to inclusive supervision. The perspectives of supervisors and students from a wide range of contexts are considered. A model to underpin initiatives to overcome the factors that hinder progression and completion is presented to inform inclusive supervisory practices and future research. This work is fundamental and relevant for new and experienced supervisors as it provides a framework to explore and discuss the hidden silences in supervision. The themes emerging from the rapid review connect the theory to societal knowledge.

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