



Eliminating barriers to postgraduate research study in the West Midlands



BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

04. DOCTORAL SUPERVISION: STRUCTURAL, CULTURAL & INTERSECTIONAL INSIGHTS

THAT'S ME!

ELIMINATING BARRIERS TO
POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDY
IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

Dr Eli Ashong
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the That's Me! Project's commitment to eliminating barriers to doctoral education, research on supervisor experiences reveals factors that shape those experiences and, in turn, influence PGRs' experiences during doctoral study at Birmingham City University (BCU).

This report synthesises qualitative insights from university staff doctoral supervisors and senior academic staff, framed within the context of the University's Supervisor Policy. The analysis explores how supervisory practices are shaped by institutional structures, and inconsistencies within discipline-based organisational units revealing tensions between policy intentions and lived practice.

Structural and institutional challenges are evident in uneven supervisory structures, variable training provision, and persistent policy–practice gaps (UKCGE, 2021, 2024; Times Higher Education, 2021). While policies are “excellent on paper,” they are inconsistently enacted across discipline-based organisational units. Despite evidence of good practice, capacity issues, including staff turnover, workload intensification, and limited managerial support, undermine sustained engagement in supervisory training. Leadership turnover, shifting institutional priorities, and post-COVID 19 disruptions have weakened established supervision provisions. Policy–practice disconnection remains a significant concern: while the supervisor policy framework is comprehensive in principle, its implementation is inconsistent. These issues show that institutional fragility often leads to unequal academic practices.

Supervisor development is further constrained by low engagement with training initiatives. Established academics often resist participation due to perceived irrelevance, lack of incentives, and unclear ownership of training across institutional levels (faculty, school, and college). Guerin et al. (2015) emphasise that sustainable supervisory development requires embedded institutional commitment, reflective practice, and ongoing peer learning, rather than compliance-based attendance.

Supervision is not a culturally neutral process, and interviews highlight the intersectional dimensions of doctoral supervision, where lived experiences, social identities, and cultural expectations of Global Majority and international students shape supervisory relationships and PGR outcomes (Crenshaw, 1989; Mirza, 2015). Supervisors also recognised the importance of explicit dialogue to counter unspoken assumptions and hidden hierarchies within supervisory interactions.

To enhance doctoral supervision, the report recommends:

- (1) strengthening institutional structures by standardising training and embedding it in organisational units;
- (2) enhancing intersectional competency through targeted cultural and pedagogical training;

(3) improving communication and transparency by providing comprehensive handbooks for students and supervisors; and

(4) fostering reflective Communities of Practice that are institutionally recognised and resourced.

These steps would align supervisory practice with institutional equity goals and the evolving needs of doctoral education.

Doctoral supervision within the institution demonstrates strong commitment but inconsistent enactment. Structural constraints, unequal training provision, and unaddressed intersectional barriers collectively shape the doctoral experience. Equitable and inclusive supervision demands institutional accountability, cultural reflexivity, and sustained investment in supervisor development as a core aspect of academic and social justice practice.

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