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Original Article
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Innovative Supervisory Practices in Social Sciences Doctoral Education

Abstract

Introduction. Supervision is central to doctoral education, particularly in the social sciences where students must develop not only methodological competence but also a strong researcher identity. This study investigates how innovative supervisory practices contribute to doctoral students' academic development and professional socialization within an internationalized higher education environment. **Methodology and Methods.** Using a qualitative design, the research draws on interviews with doctoral students and institutional documents to explore the ways in which supervision operates as both a pedagogical and relational practice. **Results.** The findings show that beyond traditional academic guidance, supervisors fostered learning and identity formation through collaborative authorship, group-based supervision, reflexive mentoring, and adaptive approaches responsive to individual trajectories. These innovations reduced isolation, strengthened confidence, and facilitated integration into scholarly communities. The study concludes that innovative supervision enhances resilience and independence while preparing doctoral students to participate more fully in global academic life. **Scientific Novelty.** The study reconceptualizes supervision as a pedagogical and innovative practice in a non-Western context that shapes researcher identity in doctoral education. **Practical Significance.** It shows how innovative supervisory practices in a non-Western context foster researcher identity and offer universities strategies to make doctoral education more student-centered, inclusive, and internationally relevant.

Keywords: doctoral supervision, innovative mentoring, researcher identity, social sciences, doctoral socialization, higher education.

Introduction. Doctoral education is widely recognized as the highest level of academic training, preparing graduates not only to conduct independent research but also to contribute to knowledge creation, institutional development, and broader societal progress. In addition to mastering research methodologies, doctoral students undergo a process of professional socialization that shapes them into members of the academic community. This socialization involves learning the norms, values, and practices of scholarship while developing an identity as an independent researcher (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018; Sverdlik et al., 2018). In the social sciences, where reflexivity, critical engagement, and theoretical contributions are fundamental, this process takes on a particular complexity. Students must learn to position

themselves within contested epistemologies, balance methodological rigor with interpretive depth, and articulate their scholarly voices.

At the center of this process lies doctoral supervision. Supervisors are often described as the most significant influence on doctoral students' progress, shaping their academic development, professional opportunities, and even psychological well-being (Lee, 2008; Wisker, 2021). Traditionally, supervision has been conceptualized as academic oversight, focused on monitoring research design and evaluating dissertation progress. However, recent scholarship emphasizes that supervision extends far beyond technical guidance. It also encompasses mentoring, modeling academic values, fostering resilience, and facilitating integration into scholarly communities.

Effective supervisors serve as role models, collaborators, and gatekeepers, introducing students to networks of knowledge production and professional practice.

The past two decades have seen growing interest in innovative forms of supervision that challenge hierarchical, individualized models. Collaborative authorship has emerged as a powerful practice, giving students early exposure to academic publishing and accelerating their integration into research communities (Pyhältö et al., 2019). Group supervision, increasingly adopted in universities worldwide, reduces student isolation, fosters peer learning, and creates collective spaces of reflexivity (Guerin et al., 2015; Samara, 2021). Reflexive mentoring has been emphasized in the social sciences, where identity formation is central to the research process; supervisors are encouraged to support students' self-awareness and critical reflection (Manathunga, 2019). Adaptive supervision, meanwhile, tailors approaches to students' prior experience, linguistic backgrounds, and professional aspirations, reflecting the diversity of doctoral cohorts in contemporary higher education (Barnes & Austin, 2021; Cotterall, 2021).

Despite this growing body of literature, most research has been conducted in established Western systems, particularly in Europe, Australia, and North America. Less is known about how innovative supervisory practices are enacted in hybrid, non-Western research environments. International research universities in such settings provide a particularly valuable lens: they adopt global academic standards - such as English-medium instruction, international publishing requirements, and peer-reviewed assessments - while operating within local cultural, institutional, and political contexts. These universities function at the intersection of global and local practices, creating both opportunities and tensions in doctoral education. They also serve as important laboratories for examining how supervision adapts to new conditions and how innovations are introduced to support doctoral students in diverse environments.

This article investigates supervision in the social sciences at an international research

university in a non-Western context. It pays particular attention to the ways in which supervision is enacted as a site of innovation that supports both academic success and the development of researcher identity. By focusing on supervisory practices, the study addresses a critical dimension of doctoral education that directly affects completion rates, student well-being, and the production of high-quality research. More broadly, it responds to international debates on how doctoral education can be reimagined to be more student-centered, inclusive, and responsive to the challenges of global higher education.

The analysis draws on two influential frameworks. The first is Weidman et al.'s (2001) theory of graduate student socialization, which conceptualizes doctoral education as a staged process unfolding across anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal dimensions. The second is Akerlind's (2008) model of researcher identity development, which emphasizes the gradual achievement of independence, confidence, and recognition as central to becoming an academic researcher. By applying these frameworks in a new and underexplored context, the study extends theoretical understandings of how socialization occurs under hybrid conditions. It also demonstrates how supervision - particularly in its innovative forms - serves as a mechanism that bridges global standards with local realities.

In doing so, the article makes two contributions. First, it provides empirical evidence from an internationalized but non-Western higher education environment, thereby filling an important gap in the literature. Second, it highlights how innovative supervisory practices - such as collaborative authorship, group supervision, reflexive mentoring, and adaptive guidance - function as catalysts for researcher identity formation and long-term academic development. These findings hold significance not only for social sciences doctoral programs but also for universities worldwide that are seeking to internationalize and improve the quality of doctoral education.

Materials and Methods. This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the role of supervision in doctoral

education in the social sciences at an international research university operating within a hybrid higher education system. Case study methodology was chosen because it allows for an in-depth examination of complex socialization processes within their natural settings, while also enabling the researcher to capture the interplay between institutional structures and individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Priya, 2021). A case study approach was particularly appropriate in this context, as the research sought to understand how supervision is practiced and perceived in an institution that blends Western-oriented academic standards with local cultural traditions.

The institutional context is characterized by several distinctive features. It follows an English-medium curriculum and applies international benchmarks for doctoral training, such as publication requirements, peer-reviewed assessments, and structured progression milestones. At the same time, it recruits a diverse student body, including individuals with professional careers, varied disciplinary backgrounds, and multiple linguistic repertoires. This combination created a rich setting in which supervisory practices had to be both academically rigorous and responsive to diverse student trajectories.

The study drew on semi-structured interviews with eleven doctoral students enrolled in social sciences programs. Participants represented different cohorts and stages of study, ranging from first-year students who were still navigating supervisory relationships to advanced candidates preparing for dissertation completion. This variety ensured that perspectives reflected the full span of the doctoral journey. Students also varied in demographic background: some entered the program directly after master's study, while others came with significant professional experience; some were early-career academics, while others were mid-career professionals seeking academic advancement. Gender balance was also maintained, reflecting the diversity of the student population.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection because

they provide both structure and flexibility. The interview protocol included open-ended questions about students' supervisory experiences, the nature of feedback received, the extent of academic and emotional support, opportunities for collaboration, and reflections on identity development. Follow-up questions were used to probe specific experiences and clarify meanings. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted either in person or via secure online platforms, depending on participants' availability. All interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reporting. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review committee, and participants were informed of their rights, including voluntary participation and the option to withdraw at any time.

In addition to interviews, institutional documents were analyzed, including doctoral handbooks, supervision guidelines, and policy statements. Document analysis provided insight into the formal expectations placed on supervisors and students, and offered a way to compare institutional rhetoric with student experiences (Bowen, 2009). This triangulation of data sources strengthened the validity of the study by allowing convergence of evidence across interviews and texts.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Braun et al., 2022). Initial codes were generated inductively and grouped into categories representing academic guidance, mentoring, networking, and innovative supervisory practices. Themes were refined iteratively and validated against existing supervision literature (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018; Pyhältö et al., 2021). To ensure credibility, researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the study (Berger, 2015), and coding decisions were revisited collaboratively. This methodological approach aligns with international scholarship emphasizing that supervision should be studied as both a structural and relational practice in doctoral education (Gardner & Doore, 2020; Skakni et al., 2025).

Results. The findings reveal that supervisors play a central role in shaping doctoral education in the social sciences. Their influence extended well beyond traditional academic oversight, encompassing mentorship, professional networking, and the introduction of innovative supervisory practices that directly contributed to doctoral students' identity development as emerging researchers. Four interrelated themes emerged: supervisors as academic guides, mentors, networkers, and innovators.

Supervisors as Academic Guides. Supervisors were first and foremost described as academic guides who supported the intellectual and methodological rigor of students' projects. They provided assistance in refining research design, selecting appropriate theoretical frameworks, and making methodological decisions suited to complex social science research. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of timely, detailed, and constructive feedback, which not only enhanced the quality of dissertation chapters but also boosted students' confidence as scholars.

For many students, this guidance represented the bridge between theoretical understanding and practical execution of research. Supervisors were valued for their ability to challenge assumptions, push students to deepen arguments, and ensure alignment with disciplinary conventions. Importantly, the role of academic guide was not static. Over time, supervisors adjusted their expectations, gradually reducing direct oversight as students gained competence. This shift allowed students to transition from dependent apprentices to independent researchers, confirming the supervisory process as a scaffolded journey toward autonomy.

Supervisors as Mentors. Supervisors were also consistently described as mentors, whose roles extended into the emotional and psychological domains of doctoral education. Participants explained that supervisors' encouragement was critical during moments of self-doubt, such as during the challenges of data collection, analysis, or dissertation writing. Mentorship often included motivational conversations, reminders of long-term goals, and consistent modeling of academic integrity and resilience.

The dual role of supervisors - as both intellectual challengers and empathetic supporters - proved particularly valuable in sustaining doctoral students' motivation. Supervisors who balanced high academic standards with empathy helped students navigate the inevitable pressures of doctoral study. Mentoring was therefore seen not as a secondary aspect of supervision, but as an essential complement to academic guidance. This echoes existing international studies that highlight supervision as both a cognitive and emotional practice (Bastalich, 2017; Wisker, 2021, 2023).

A notable finding was that mentoring practices varied depending on students' backgrounds. Early-career students often needed reassurance and confidence-building, whereas mid-career professionals valued supervisors' ability to help them integrate professional expertise into academic research. Supervisors' sensitivity to these differences further underscored the multifaceted and adaptive nature of mentoring in doctoral education.

Supervisors as Networkers. Another critical dimension of supervision involved supervisors' active role in professional networking. Supervisors encouraged students to attend and present at international conferences, often providing guidance in proposal development and presentation strategies. They introduced students to colleagues abroad, recommended them for collaborative projects, and provided opportunities to co-teach or co-research. These practices significantly expanded students' professional visibility and strengthened their sense of belonging within the global academic community.

For students situated in a hybrid higher education environment, where access to international academic circles may otherwise be limited, supervisors' facilitation of networking opportunities was particularly impactful. Students described conference presentations and international collaborations as transformative experiences that shifted their identities from local students to globally engaged scholars. This confirmed earlier findings in the literature that supervision plays a decisive role in students' academic integration and future career trajectories (Pyhältö et al., 2019).

Networking practices also helped students acquire essential skills for academic careers, such as collaboration, interdisciplinary communication, and dissemination of research findings to diverse audiences. In this way, supervisors' role as networkers extended supervision beyond the immediate dissertation project to long-term career development.

Supervisors as Innovators. The most striking finding was the extent to which supervision was characterized by innovative practices that moved beyond traditional models of one-to-one academic oversight. Four specific practices were identified: collaborative authorship, group supervision, reflexive mentoring, and adaptive supervision.

Collaborative Authorship. Many supervisors engaged in co-writing scholarly articles with their doctoral students. This practice was described as one of the most impactful innovations, as it provided direct exposure to the norms of academic publishing and allowed students to gain confidence in disseminating their work. Collaborative authorship not only accelerated integration into scholarly communities but also signaled recognition of students as legitimate contributors to the field. Students emphasized that writing alongside supervisors helped them internalize standards of argumentation, structure, and clarity that are difficult to achieve through feedback alone.

Group Supervision. Another innovation involved the use of group supervision formats, where supervisors convened multiple students for joint meetings. These sessions created peer-learning environments in which students could share progress, exchange constructive feedback, and reflect collectively on challenges. Group supervision helped normalize struggles such as writer's block or methodological difficulties, reducing the isolation often associated with doctoral study. It also encouraged interdisciplinary exchange, as students from different social science fields compared approaches and insights. This practice resonated strongly with international findings on the benefits of peer learning and collective reflexivity in doctoral education (Samara, 2021; Guerin et al., 2015).

Reflexive Mentoring. Supervisors also encouraged students to critically examine their researcher identities, positioning supervision as a reflective as well as technical process. Reflexive mentoring involved guiding students to articulate their motivations, values, and scholarly aspirations. This reflective element helped students connect their personal experiences with their academic projects, reinforcing their identity as independent scholars. It also equipped them with resilience, as they were better able to navigate setbacks by framing challenges as part of their professional growth.

Adaptive Supervision. Finally, supervisors demonstrated adaptability by tailoring their approaches to students' individual needs. Students from non-English speaking backgrounds received structured guidance on academic writing, while those with prior research or publication experience were given greater autonomy. Similarly, supervisors adjusted their practices for students balancing doctoral study with professional responsibilities, offering flexible deadlines or personalized forms of feedback. Adaptive supervision reflected a student-centered paradigm that valued inclusivity and recognized diversity in doctoral cohorts (Barnes & Austin, 2021; Cotterall, 2021).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that supervision in the social sciences was experienced as a complex and multifaceted process that combined intellectual, relational, and professional dimensions. Supervisors were not only academic guides but also mentors, networkers, and innovators. The emergence of innovative practices - particularly collaborative authorship, group supervision, reflexive mentoring, and adaptive supervision - marked supervision as a dynamic and transformative force in doctoral education. These innovations facilitated dissertation completion, reduced isolation, enhanced academic confidence, and strengthened students' researcher identities, thereby preparing them for long-term participation in the global academic community.

Discussion. The findings underscore that supervision in the social sciences is not a static or uniform process but a multidimensional practice that integrates intellectual, relational,

and professional dimensions. While supervisors have traditionally been viewed primarily as academic guides who ensure the quality and rigor of doctoral work, this study demonstrates that their role is increasingly characterized by innovative practices that enhance doctoral students' socialization and researcher identity development. These findings provide fresh insights into how doctoral education operates in hybrid higher education contexts, where global academic norms intersect with local cultural and institutional realities.

In terms of innovations in supervisory practice, *collaborative authorship* exemplifies the shift from hierarchical supervision to partnership. In this study, joint publication with supervisors provided students with early entry into academic publishing, helping them to internalize scholarly conventions while simultaneously gaining recognition as legitimate contributors to their fields. This practice challenges traditional apprenticeship models where students were expected to publish independently only after completing their dissertations. It resonates with international research emphasizing the importance of early integration into scholarly communities of practice (Pyhältö et al., 2019). In many Western contexts, such as in Europe and North America, co-authorship is now widely recognized as a critical mechanism for supporting doctoral completion and employability. The findings here confirm that this practice is equally valuable in hybrid contexts, where students must navigate both local expectations and international publishing standards.

Group supervision represents another important innovation. Beyond efficiency gains, group supervision created collective spaces of learning that countered the isolation frequently reported by doctoral students (Sverdlik et al., 2018). The findings show that such arrangements enabled peer-to-peer feedback, collaborative problem-solving, and the normalization of challenges such as writer's block or methodological dilemmas. These practices align with global trends toward peer learning and co-construction of knowledge (Samara, 2021; Guerin et al., 2015). Importantly, in the

hybrid setting examined here, group supervision also served as a culturally inclusive practice. Students from diverse backgrounds described these sessions as valuable opportunities to share experiences and perspectives, thereby reducing asymmetries often present in cross-cultural supervision. This suggests that group supervision is not only a pedagogical innovation but also an equity-enhancing mechanism in international doctoral programs.

Reflexive mentoring highlights the importance of supervision in fostering critical self-awareness and researcher identity formation. In social sciences research, reflexivity is not only a methodological stance but also a core component of scholarly identity. By encouraging students to interrogate their values, positionalities, and motivations, supervisors enabled them to align personal aspirations with academic goals. The findings show that this reflexive dimension strengthened resilience, nurtured authenticity in scholarly practice, and fostered long-term engagement with academia. These outcomes echo calls for doctoral education that foregrounds identity work alongside technical skill development (Manathunga, 2019; Xu & Hjalmarson, 2022). Internationally, reflexive mentoring has been found to help students navigate the emotional complexities of doctoral work, particularly in social sciences fields where personal experience often intersects with academic inquiry.

Adaptive supervision further illustrates the shift toward student-centered doctoral education. Supervisors in this study adjusted their practices according to students' prior experiences, linguistic repertoires, and professional goals. For instance, novice researchers or students from non-English-speaking backgrounds received more structured and detailed feedback, while experienced students were offered greater autonomy. Such flexibility reflects a growing recognition in the literature that doctoral cohorts are increasingly heterogeneous (Cotterall, 2021; Barnes & Austin, 2021). In hybrid international contexts, adaptive supervision is particularly significant, as it mediates between global academic expectations and local cultural and institutional realities. It ensures that

diverse students are supported equitably, while also upholding international benchmarks for doctoral training.

Theoretical Implications. Theoretically, these findings extend and refine existing models of doctoral socialization and researcher identity. Weidman et al.'s (2001) framework conceptualizes doctoral education as a staged process - anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal - leading to socialization into academic communities. The evidence from this study suggests that innovative supervision practices blur these stages. Collaborative authorship, for example, combines formal learning (academic writing for publication), informal mentoring (joint reflection on arguments), and personal development (confidence building). Similarly, group supervision integrates formal oversight with informal peer learning and social support. These findings indicate that in hybrid contexts, socialization is less linear and more overlapping, shaped by relational innovations in supervision.

Akerlind's (2008) framework emphasizes progression toward independence, confidence, and recognition as key dimensions of researcher identity. The findings of this study challenge the assumption that independence is achieved primarily through gradual autonomy. Instead, they suggest that independence can be fostered through collaborative, innovative, and context-sensitive practices. Independence emerges not as separation from supervisors but as co-construction of identity through shared authorship, collective learning, and reflexive mentoring. This reconceptualization enriches theoretical understandings of doctoral supervision by highlighting the relational pathways through which identity is formed. Taken together, the findings suggest that doctoral supervision in hybrid contexts should be understood as a process of relational innovation, where traditional roles are reconfigured through practices that simultaneously support, challenge, and empower students.

Policy and Practical Implications. From a policy perspective, the study highlights several imperatives for universities seeking to strengthen doctoral education. First, institutions should formally recognize and incentivize

innovative supervisory practices. Collaborative authorship, group supervision, and reflexive mentoring require significant investment of supervisors' time and effort. Without institutional acknowledgment - through workload models, recognition in performance evaluations, or supervisory awards - supervisors may lack incentives to adopt such approaches.

Second, supervisor training programs should move beyond a narrow focus on technical guidance to include relational and innovative dimensions. Training should equip supervisors with skills in group facilitation, cross-cultural communication, and reflexive mentoring. Evidence from international contexts suggests that such training enhances both student satisfaction and doctoral completion rates (Debray et al., 2024). Third, doctoral programs in hybrid contexts should adopt flexible policies that support adaptive supervision. This includes providing supervisors with resources to manage diverse student cohorts and ensuring that institutional structures - such as progression requirements or publication expectations - are responsive to the realities of students' varied backgrounds.

Finally, the findings highlight the importance of culturally sensitive supervision in internationalized universities. Supervisors who adopt reflexive and adaptive practices help reconcile tensions between global standards and local traditions, ensuring that doctoral education is both internationally competitive and locally meaningful.

Limitations. Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the data were drawn from a single international research university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other institutional or cultural contexts. While the hybrid environment provided a rich site for exploring innovative supervision, results may differ in national universities or in institutions with less international orientation. Second, the study relied primarily on students' perspectives. While these accounts are valuable, they capture only one side of the supervisory relationship. Supervisors' perspectives on their own practices, including the challenges and constraints they face, would provide a

more holistic understanding. Third, the study was cross-sectional, capturing supervisory experiences at a single point in time. Doctoral supervision and researcher identity, however, are dynamic processes that evolve across the doctoral journey. Longitudinal research would therefore be valuable for understanding how supervisory relationships and innovations develop over time.

Conclusion. This study highlights the central role of supervision in doctoral education in the social sciences, demonstrating that it is a multidimensional practice integrating intellectual guidance, mentoring, professional networking, and innovative approaches to student development. Supervision in this study was found to extend beyond conventional academic oversight, encompassing practices such as collaborative authorship, group-based learning, reflexive mentoring, and adaptive strategies tailored to the needs of diverse doctoral cohorts. These innovations significantly contributed to doctoral students' researcher identity formation, academic confidence, and readiness for engagement in international scholarly communities. The study also shows that independence and scholarly recognition can be nurtured not only through gradual autonomy but also through collaborative and context-sensitive supervisory practices. This

reconceptualization positions supervision as a dynamic, relational, and culturally adaptive process that is especially relevant in hybrid, internationalized higher education settings.

At the practical level, the findings point to the importance of institutional support for innovative supervision. Universities seeking to strengthen and internationalize their doctoral programs should recognize supervision as a multifaceted activity requiring not only technical expertise but also relational skills, cultural sensitivity, and reflexive approaches. Policy measures that incentivize collaborative authorship, group supervision, and adaptive mentoring, while embedding structured supervisor development programs, can enhance student outcomes and strengthen institutional reputations in the global higher education landscape. Ultimately, this study underscores that doctoral supervision is both a form of academic training and a transformative process of identity construction. By embracing innovative, student-centered practices, supervisors can foster resilience, confidence, and a strong sense of belonging among doctoral candidates. As higher education systems worldwide continue to grapple with globalization and diversification, such practices will be essential for building sustainable, inclusive, and internationally relevant doctoral education.

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