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Article

Understanding Asymmetry as a Structural Condition in International Cooperation and Doctoral Education

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Abstract

Internationalization has become a central feature of contemporary higher education, yet collaborations and doctoral training across institutional and cultural contexts often involve persistent asymmetries. While these are frequently interpreted as temporary coordination problems or individual adaptation challenges, less attention has been paid to how asymmetry is structurally produced and managed within everyday academic practice. This paper examines asymmetry as a structural condition shaping international academic cooperation and doctoral supervision. The study adopts a conceptual and practice-informed analytical approach based on two longitudinal situations at the University of Genoa (Italy): a capacity building partnership with a university in the Global South and the supervision of an international doctoral student within a biomedical research laboratory. Based on literature on internationalization, supervision, and academic development, the analysis explores how asymmetries emerge and evolve in practice. Across both cases, asymmetry became visible through misaligned temporalities, uneven distributions of responsibility, and adjustment processes that enabled collaboration and supervision to continue despite unresolved structural tensions. Stabilization occurred primarily through the redistribution of academic labor rather than through convergence of expectations or practices. These dynamics gradually contributed to the normalization, and partial invisibility, of asymmetry within everyday academic work. The paper argues that recognizing asymmetry as a structural feature of international academic engagement can support more reflexive and negotiation-oriented approaches to collaboration and doctoral education.

Keywords: academic development; doctoral supervision; international cooperation; internationalization of higher education; capacity building; structural asymmetry

1. Introduction

Internationalization has become a defining feature of contemporary higher education, shaping how institutions collaborate, how doctoral candidates are recruited, and how academic work is organized across borders. Policy frameworks and institutional discourses often portray internationalization as a largely positive and progressive process, emphasizing mobility, inclusion, and mutual capacity building (Kushnir & Yazgan, 2023). At the same time, a growing body of scholarship has shown that international academic engagements are frequently structured by asymmetrical relationships—between institutions, between epistemic traditions, and between expectations of responsibility and performance. These asymmetries are embedded in institutional routines, evaluation systems, and dominant academic norms. Existing research on international cooperation and doctoral education often interprets difficulties in collaboration through the lenses of miscommunication, cultural adjustment, or individual preparedness. While these perspectives offer valuable insights, they may overlook how asymmetries are produced and sustained through institutional arrangements and everyday academic practices. In particular, less attention has been paid to how asymmetry operates simultaneously at institutional and interpersonal levels and how it

is negotiated in practice—especially within non-English-speaking contexts and practice-intensive environments such as STEM laboratories, where supervision, experimental work, and accountability are closely intertwined. Building on these debates, this paper examines how asymmetry operates in practice within international academic cooperation and doctoral supervision. The analysis draws on two longitudinal situations at the University of Genoa (Italy). The first case concerns an institutional capacity-building partnership between a public university in Southern Europe and a university in Sub-Saharan Africa, developed within a framework of international academic cooperation (Collins et al., 2010; Yallem & Dipitso, 2022). The collaboration involved joint training initiatives and academic coordination activities aimed at strengthening teaching and research capacities. The second case focuses on the supervision of an international doctoral student within a biomedical research laboratory operating in a non-English-speaking institutional environment. Although these situations differ in scale and formal structure, both reveal persistent challenges in translating institutional intentions into effective collaboration and learning. In both cases, initial tensions emerged around communication, time management, and expectations of academic responsibility. These difficulties were initially interpreted as coordination problems or transitional challenges (Hansen et al., 2025). Over time, however, they revealed deeper misalignments related to epistemic assumptions, institutional design, and uneven distributions of responsibility. Importantly, stabilization did occur in both situations, yet not through the elimination of asymmetry. Rather, collaboration and supervision continued through processes of adjustment in which responsibilities, expectations, and temporal commitments were redistributed. In this process, asymmetry was not resolved but gradually normalized, often becoming less visible while requiring uneven forms of academic labor. Rather than treating asymmetry as a temporary dysfunction, this paper approaches it as a structural condition of international academic work. In both institutional cooperation and doctoral supervision, asymmetry operates through everyday practices that regulate time, distribute responsibility, and shape whose knowledge and efforts become central to sustaining collaboration. These dynamics rarely appear in formal policy frameworks but play a crucial role in how international academic engagement is experienced and maintained. By examining these processes across institutional cooperation and doctoral supervision, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on internationalization by shifting attention from outcomes to practices. Instead of asking whether collaboration or supervision “works,” we explore how asymmetry is enacted, negotiated, and normalized in everyday academic life. In doing so, the study offers a practice-informed perspective on how structural asymmetries shape international academic cooperation and doctoral education, particularly within non-English-speaking and practice-intensive institutional settings.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, practice-informed analytical approach to examine how asymmetry operates within international academic cooperation and doctoral supervision. Rather than seeking generalizable causal explanations, the analysis aims to generate conceptual insight from situated academic experience. The study draws on two longitudinal situations embedded in the authors’ professional practice at a large public university in Southern Europe. The first situation concerns a capacity-building partnership between a public university in Southern Europe and a university in Sub-Saharan Africa, developed within an international academic cooperation program aimed at strengthening teaching and research capacity. The collaboration involved academic coordination, training initiatives, and curriculum-related activities designed to support institutional development and research capacity. These activities were carried out by academic staff and institutional coordinators across the two institutions. The second situation concerns the supervision of an international doctoral student within a biomedical research laboratory operating in a non-English-speaking institutional context. The laboratory is a small experimental research group where doctoral training involves daily experimental work, methodological learning, and the progressive development of scientific autonomy under close supervision.

The two situations were selected not as representative cases but as analytically generative contexts in which asymmetries became visible through everyday academic practice. Both unfolded over several years and involved sustained interaction among supervisors, students, and institutional actors. The purpose of the analysis was therefore not to evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives but to understand how institutional arrangements, epistemic expectations, and professional roles shaped collaboration and supervision over time. The study adopts an interpretive and constructivist perspective, which views knowledge as situated and produced through engagement with practice rather than through detached observation (Taylor & Medina, 2013). Observations emerging from practice were interpreted through an abductive analytical process in which empirical experiences were examined in dialogue with existing literature on internationalization, doctoral supervision, and epistemic justice. Through this process, recurring analytical patterns were identified across the two situations, including temporal misalignment, redistribution of responsibility, adjustment practices, and the normalization of asymmetry. These patterns provided the analytical basis for the conceptual argument developed in this paper. As the authors were directly involved in the institutional contexts examined, reflexivity and positional awareness were central to the research process. One author participated in the institutional cooperation initiative, while the other was directly involved in doctoral supervision within the laboratory setting. Rather than treating insider perspectives as a limitation, the study approaches them as a source of insight into the everyday practices through which academic collaboration and supervision are sustained. Ethical considerations were addressed by anonymizing institutions and individuals and by focusing the analysis on structural dynamics rather than identifiable actors. The study therefore emphasizes institutional and relational processes rather than personal performance. The authors used generative artificial intelligence tools to assist with language editing and improving the clarity of the manuscript. No AI tools were used to generate data, perform analyses, or interpret the results. The authors remain fully responsible for the content of the paper.

3. Results

Case 1: Institutional asymmetry in international academic cooperation

In recent years, the University of Genoa has developed several academic partnerships with institutions in the Global South, including a capacity-building initiative with a public university in Sub-Saharan Africa. The initiative aimed to support institutional development through academic training activities, curriculum support, collaborative research initiatives in the life sciences, and institutional capacity-building activities related to postgraduate training, research dissemination, and the development of innovation-oriented competencies such as patenting and early-stage academic entrepreneurship. The cooperation involved academic staff from both institutions and included activities such as online and in-person training sessions, joint curriculum discussions, supervision of student research projects, and coordination of project reporting and evaluation requirements. The European partner coordinated the project and managed reporting requirements within the international funding framework, while the African partner focused primarily on local implementation and participation in training activities. At the outset, the cooperation was framed as a reciprocal and mutually beneficial collaboration grounded in shared academic goals and formal agreements (Teferra, 2012).

Emergence of asymmetry in practice

As the collaboration unfolded, persistent difficulties emerged in the everyday coordination of project activities. Communication cycles were often slow and irregular, joint planning meetings were difficult to schedule, and feedback on shared documents frequently arrived with significant delays. In practice, several operational responsibilities—including project monitoring, coordination of activities, and preparation of reports—gradually became concentrated on the European partner. This redistribution did not result from a formal decision but from repeated attempts to maintain project continuity when coordination slowed. Initially, these challenges were interpreted as common issues in early phases of international cooperation, often attributed to communication barriers or logistical

constraints (Hansen et al., 2025). However, as these patterns persisted over time, they suggested deeper structural differences in institutional organization and working practices (Bussotti & De Muti, 2013).

Structural rather than individual explanations

Further reflection revealed that many of these difficulties were linked to differences in institutional organization rather than to a lack of engagement. Academic calendars, administrative hierarchies, and decision-making processes at the partner institution shaped the pace and form of participation. For example, internal procedures often required several administrative steps before academic staff could formally engage with external project activities. This limited the degree of autonomous planning that local academics could undertake within the partnership. The cooperation model initially adopted—largely based on European planning norms emphasizing predefined milestones, reporting cycles, and rapid communication—proved only partially compatible with these institutional conditions. As documented in studies of North–South academic partnerships, such dynamics are often structurally embedded rather than accidental (Baud, 2002; Dannecker, 2022). Similar tensions have been observed in other capacity-building initiatives, including the Medical Education Partnership Initiative (MEPI) in Mozambique, where institutional constraints influenced the pace and form of collaboration despite strong project design (Noormahomed et al., 2013).

Analytical takeaway from Case 1

This case illustrates how international academic cooperation can function while remaining structurally asymmetric. Improvement and continuity were possible, but at the cost of unevenly distributed academic labor and responsibility. Asymmetry did not disappear; it became normalized and less visible. Rather than signaling failure, moments of friction served as diagnostic indicators, revealing whose assumptions structured the collaboration and how institutional conditions shaped what forms of cooperation were feasible. In this sense, the case highlights the limits of transfer-based models of international cooperation and underscores the need to treat asymmetry not as a temporary dysfunction, but as a structural condition requiring explicit recognition and ongoing negotiation.

Case 2: Asymmetry in doctoral supervision

A second form of asymmetry emerged within the context of doctoral supervision in a biomedical research laboratory in Italy. The doctoral candidate, trained in a non-European higher education system, entered the program with appropriate formal credentials and strong initial motivation. Supervision took place within a STEM research environment characterized by experimental work, laboratory routines, and implicit expectations of autonomy and scientific reasoning (Falletta et al., 2025). The laboratory itself is a small research group in which doctoral training is closely tied to everyday experimental practice, including the design of experiments, data interpretation, and collective discussion of results. At the institutional level, the PhD program formally welcomed international candidates; however, it was not structured as an international track, and its organizational design largely reflected national academic norms and language practices.

Emergence of asymmetry in practice

In the early phase of the doctoral trajectory, initial difficulties were interpreted as transitional and addressed through intensified supervision, mentoring, and stepwise integration into laboratory activities (Agasisti, 2019; Jordal et al., 2021). Over time, however, a more persistent pattern became visible. While the student regularly attended laboratory activities and completed assigned experimental tasks, progress remained largely procedural. Experimental protocols could be executed correctly, and formal requirements fulfilled, yet it remained difficult to engage with the conceptual rationale underlying the experiments or to independently formulate research questions and interpret results. Participation therefore did not consistently translate into conceptual understanding or scientific reasoning. Language and institutional design played a central role in shaping this dynamic. Although direct supervision and laboratory discussions were conducted in English, most mandatory activities within the doctoral program—seminars, lectures, and internal communications—were delivered in Italian. As a result, the student accumulated credits and fulfilled program requirements while often having limited access to the conceptual discussions that framed those activities. In

practice, presence and participation gradually became equated with progress, while procedural compliance substituted for deeper intellectual engagement. Similar dynamics have been described in the literature on intercultural supervision, where mismatched expectations regarding hierarchy, initiative, and knowledge production can generate misalignment for both supervisors and supervisees (Bøgelund & De Graaff, 2015).

Structural rather than individual explanations

As the doctoral trajectory unfolded, the nature of supervision gradually changed. Explaining laboratory procedures, experimental rationale, and data interpretation required increasing time and repetition, while some advanced experimental protocols had to be simplified or excluded from the training plan. Despite repeated efforts to clarify the scientific logic underlying the project, the student often approached experimental work primarily as a sequence of tasks rather than as part of a broader process of hypothesis-driven research. Over time, supervision shifted from a mentoring model oriented toward intellectual development to a more containment-oriented approach, where supervisory effort focused on ensuring minimal procedural functioning and completion of program requirements (Dawley et al., 2008; Hansen et al., 2025). Importantly, these difficulties could not be addressed solely through individual pedagogical adjustment. Within the Italian doctoral system, admission decisions are largely front-loaded, and only limited mechanisms exist to recalibrate trajectories once the program is underway. There were no clear institutional tools to distinguish procedural compliance from substantive learning, nor formal pathways for intervention when misalignment became evident. Responsibility for managing the situation therefore fell largely on the supervisor, who absorbed the cognitive, temporal, and emotional costs of maintaining the doctoral process. Over time, some stabilization occurred. The student became increasingly familiar with laboratory routines and continued to complete assigned tasks. However, as in the case of international institutional cooperation described above, this stabilization did not involve the resolution of asymmetry. Rather, it occurred through processes of asymmetric adjustment. Supervisory effort intensified, expectations were implicitly recalibrated, and the scope of scientific training was progressively narrowed in order to maintain the functioning of the doctoral trajectory. Individual effort reduced the most visible tensions in everyday laboratory work, yet the underlying structural misalignment remained.

Analytical takeaway from Case 2

This case illustrates how doctoral supervision can continue to function even when shared academic frames of reference remain only partially aligned. Asymmetry emerged not primarily from individual shortcomings, but from structural conditions, including language regimes, program design, and implicit assumptions about autonomy, initiative, and learning. When such assumptions remain implicit, supervision risks becoming an asymmetrical exchange—high in supervisory effort yet limited in intellectual reciprocity (Pham, 2021). As in the case of institutional cooperation, improvement should not be confused with resolution. The case highlights the need to recognize asymmetry as a structural feature of international doctoral education, one that requires institutional mediation rather than being absorbed informally by individual supervisors.

4. Discussion

Cross-case dynamics: temporalities, responsibility, adjustment, and normalization

Considering the two cases together makes it possible to identify recurring analytical patterns across institutional cooperation and doctoral supervision. Although the situations operate at different scales—one institutional and one interpersonal—both reveal similar mechanisms through which asymmetry emerges, is managed, and gradually becomes normalized in everyday academic practice. Four dimensions are particularly relevant: temporalities, responsibility allocation, adjustment processes, and the normalization of asymmetry.

Temporalities

In both cases, asymmetry first became visible through divergent temporal expectations. In the international cooperation initiative, differences emerged in assumptions about pace, deadlines, and

responsiveness. European planning practices—often structured around linear timelines, predefined milestones, and rapid feedback cycles—encountered institutional rhythms shaped by different administrative hierarchies and workload distributions. What initially appeared as delay or limited engagement reflected a different temporal regime governing academic work. A comparable dynamic emerged in doctoral supervision. In this case, temporal misalignment was linked to the expectation that prolonged participation in laboratory activities would naturally lead to conceptual development. Attendance, credit accumulation, and extended exposure to laboratory routines were assumed to translate into scientific understanding. When this progression did not occur as expected, slower development was initially interpreted as individual adaptation rather than as a mismatch between program design and the temporal demands of learning in a second language and epistemic environment. Across both situations, time functioned as a largely implicit regulator of asymmetry, shaping judgments of progress, competence, and commitment.

Responsibility allocation

As temporal misalignment persisted, responsibility for maintaining the functioning of the collaboration gradually shifted. In the cooperation case, coordination tasks—including monitoring activities, preparing documentation, and maintaining communication—became increasingly concentrated on the European partner. This redistribution did not result from formal institutional decisions but emerged as a pragmatic response to ensure project continuity. Similarly, in the doctoral supervision case, responsibility for bridging epistemic and linguistic gaps largely fell on the supervisor. Supervisory work expanded to include repeated explanation of experimental logic, translation between conceptual frameworks, and ongoing management of potential research risks. This additional labor was rarely formally recognized within institutional workload structures. Across both contexts, responsibility therefore became asymmetrically distributed, with actors positioned closer to dominant academic norms absorbing the operational and relational costs of misalignment. Importantly, this redistribution remained largely invisible at the institutional level. Responsibility was individualized rather than structurally acknowledged, reinforcing the perception that difficulties stemmed from personal shortcomings rather than from systemic design.

Adjustment

In neither case did asymmetry lead to a breakdown of collaboration or supervision. Instead, both situations evolved through processes of adjustment. Expectations were recalibrated, timelines were rephased, and operational practices were modified to maintain continuity. In the cooperation project, adjustment involved accepting slower coordination cycles while compensating through increased planning and monitoring by the European partner. In doctoral supervision, adjustment took the form of narrowing the scope of training, recalibrating expectations regarding autonomy, and prioritizing procedural continuity over conceptual development. These adjustments allowed collaboration and supervision to continue despite persistent misalignment. However, they did not imply convergence toward symmetrical arrangements. Rather, they functioned as pragmatic coping mechanisms that redistributed effort unevenly among participants.

Normalization of asymmetry

Over time, these adjustments contributed to the normalization of asymmetry. Practices that initially appeared problematic gradually became integrated into the everyday functioning of the system. Delays became anticipated, supervisory overload was internalized, and uneven labor distributions were rarely questioned. In both cases, normalization occurred not through explicit institutional recognition but through informal accommodation. Because asymmetry was absorbed by individuals rather than addressed structurally, it became progressively less visible. The absence of formal mechanisms for identifying and negotiating asymmetry meant that collaboration and supervision could continue, but at the cost of accumulating, unevenly distributed academic labor.

Asymmetry as governance

These patterns suggest that asymmetry can be interpreted not only as a characteristic of specific collaborations, but also as a practical mechanism through which academic work is coordinated. As

illustrated in Figure 1, asymmetry operates through interconnected processes of temporal misalignment, responsibility redistribution, adjustment, and normalization.

Asymmetry as Governance in International Academic Work

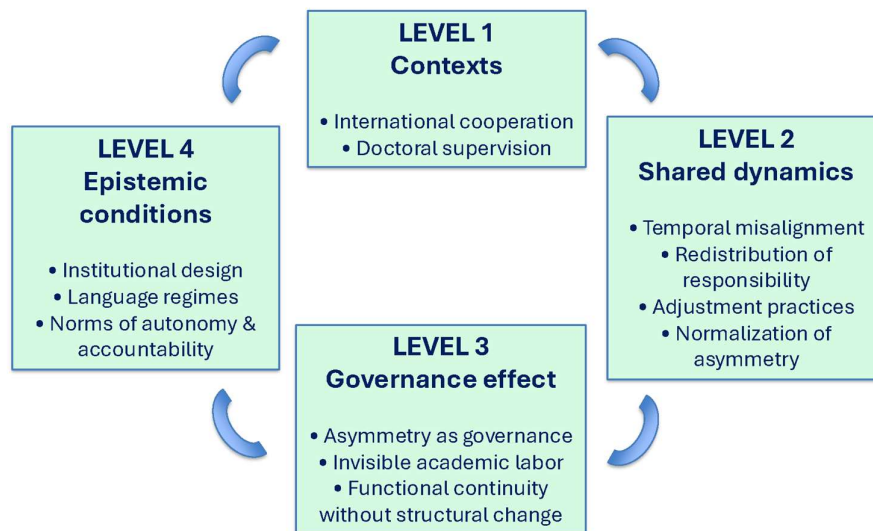


Figure 1. Asymmetry as governance in international academic work. The figure illustrates how asymmetry operates across interconnected levels of academic practice. Starting from specific contexts (international cooperation and doctoral supervision), shared dynamics such as temporal misalignment, redistribution of responsibility, and adjustment practices generate a form of governance in which asymmetry becomes normalized. This process is sustained by broader epistemic conditions, including institutional design, language regimes, and norms of autonomy and accountability. Together, these dynamics enable functional continuity without structural transformation, rendering asymmetry both productive and largely invisible.

Together, these dynamics help sustain academic collaboration and doctoral training even when institutional conditions remain partially misaligned. This interpretation resonates with scholarship on the governing effects of accountability and responsabilization in contemporary universities, where responsibility is increasingly individualized rather than structurally addressed. In such contexts, governance operates less through formal regulation and more through the internalization of expectations, self-monitoring, and the normalization of uneven workloads (Shore, 2017). Within international cooperation and doctoral supervision, the capacity to absorb delays, translate expectations, and maintain continuity becomes unevenly distributed. Actors positioned closer to dominant academic norms, linguistic capital, or institutional authority often carry a disproportionate share of this relational and organizational labor. Because this labor remains largely invisible within institutional metrics and evaluation systems, asymmetry rarely becomes an explicit object of policy reflection. Instead, it is often reframed as professional commitment, individual resilience, or collegial responsibility. In this sense, asymmetry does not necessarily prevent collaboration or supervision from functioning. Rather, it enables them to continue while concealing the structural conditions that make academic work uneven and, at times, unsustainable (Shore & Wright, 2015). Figure 1 summarizes these interconnected dynamics. Understanding asymmetry in this way shifts analytical attention from isolated cases of difficulty to broader organizational logics shaping international

academic work. It invites reflection on how responsibility, accountability, and care are distributed within academic systems and whose labor remains invisible in the process.

5. Conclusions

This study examined how asymmetry operates across two domains of international academic life: institutional cooperation and doctoral supervision. Rather than treating asymmetry as a temporary dysfunction or a problem of individual adaptation, the analysis conceptualizes it as a structural condition emerging from the interaction between institutional design, epistemic expectations, and everyday academic practices. Across both cases, asymmetry became visible through misaligned temporal regimes, uneven distributions of responsibility, and adjustment processes that allowed collaboration and supervision to continue without fully resolving underlying tensions. Stabilization occurred not through the elimination of asymmetry, but through its redistribution—often informally and unevenly—among specific actors. Over time, these processes contributed to the normalization of asymmetry, rendering it less visible while simultaneously making it more durable. Recognizing asymmetry as a structural condition has important implications for how international academic development is understood. When asymmetry is framed primarily as miscommunication or individual inadequacy, responsibility is shifted from institutions to individuals, limiting opportunities for collective learning and institutional change. By contrast, making asymmetry visible creates space for negotiation—of expectations, responsibilities, and institutional constraints. This perspective challenges transfer-based models of internationalization that assume convergence as the default outcome of academic cooperation. Rather than proposing prescriptive solutions, this study offers an analytical perspective grounded in academic practice. From the standpoint of researchers working in the medical and life sciences, the findings suggest that reflexivity in international cooperation and doctoral education requires institutional environments where misalignment can be acknowledged without being immediately individualized or silenced. In this sense, the value of international academic collaboration does not lie in eliminating asymmetry, but in recognizing how asymmetry is negotiated and governed. Making asymmetry visible therefore represents not merely a technical adjustment, but an ethical and epistemic stance toward the uneven terrain of contemporary global academia.

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