

PhD International Mobility: Perspectives from Students and Supervisors

Rosalia Camporeale, Vilhelm Malmborg and Leandro Iannacone, *LTH*

Abstract— International mobility is increasingly integrated into doctoral education, offering PhD students opportunities to broaden academic perspectives, expand professional networks, and engage with diverse research environments. However, the effectiveness of these exchanges depends on supervisory dynamics, institutional support, and students' adaptability to new academic and cultural contexts.

This study explores the experiences of exchange PhD students and their supervisors, focusing on supervision styles, academic integration, and the institutional mechanisms that facilitate or hinder productive exchanges. Through semi-structured interviews with both incoming and outgoing PhD students, as well as supervisors hosting international researchers, we analyze expectations, supervision practices, and the role of institutional support in shaping exchange outcomes.

Findings highlight the importance of structured pre-departure planning, proactive and flexible supervision, and clear institutional frameworks. While exchanges foster academic and professional growth, challenges remain concerning supervision, research autonomy, and logistics. The study underscores the need for balance between independence and guidance to enhance learning, research productivity, and collaboration in PhD mobility.

Index Terms — PhD exchange, doctoral supervision, research collaboration, academic integration.

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

INTERNATIONAL mobility has become an increasingly important component of doctoral education, promoted through initiatives such as Erasmus+ to foster collaboration, knowledge exchange, and cultural understanding (Horta et al., 2021; European Commission, n.d.). Universities encourage PhD students to spend part of their studies abroad to enhance research competence and employability, yet participation remains limited due to funding, information gaps, and administrative complexity (Universities UK International, 2016).

In the Nordic region, international exchange is well established within doctoral training. A Danish study found that more than 75% of PhD students valued the opportunity to study abroad, viewing mobility as a natural part of a scientific career (Sörlin et al., 2006). Research also highlights how mobility supports access to leading infrastructures, fieldwork opportunities, and personal development, including improved language skills, professional networking, and confidence in tackling new challenges (Kyvik et al., 1999).

Supervision quality is widely recognized as a decisive factor in doctoral success and becomes even more critical in

an international exchange context (Lee, 2017). Doctoral education typically follows an apprenticeship model in which the supervisor guides the junior researcher. Supportive and responsive supervision enhances engagement and productivity (Khuram et al., 2023), while mismatched expectations or limited cross-cultural understanding can hinder progress. Supervisory approaches must therefore be flexible and culturally aware when working with visiting doctoral researchers.

Existing research on international doctoral education mainly addresses full-degree mobility, leaving limited understanding of short-term PhD exchanges and the interplay between supervisory practices and institutional frameworks (Horta, 2021; Bahtilla, 2022; van den Hoven & Connell, 2016; Bendrups et al., 2021). Evidence suggests that effective exchanges rely on clearly defined roles between home and host supervisors, structured supervision plans, and regular communication among all parties (van den Hoven & Connell, 2016). Prior collaboration between the two supervisors and strong informal interaction with local research groups further contribute to successful outcomes (Horta et al., 2021).

Challenges often arise when host supervisors have limited time for discussion or when communication barriers impede feedback (Bahtilla, 2022). Differences in institutional systems, administrative procedures, and funding structures can also complicate exchanges (Lezzerini & Hanks, 2016). Universities with dedicated support frameworks—such as orientation sessions, co-supervision agreements, and language or cultural preparation—are more likely to create positive experiences and sustain research continuity (European University Association, 2015).

Against this background, this study explores how supervision practices and institutional support shape the experiences of international PhD exchanges from both student and supervisor perspectives. Semi-structured interviews with incoming and outgoing PhD students, as well as supervisors hosting international researchers, provide insights into expectations, supervisory relationships, and institutional mechanisms that enable or constrain successful mobility.

II. METHODOLOGY

To explore experiences of doctoral supervision during international mobility, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with an equal number of *incoming and outgoing PhD students and supervisors at Lund University*. The distribution included three supervisors with experience hosting visiting PhD researchers, three incoming students conducting research stays in Sweden, and three outgoing

students who had completed exchanges abroad. Participants represented a range of academic disciplines, research areas, and international backgrounds.

Interviews were conducted both in person and online, each lasting 30–45 minutes. They followed a semi-structured format, guided by a shared framework while allowing open discussion and reflection. Conversations were transcribed or documented through detailed notes and analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to supervision, institutional support, and academic integration.

The interview guide was organised around five key themes:

- (1) *Expectations and preparation*, exploring motivations, pre-departure information, and early adaptation;
- (2) *Support mechanisms*, including institutional and informal resources for academic and social integration;
- (3) *Supervisory dynamics*, focusing on communication, meeting frequency, and the relationship between home and host supervisors;
- (4) *Impact on research*, examining effects on progress, networking, and outcomes; and
- (5) *Reflections and advice*, where participants discussed lessons learned and recommendations for improving supervision and mobility arrangements.

This approach provided complementary perspectives from both students and supervisors, capturing the diverse academic and cultural dimensions that shape the quality of international PhD exchanges.

III. FINDINGS

Interviews revealed shared views among supervisors and students on the importance of preparation, supervision, and institutional support in shaping international PhD exchanges. Despite differences in role or context, all participants emphasized that *clear expectations, proactive communication, and early planning* are crucial for successful experiences.

Supervisors expected incoming students to contribute actively to research projects and integrate within research groups, while encouraging outgoing students to broaden professional networks and gain new perspectives. Outgoing students often entered exchanges anticipating intensive research engagement, though expectations sometimes shifted toward more observational learning, particularly at later PhD stages. Even so, participants valued the experience for the insights, networking opportunities, and exposure to new academic cultures it provided. As one student noted, “*I was positively surprised by how much interaction I had with my host supervisor.*” Structured pre-departure support—such as orientations, administrative guidance, and information on workplace culture—was seen as particularly beneficial.

Supervisory dynamics were central to academic progress and networking outcomes. Regular meetings, constructive feedback, and approachable supervisors enhanced students’ confidence, productivity, and sense of belonging. Students appreciated supervisors who maintained supportive contact throughout the exchange: “*It makes such a big difference when there’s proactive supervision and clear communication.*” Autonomy was also valued, especially

when paired with reassurance that help was available if needed.

Incoming students emphasized the benefits of accessible, engaged supervisors at the host institution. Frequent and open interactions with research groups not only clarified objectives and improved methodological understanding but also led to concrete outcomes such as publications or successful experiments. Professional networking naturally followed from these interactions, with students reporting that discussing their research in new settings strengthened both presentation skills and future collaborations: “*I talk about my research to so many people... it’s helping me learn how to present my work to others.*”

Institutional and social support proved equally important. Departments that offered structured orientations, help with accommodation or administrative procedures, and opportunities for informal integration fostered smoother adaptation. Regular group meetings, seminars, and social events promoted belonging and mitigated cultural barriers. Supervisors who encouraged collaboration with local PhD students helped reduce isolation: “*Preferably they work together with one of our doctoral students, so they don’t become isolated.*”

Participants collectively viewed exchanges as highly valuable for academic, professional, and personal growth. Supervisors described mobility as a catalyst for collaboration and intellectual stimulation: “*It’s incredibly stimulating for doctoral students to go somewhere else for a few weeks.*” Students reported greater research confidence, broader networks, and deeper methodological competence.

Common recommendations included: (1) *structured preparation* and clearer communication between home and host institutions; (2) *flexible supervision* that adapts to evolving research contexts; (3) *robust institutional support* for logistics and integration; and (4) *opportunities for structured learning*, such as short courses or methodological workshops, to enhance the educational value of exchanges.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Given the small sample, this study does not aim to produce statistical generalizations but rather to offer *qualitative insights* into how supervision and institutional practices shape international PhD exchanges. Despite its limited scope, the findings align with prior research (e.g., Bahtilla, 2022; van den Hoven & Connell, 2016) and provide useful directions for improving doctoral mobility.

Across all participants, experiences were *consistently positive*. Both incoming and outgoing students described their exchanges as enriching and professionally valuable, while supervisors viewed them as opportunities for collaboration and mutual learning. This coherence supports the idea that *mobility meaningfully contributes* to doctoral development.

Contrary to earlier studies highlighting cultural or linguistic barriers (Bahtilla, 2022), participants did not identify such obstacles as significant. The Swedish context—marked by strong English proficiency and international research environments—likely reduced potential integration challenges. Differences in supervision styles were generally perceived as learning opportunities rather than obstacles. However, these results may reflect

self-selection among participants who are already open and adaptable. Future research could test whether similar experiences apply across more diverse contexts.

A recurring theme was the *balance between structure and flexibility*. Participants emphasized clear agreements defining the roles of home and host supervisors, communication routines, and research expectations—echoing van den Hoven and Connell (2016)—while also stressing the need for adaptability as projects evolve. PhD students value structured supervision and defined goals but also autonomy to respond to changing research needs. Institutions might therefore adopt *adaptive supervision guidelines*, setting baseline expectations while allowing for case-specific adjustments in timelines, scope, or collaboration.

The importance of *structured preparation* was evident: students who received early guidance on logistics and research arrangements reported smoother transitions and faster integration. This was especially valuable for short exchanges, though even those with limited preparation managed to adapt through independent problem-solving. Coordinated planning can also extend beyond supervision, offering participation in courses, workshops, or seminars to enrich research skills and cross-disciplinary learning.

Finally, the study underscores the *complementary roles of formal and informal supervision*. Regular meetings with supervisors provided structure and accountability, while informal support from peers and research group members fostered integration, confidence, and well-being.

In conclusion, international PhD mobility emerges as a *mutually beneficial experience* that enhances both academic and personal development. Success depends on clear communication, adaptive supervision, and proactive institutional support—balancing structured frameworks with flexibility to ensure that doctoral exchanges continue to strengthen globally connected research training.

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