



Advice for PhD supervisors and supervisory teams when supervising Black and Ethnically Minoritised (BEM) students

The Decolonising DMU team have pulled together a range of resources to support students, academics and professional services staff in thinking about their work, in relation to the ethos of decolonising and anti-racism. These resources are available at:

<https://www.dmu.ac.uk/community/decolonising/publications-and-resources.aspx>

In terms of research, there is a [self-audit tool](#) available for research Institutes/Centres, and this includes a checklist of questions focused upon PGR work.

However, it has become clear that providing advice for supervisors and supervisory teams when supervising BEM students would be useful. A series of principles are listed and developed below, for you to consider. Students have argued that these principles are best considered within supervisory teams as a self-reflection process during the initial stages of the PhD journey. They are designed to support teams in considering what they need as individuals, and as a group, from the supervision relationship, and how to manage expectations. Then, as time and the relationships develop, principles can be extended and amended according to their own experience.

Using this at the beginning of the journey mitigates against the PGR process being a series of isolated or transactional engagements, and will (hopefully) be empowering. Students can refer to it directly before/after supervisions as well, in order to see what principles they can add (to). They can then share their insights with supervisors, in order to predicate supervisions around relationality, mutuality and dignity.

This aligns with the [Decolonising DMU Working Position](#), which centres the following, as a movement of dignity:

- Diversify the syllabus, canon, curriculum, infrastructure and staff;
- Decentre knowledge and knowledge production away from the global North;
- Devalue hierarchies and revalue relationality;
- Disinvest from power structures that reinforce metrics, citations and rankings; and
- Diminish some voices and opinions that have predominated, and magnify those that have been unheard.

Principle 1: Get to know your students

The PhD journey is long and tedious and your conversations don't have to always be centred strictly on PhD stuff. Spare a few minutes during the supervision to check in on your students- how their week has been, any obstacles that you can support them with and just learning more about your students' interests. If you know they celebrate a particular festival then send them well wishes! These small gestures make students feel valued and enable a sense of belonging.

Become more attuned to the concept of Intersectionality in the context of getting to know your students through the multiple identity markers they may occupy. A person may share commonalities with another based on for example race/class/gender/faith but the individual lived experience/perspective is far too unique for people within those categories to think the same. Supervisors should be mindful of the harms in categorising students into rigid structures and sometimes well-meaning intentions can be problematic.

Principle 2: Consider your use of language

There is significant new information that students are expected to absorb when undertaking the PhD. This can make students hesitant to reach out and let you know they haven't quite understood something. During supervisions and even in email correspondence be mindful of the choice of your words- is it accessible or marginalising? As an example, explain what your own understanding is of key concepts such as ontology, epistemology, paradigms and relevant frameworks, and how it can be connected to your student's research. You could even develop a glossary of key terms to share with students.

Principle 3: Combat imposter syndrome by modelling BEM students' work

When highlighting examples of previous students' work it is important to showcase the work of BEM students rather than only White students. Unique connections are made through lived experience, narratives and positionality which creates a sense of belonging for students to develop the mindset that they too can do this, and do it well; this can help reduce feelings of isolation and being overwhelmed with feelings of 'otherness' and being 'outsiders'. Research on race and racism although conducted by white students cannot replicate the importance of BEM lived experience and (counter) storytelling.

Principle 4: Direct students to resources that are not just restricted to journal articles/books

Journal articles can be really heavy to read during the initial stages of the PhD journey- can this information be accessed through other more digestible formats such as podcasts or videos or websites? If you are introducing your students to methodological approaches does it have to be through a dense journal article/textbook or could you find a reliable Youtube video that summarises the key points?

Principle 5: Be open to the critique of western knowledge production, ontologies and epistemologies

PhD students are expected to demonstrate a clear understanding of their ontological and epistemological positionality. Traditional paradigms are problematic as they are Eurocentric and do not acknowledge credible perspectives from the global south. Suggest and encourage reading around disruption of knowledge production so students don't feel compelled to push forward paradigms that do not subscribe to their views of truth and



reality. See works by Vanessa Andreotti, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Walter Dignolo and Catherine Thompson, amongst others (listed in the [Decolonising DMU Working Position](#)). This work is empowering to students who otherwise feel compelled/conflicted to use particular traditional paradigms. Students have focused upon the need to centre and discuss work that: is not based on extractive research relationships; does not use hegemonic theory and methods; enables grassroots, community learning; frames participatory methodologies; enables horizontal and intersectional approaches.

Principle 6: Compassionate pedagogy

Create a learning environment which recognises the structural inequalities for marginalised students and ensure that your interactions with students are based on kindness, dignity and promote wellbeing. Centre your dialogue and listening to respect the dignity of difference by recognising power dynamics within supervisions. Sometimes deadlines aren't always met- let your students know it is OK for this to happen but keep an eye on this, if it is happening repetitively then offer support to the student and try to make work more manageable for them. This may mean speaking to their work managers about workload allocation or providing a safe space to listen to students' who may be going through personal crises. This dialogic and non-judgemental approach enables the formation of: emancipatory education; education as the practice of freedom; and supervisions as radical spaces of possibility (bell hooks 1994).

Principle 7: Peer support

Introduce your students to other BEM PhD students and offer opportunities for students to develop their own support network if they wish to take this forward. They can use this opportunity to perhaps meet and discuss once a month how they are finding supervisions, share resources and use this time to address issues collectively and build connections with each other.

Principle 8: Writing for publication

Support your students by involving them in co-authoring journal articles with you. This can be extremely daunting for your students initially and they may resist as they are not feeling confident or able enough but let them know they can still be involved by putting forward their ideas and thoughts and contributions rather than writing out whole chapters. Take it slowly and appreciate their input, however small it may begin with.

Principle 9: Academic skills development

Are you offering enough support for students to master their academic skills development? Signpost students to relevant DC training or even the LLS workshops-there are some really useful workshops which offer support on academic writing and study skills for PhD students-it is useful to liaise with LLS staff to know when these workshops will take place so you can highlight these to students.



Principle 10: respect the need for positionality to be articulated

For some researchers, developing a positionality statement is a fundamental moment of dignity and self-respect in the PhD process. Potentially, these might be included in the thesis or publications, and should be celebrated as a core component of the originality of the work. This enables the researcher to centre their unique identity, and how this has influenced their worldview. This is core in the participative, co-production of ways of knowing the world, and it develops an acceptance of the dignity of difference.

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