

AN INTRODUCTION TO DECOLONISATION IN DOCTORAL SUPERVISION



Artwork by Grace Lee

Many scholars have highlighted the importance of decolonisation in Higher Education. Discussions around decolonising the relationship between supervisors and their PGRs are also gaining traction in doctoral supervision. This resource offers an opportunity to discuss and reflect on the relationship between supervisors and their PGRs, and what a decolonial approach to supervision can offer in terms of enriching and deepening the connections we develop with PGR students.

How do we define decolonisation?

The central debates in decolonial scholarship in the UK revolve around the whiteness of the curriculum, the dominance of Eurocentric and western-centric thought, the issue of diversity of perspectives in the curriculum and the representation of Black and minority ethnic (BME) staff (Bhambra et al., 2020; Jivraj, 2020).

Martin et al. (2020, p. 317) argue that ‘decolonisation must start from a place of strength; a place that is open to other ways of knowing and being. Only there can we find meaning and belonging within our own sense of identity.’ However, ‘other ways of knowing’ extends beyond merely diversifying reading lists—especially in doctoral supervision, where there are numerous opportunities to incorporate the diverse cultural, social, and lived knowledge of both doctoral students and supervisors. To achieve this, we must explore pedagogical approaches that rethink the relational dynamics between supervisors and supervisees, recognising what we bring into the supervisory space as individuals with complex identities, beliefs, attitudes, and positions in the world. As Begum and Saini (2019, p. 198) suggest, this approach ‘acknowledges the inherent power relations in the production and dissemination of knowledge, and seeks to destabilise these, allowing new forms of knowledge to emerge.’



Artwork by Ellie Cook

How can decolonisation be applied to doctoral supervision?

Decolonising supervision creates opportunities to establish friendships, share experiences, and learn from one another, fostering collegial relationships that are less defined by asymmetrical power dynamics (Guccione, 2023; Hyatt & Hayes, 2022). This approach challenges the notion of the supervisor as an ‘all-knowing authority’ and the student as someone who ‘does not know’ (Grant, 2003, p.179).

I’ll start by problematising my own institutional “naming” as a “supervisor”—I don’t feel my job is to supervise my student (colleague). I’m their advisor, their critical friend, their colleague, their co-conspirator’ (Hyatt & Hayes, 2020; 27)

Decolonising doctoral supervision means recognising the diverse cultural and lived knowledge that doctoral students bring to their research project. It also provides supervisors with the chance to broaden their understanding of the world, reconsider their disciplinary knowledge, and stay humble as they continue learning from their students (Manathunga, 2011).



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Positionality and Doctoral Supervision

Positionality is the process of developing a critical awareness of one's position in relation to the social context and the world. We do not come into a classroom or supervisory space as neutral or disembodied entities. Knowingly or unknowingly, we bring the complexity of ourselves into the various spaces we occupy. Reflecting on your positionality as a supervisor can be a powerful strategy for student success, especially if you consider how your lived experiences shape what you do in teaching and supervision spaces, and how those actions may or may not support the success of students in your class and your sense of personal and professional fulfilment (Harrington, 2020). Reflecting on what you bring to the classroom in terms of your identity, experiences, and beliefs—and how those may differ from what your students bring—can help you identify ways to better connect with and support your students (Harrington, 2020).

Share your positionality

Early in the supervision process, share some reflections on your positionality with your PGRs and encourage them to do the same. This practice may help to foster mutual understanding and trust, helping you both see where the other is coming from.

Remember, positionality is an ongoing, open-ended process. There’s no such thing as a perfect or final expression of it; positionality is constantly in motion, changing as our worldview, beliefs, and experiences change. As we grow and the world evolves, so do our perspectives. Reflecting on what we know and how we've come to understand certain aspects of the world and the disciplines we work within is essential for shaping effective supervisory dynamics.

Consider how your experiences and beliefs influence your approach as a supervisor, and how those actions impact your students—and likewise, encourage students to consider how their own experiences and beliefs shape their research and interactions with you.

Reflecting on your positionality from these perspectives:

Social Identities

- What identities do you hold in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, religion, nationality, etc?
- How significant is each identity to how you teach and supervise?
- What beliefs or values and characteristics do you have, and how do they impact your identity and related actions as a supervisor?

Qualifications and Experiences

- What type of education, training, and experience do you have?
- How have these experiences shaped who you are professionally, and how might they impact how students relate to you and your supervision style?

Research Experience

- How was your discipline developed?
- What role did your discipline play in reifying dominant ideologies or worldviews? What role do you play in this work?
- In what ways do you challenge or divest from some of these practices? Why or why not?

Intercultural Supervision

Intercultural supervision is a teacher/supervisor's ability to think and act effectively across different cultures (Whaley & Davis, 2007). In a broader sense, it is the pedagogical practice of intercultural competence, which can be understood as a process of learning and adjusting to new cultural contexts with students and others (Barker, 2015). Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) propose that intercultural competence is the 'appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioural orientations to the world.'

“A lot of literature focuses on how western and domestic supervisors develop cultural competence when working with international students. But what about the experiences of international supervisors new to the UK? How do they navigate assimilation, alienation, and social or cultural disconnect? Are there opportunities to integrate a diversity of identities, backgrounds, and cultural knowledge into university teaching and supervision roles? Does this resonate with your experiences as a teacher, supervisor, and/or researcher?”



Intercultural Supervision Case Study I

‘They consistently emphasized that my Vietnamese identity deserves to be embraced evidently as a part of my project and as a post-colonial effort to decolonize Western academic superiority. I accepted their challenge and attempted to create found poetry made from my research participants’ own words in Vietnamese. In so doing, I was reminded that in seeking the legitimization of being an academic in a Western world, my cultural root was visible and a crucial part of the process. In that sense, elements of transculturation should be present in supervisory relationship “as moments of creativity” when students critically and carefully blend the parts of Western knowledge they find useful with their own ways of thinking.’

Phan, A. N. Q. (2023). My Supervisors Never Cease to Believe in Me: A Reflection of an Intercultural Doctoral Supervision Relationship. *About Campus*. 28(5), 33-37.

Intercultural Supervision Case Study II

‘I was feeling upset and extremely worried after this meeting with my supervisors. Both supervisors had suggested that I make significant changes to my project. I did not think this new direction to my research was warranted, but I did not speak up. I did not have the courage to disagree with my supervisors or express my opinions. Instead, I just sat there nodding and thinking that obeying my supervisors was the best thing to do... My silence was a way to show respect to and avoid conflict with my supervisor. However, my supervisors probably understood my silence to be agreement with their point of view.’

Zheng, H. and Herawati, H., (2019). Effective intercultural supervision: Using reflective practice to enhance students’ and supervisors’ intercultural competence. In: R. Sigala and H. Berber, eds. *Wellbeing in doctoral education*.

Intercultural Supervision Tips

- Discussing supervisory styles and expectations with your PGRs early in the supervision relationship helps minimise confusion, stress, and anxiety.
- Exploring the backgrounds of both the student and supervisor early on helps foster understanding, build trust, and connection. This process could also introduce unique perspectives and cultural insights that could enrich the doctoral project.
- Create a compassionate environment for your PGRs to voice concerns within your supervisory relationship. Keep in mind that cultural, social, and power dynamics between students and supervisors can influence a student’s willingness to voice their opinions.
- Transparent communication is key. At subsequent meetings, discuss the outcomes of the previous meeting, highlighting any potential thoughts and feelings that may have hindered understanding from both the student’s and the supervisors’ perspectives.

Supporting Indigenous Doctoral Research Supervision

Understanding the term “Indigenous”

- Self- identification as indigenous peoples at the individual level and accepted by the community as their member.
- Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies.
- Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources.
- Distinct social, economic or political systems.
- Distinct language, culture and beliefs.
- Form non-dominant groups of society.
- Resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities.

United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
(UNPFII)

Navigating The issue of formal supervision: Institutional tensions arise from the policy of restricting supervision to university employees. Finding a compromise involves balancing the role of community mentors as 'consultants' on the research while ensuring that their contributions are appropriately remunerated and acknowledged.

Community Relevance and Agency: It's vital to consider whether research is relevant to the communities it aims to serve. Community members should have a say in the research design and its purposes. Building strong relationships, discussing expectations, and aligning outcomes with community aspirations are essential steps. Establishing a shared commitment to decolonising methodologies and ethical research practices is vital, ensuring that the autonomy and goals of participants are respected.

The problem with single authorship/individually authoring a PhD which contradicts the co-creation of knowledge within communities. Single authorship of a PhD dissertation can conflict with the principle of co-creating knowledge within communities. Supervisors often advise that the dissertation is just one output of the PhD, with the development of the student's identity and research capacity being another crucial outcome. This advice may prompt a critical reflection on the challenges of creating knowledge collaboratively within an institutional framework that valorises individual/hierarchical authorship. While this can be seen as the student compromising personal aspirations for institutional requirements, it can also be viewed as the thesis being one contribution among many, where the student's broader potential impacts on the community represent the larger, ongoing contribution.

Scobie et al. (2021) in **'Braiding together student and supervisor aspirations in a struggle to decolonize'** discuss the issues above, highlighting how the PhD process can be perceived as a balancing act between institutional expectations and the broader, more collaborative contributions to community knowledge.

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