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Mentoring and the Doctoral Experience of Asian Arts Educators in Western Universities

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Abstract

The attrition rates of doctoral students in Australia, British, and North American universities average between 30% and 50% depending on the disciplines (McAlpin and Norton, 2006). In Australia, the satisfaction ratings of supervisors were about 54% for part-time and 64% for full-time doctoral students (Harman, 2002). While some studies have identified the difficulties encountered by minority students, research into completion rates have largely failed to recognise or differentiate the diverse experiences of minority groups. This paper reports on the doctoral experiences of fourteen Asian arts educators who have undertaken research training in British, American and Australian universities, and who currently work in the Asian tertiary sector. It presents their perspectives on the key roles played by their supervisors in their doctoral journey, the special qualities of supervisors that impressed/appealed to them, and their experience of mentoring, an important component of the supervision process (Shannon, 1995). Information presented here represents a portion of the total survey and interview data from a larger study. Survey data revealed that few doctoral supervisors acted as mentors to help participants get papers published and model sound management of communications in the research process. Overall, participants regarded their doctoral experience to be a positive one.

INTRODUCTION

Research in recent years has noted the importance placed by the university sector on rates of completion, attrition and the quality of supervision (Holdaway, Deblois and Winchester, 1995; Becher, Henkel and Kogan, 1994). McAlpin and Norton (2006, p. 3) cites reports indicating that the attrition rates of doctoral students in Australia, British, and North American universities average between 30% and 50% depending on the disciplines. Sinclair's study (2004) found approximately one in three doctoral candidates in Australia did not complete their studies. The completion rates in the 'Humanities and Arts' and 'Social Sciences' were considerably lower at 54% and 52% respectively, compared to 75% in the 'Natural Sciences' (p. 2). The completion rate for 'Arts and Humanities' was as low as 45% in Canada (Elgar, 2003), and 51% in the United Kingdom (Wright and Cochrane, 2000). However, there is a dearth of literature which focuses on the doctoral supervision and experiences in arts education. This paper therefore attempts to contribute to research into this area by examining the doctoral experience of fourteen Asian arts educators who have completed research training in British, American and Australian universities and are currently working in the tertiary teacher education sector in East Asia. It reports their perspectives on the key roles played by their supervisors during the doctoral journey, the special qualities of supervisors which impressed or appealed to them, and the extent they had experienced mentoring by their supervisors. Their viewpoints would contribute to a better understanding of the factors which contribute to doctoral completions in arts

education. Information presented here represents a portion of the total survey and interview data from an ongoing larger study involving arts educators in several Asian countries.

SOME KEY ISSUES IN POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION

A landmark study on the doctoral experience of candidates at Australian universities reports that all the participating universities "were aware of the *White Paper*'s criticism of supervision quality and the government view that poor quality supervision was to blame for high attrition and long completion times (Neumann, 2003, p. 123). In Australia, satisfaction ratings of supervision were 51% for part-time (off-campus), 57.5% for part-time (on-campus) and 64% for full-time doctoral students (Harman, 2002, p. 182). The overall doctoral experience was rated by respondents to be satisfactory or very satisfactory by 56.9% of respondents (ibid., p. 188). Another study (Harman, 2003) found more international than Australian students were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the level of research support at Australian universities – 27% compared to about 23% for Australian students (p. 6). This was considered to be a "particularly important finding since it is well known that international students generally tend to be less critical and more supportive of teaching and facilities than Australian students…, although there appear to be some marked variations between international student groups based on facility with English and expectations" (*ibid*., p. 6). The need to support international students becomes more prominent in an environment when one in five students enrolled is from overseas (Harman 2004). Statistics from the IDP Education Australia (2005) reveal that students from ten Asian countries form the main sources of international students for the Australian higher education sector (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Top 10 source countries for Australian higher education in 2005

Country	2004	2005	Growth
China	30,203	40,054	33.0%
India	17,853	22,279	25.0%
Malaysia	15,895	15,375	-4.0%
Hong Kong	10,974	10,703	-3.0%
Indonesia	10,542	9,543	-2.5%
Singapore	9,229	8,349	-10.0%
South Korea	4,976	5,380	9.0%
Thailand	5,721	5,252	-9.0%
Taiwan	4,165	3,964	-5.0%
Bangladesh	3,371	3,657	9.0%
Total All Countries	**151,304**	**163,930**	**9.0%**

Source: www.idp.com/research/fastfacts/article406.asp

While the difficulties encountered by minority students have been identified in some studies, research into completion rates has generally not given due attention to the diverse needs and experiences of students from minority cultures (Gonzales et al., 2002; Roach, 2001; Acker, 2001; Ryan and Zuber-Skerrit, 1999). The reality of cross-cultural differences in approaching postgraduate research was highlighted by Sillitoe, Webb and Zhang (2005), and the progress of international doctoral students in Harman's (2003) study was hampered by issues relating to language, supervisor-supervisee working relationship and structure in research direction. Some recent attempts have been made by authors to acknowledge the

different needs of international postgraduate students (Phillips and Pugh, 2005; Wisker, 2005; Ryan and Zuber-Skerrit, 1999). In the context of the Australian and UK settings, Wisker (2005) discusses four categories of issues which should be considered by postgraduate research supervisors: (1) cross-cultural issues, (2) language, power and provision, (3) context and shape of research into postgraduate learning, and (4) cultural issues and power relations (chapter 12). Besides needing assistance with matters directly related to research, doctoral students need supervisory support with ‘personal support’ (such as motivation, socialization and help with accommodation) and ‘indirect research related help’ (such as locating references and being provided with contact and equipment) (Haksever and Manisali, 2000).

In the first-ever publication which focuses on the doctoral journeys of music educators and published by the Australian Society for Music Education (Forrest, 2003), eleven white Australian music educators were invited to share insights from their doctoral experiences that could be useful for both doctoral students and supervisors. Ten of the doctoral studies were undertaken at Australian universities and one was at an American institution. The period covered by the accounts spanned three decades – from 1971, when the first PhD in music education was awarded by an Australian university, to 2002. The eight questions asked of contributors were related to choice of university and topic, organization of life and work around the thesis, advice for prospective doctoral candidates, the most difficult and most memorable time, and what might have been done differently during the doctoral journey. Issues related to supervision were mentioned in six of the accounts, with a seventh reporting administrative interference in “replacing [her] senior supervisor with another person, totally unknown to [her] and without any consultation” two months before the submission date (p. 92). The difficulties of long distance supervision were highlighted by two contributors, specifically the issues of “isolation” and “access to a whole host of support mechanism” (p. 78). Only one supervisor was regarded as “exemplary” (p. 66), and there was no specific mention of the role of doctoral supervisors as mentors.

MENTORING AND POSTGRADUATE SUPERVISION

Postgraduate supervisors are expected to possess research knowledge and related skills, management and interpersonal skills (Beasley, 1999), and to foster and enhance learning, research and communication at the highest level during the supervision process (Laske and Zuber-Skerritt, 1996). As the tertiary sector becomes transformed by developments such as economic rationalization, devolution, globalization and internationalization, the role of postgraduate supervisors has become more complex in recent years. Research supervisors may be required to perform up to sixteen different roles (Down, Martin and Bricknell, 2000, cited in Zhao, 2001) and these may vary substantially between disciplines (Shannon, 1995; Nulty and Barrett, 1996; Kiley and Liljegren, 1999). Doctoral supervisors may also need skills that are similar to those required of workplace managers. They may need to be “innovative, creative problem solvers, resource-oriented, work-focused, technically expert, decisive, and dependable” (Vilkinas, 2002, p. 130). They also have to

> monitor progress, be caring and empathetic and a team builder. In addition, supervisors, like business managers, must be able to assess which of these supervisory qualities is needed at any particular time; and during the student’s journey through the doctoral program the supervisor must deliver each of these qualities with expertise, ease and care. In order to do this, they must be able to take

> a "helicopter perspective" of the PhD process and accurately assess their own capabilities as a supervisor. The supervisory role is, therefore, not unlike that of a manager who strives for effective management through informed observation, sensitive analysis and appropriate application of his or her skills as a leader. (*ibid*., p. 130)

While the supervisor-supervisee relationship has been acknowledged as an important factor directly influencing the success or failure of postgraduate studies (Symons, 2001; Chambers and Newth, 1998; Seagram, Gould, and Pyke, 1998; MacKay, 1996; Wright, 1992), mentoring has also been identified as a critical ingredient in the research supervision process (Shannon, 1995). According to Zelditch (1990), mentors are "advisors, people with career experience willing to share their knowledge; supporters, people who give emotional and moral encouragement; tutors, people who give specific feedback on one's performance; masters, in the sense of employers to whom one is apprenticed; sponsors, sources of information about, and aid in obtaining opportunities; models of identity, of the kind of person one should be to be an academic" (p. 11). At least nineteen things are performed by excellent mentors; these include: select and know their mentees, expect excellence, affirm, teach and coach, counsel, protect, stimulate growth, give mentees exposure and promote their visibility, nurture creativity, correct, accept increasing friendship and mutuality, be an intentional model and display dependability (Johnson and Ridley, 2004). However, potential problems may exist in the relationship between mentors and mentees of different genders, races or ethnic backgrounds (Gerber, 2003; Galbraith and Cohen 1995). The reality in practice is that the "relationship and resulting communication is influenced by the roles adopted by both [supervisor and postgraduate research student]" (Wilkinson, 2005, p. 190).

DOCTORAL EXPERIENCE OF ASIANS IN WESTERN UNIVERSITIES

Method and Participants

Fourteen Asian music and visual arts educators currently working in the tertiary teacher education sector in East Asia and who have undertaken their doctoral education in Western countries were invited to participate in this study. The nine music educators and five visual arts educators were requested to respond to a 'Survey on the Doctoral Experience of Asians in Arts Education' either via email or printed copy. The eight questions in the survey required both quantitative and qualitative responses which provided data relevant to the three research questions stated below:

1. What key roles did supervisors play in the doctoral journey of postgraduate students in arts education?
2. What special qualities of postgraduate supervisors impressed or appealed to doctoral students in arts education?
3. To what extent did Asian students experience mentoring during their doctoral studies in Western universities?

Table 2 below shows the profile of the participants who are teacher educators above the age of 40, and use Chinese as their primary language of teaching and writing. Most (86%) have studied in Western universities prior to being engaged in doctoral research, with half having completed both their first and master's degrees at Western institutions. All except one chose to study at Australian or British universities, and the preferred doctoral

qualification is the PhD. Work expectations was cited as the main reason behind their enrollment in doctoral studies, and all of them were working full time while undertaking their doctoral research. Some level of employer support in terms of study scholarship and summer study leave allowance were given to each of them throughout their candidature. Apart from one participant whose doctoral program was run completely offshore, the other universities required a period of residency. Most of the participants visited their supervisors on campus beyond the residency requirements. Half the participants had additional visits made by supervisors to their country of residence.

Table 2: Profile of 14 Asian arts educators who studied in Western universities

Item		*N*=14
Specialization		
	- Music	9
	- Visual Arts	5
Gender		
	- Male	8
	- Female	6
Qualification		
	- PhD	11
	- EdD	2
	- Doctor of Fine Arts (DFA)	1
Country of Study		
	- Australia	7
	- UK	6
	- USA	1
Motivation for PhD		
	- Work expectations	9
	- Personal interest	3
	- Mix of work expectations and personal interest	2
Length of Study		
	- 3 to 4.5 years	2
	- 5 to 6 years	8
	- > 6 years	4
Mode of Study		
	- Part time while working	14
Employer Support		
	- Study scholarship (partial)	14
	- Extra leave allowance/study leave	14
Residency during candidature		
	- Some residency requirement	13
	- Program completely offshore	1
	- Voluntary residency beyond requirements	11
	- Supervisor/s visit students in their country	7
First language		
	- Chinese	14
International Higher Education Experience		
	- First degree	10
	- Masters degree	9
	- Both first and masters degree	7
	- None	2

Characteristics of Doctoral Programs in Arts Education

The course requirements of participants' doctoral programs vary considerably (see Table 3 below). About one third required a course work component and nearly two thirds required a research methods course. A viva voce component was not required by about one third of the programs. Nearly one in three participants had a say in the choice of their examiners.

Table 3: Characteristics of Doctoral Programs in Arts Education

Item	*N*=14
Course work component	5
Required research methods course	9
Viva voce component	10
Say in choice of examiners	6

Relationship between Supervisors and Doctoral Students

Twelve descriptions were given by participants when asked for the "words [which] would best describe your supervisor-supervisee relationship" in the context of their doctoral journey. Very few multiple responses were received. Table 4 below lists the descriptions together with the number of responses received for each. One out of two participants described the relationship with their main supervisors as a 'friend', and the next most frequent description was 'mentor' (43%). It is surprising that the more traditional descriptions of supervisors as 'advisor', 'teacher' and 'guide' – identified in the literature as roles performed by mentors – did not appear more frequently in the responses.

Table 4: Descriptions of Supervisor-Supervisee Relationships

Description	*N*=14
Friend	7
Mentor	6
Critic	3
Supporter	3
Advisor	3
Teacher	2
Guide	2
Supervisor	2
Editor	2
Facilitator	1
Counsellor	1
Excellent	1

Key Roles of Doctoral Supervisors

Participants were also asked: "What key role/s did your main supervisor play in your doctoral studies?" Some responses were extremely short while others were a few sentences long. No outright negative responses were received and almost every response was directly related to the research and thesis aspects of the doctoral journey. Responses that are listed below are accompanied by a letter and number in brackets indicating the source of information.

- “Responds or gives comments only if I produce some work. However, they give me advice on what I should do for my thesis.” (A1)
- “Academic guidance” (A2)
- “Facilitator of my studies” (A3)
- “Critical friend and mentor” (A4)
- “… a pilot to direct me through the doctoral journey, like a compass pointing towards the right direction for me to carry on the journey. … also acted as an academic mentor to provide me professional support on some specific areas which was related to the study.” (A4)
- “Advisor: gave professional advice, asked thought provoking questions.” (A5)
- “Mentor: suggested alternative methods and useful literature.” (A5)
- “Friend: encouraging but being strict at the right time.” (A5)
- “Provides research insights, discusses about the research framework, findings, and comments on the writing up materials, thesis chapters.” (A6)
- “Demanding what is needed for the improvement of the study”(A7)
- “… really a teacher, an editor who told me how to write thesis, to improve my writing, to provide suggestions in research methods, and most important, an encourager.” (A8)
- “Advising and shaping my thesis” (A9)
- “Supervise and support” (A10)
- “Clarify concepts, give book reference, provide guidance: research structures, content, theoretical understanding and background, practicality of research methodology, knowing general trends of similar research and how to apply theories in data analysis.” (A11)
- “Advisory” (A12)
- “Points out areas that need more work and revision.” (A13)
- “Mentor, professional friend, supervisor with deadlines and give official comments on my work performance.” (A14)

Special Qualities of Doctoral Supervisors

Responses to the question, “What were the special qualities of your main supervisor that impressed or appealed to you?” were short and precise; a few participants provided more than one response. No reference code is supplied here to avoid possible identification of participants and supervisors, and all duplicate statements have been omitted. The descriptions of the special qualities of main supervisors have been classified into two main categories: ‘research related’ and ‘personal qualities’.

Research related

- “His research and publications”
- “Very experienced in qualitative research”
- “Sharp, highly experienced, clear mind, gives precise instructions”
- “Patience, continual encouragement, attention to major and minor issues arisen from the thesis writing etc.”
- “Smart, confident, knowledgeable scholar”

- “Gives good guidance in direction and theoretical concept for research”
- “Always have ideas and suggestions”
- “Systematic and detailed”
- “Demanding”
- “Quick in responding”
- “Give justified comments on my work and ideas”.

Personal qualities

- “Treated me as a good friend”; “friendly”
- “Offered me all kinds of support”
- “Humorous”
- “Responsible and caring”
- “Excellent relationship with all people”
- “Patience, continual encouragement”
- “Very understanding”.

One participant expressed preference for supervisors to be “more critical and demanding so that I might have been made to finish my study a bit earlier” (A14).

Participants were also asked about the number of conference papers they had presented and journal papers submitted during their candidature, whether they were encouraged by their supervisors to do so and if assistance was provided by their main supervisors. The responses to these questions are summarised in Table 4 below. Nearly every participant (86%) gave conference presentations during their candidature but less than half (43%) managed to get one (or more) journal paper/s published. There were more incidences of supervisors encouraging their doctoral students to present at conferences than to submit papers to journals, and it is disappointing that supervisors were not as helpful in assisting their doctoral students with getting papers published.

Table 4: Presentations and Publications by PhD Students

Item	*N*=14
Conference Papers	
- Presented	12
- Encouraged to present	10
- Assistance from supervisor/s	8
Journal Papers	
- Published	6
- Encouraged to publish	8
- Assistance from supervisor/s	3

Difficulties Encountered by PhD Students

Two main types of difficulties were encountered by participants when pursuing their doctoral studies while working full time as tertiary teacher educators. Despite receiving employer assistance with university fees and being provided with study leave support, nearly all the participants voiced their struggles with **balancing work/teaching and study/research commitments**. Statements articulating this issue included: "lack of time" (A1), "study schedule is affected from time to time in order to finish jobs in hand" (A3), "the major obstacle is I have to complete my job responsibilities before I can work on my thesis" (A7), "I had to give up some important opportunities in my job in order to save time for the study" (A8), "heavy work duties – there is no allowance for part-time studies" and "progress was not in your control because of workload and pressure…. work twice as hard during the holidays, if there were any!" (A5).

Being supervised at a distance was another major challenge encountered by almost every participant. Two questions were asked in this regard: (1) what difficulties in supervision did you encounter when you were not resident at the university? and (2) what solutions were found to address these? Email communication was the primary means of correspondence; this was supplemented by having printed copies sent between supervisors and participants via air mail and occasional telephone calls. Six statements by participants illustrate this issue succinctly:

- "the major difficulty was communication of course…" (A8)
- "progress became slow because of not able to have immediate feedback from my supervisor" (A3)
- "…lack of face communication and lack of instant feedback. It was difficult to share and express what we were really concerned without a two-way communication. Via email and phone call to speed up the communication…" (A4);
- "late or no response; need to chase up politely" (A11)
- "everything has to be discussed via email. It was time consuming, and at times difficult to explain" (A12);
- "difficult to get quick response from her and sometimes sending of drafts to each other takes a lot of time" (A13).

However, email communication was not considered to be problematic by five participants (36%). This form of communication actually helped one participant who was "self-disciplined" to "[find] no pressure from the study" (A10). Another did not feel "[affected by email communications]… at this level of study. I needed private and independent time for my own development of ideas and work. It was fine that they [the supervisors] visit me several times a year" (A14).

MENTORING EXPERIENCE OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS

The majority of the fourteen participants became engaged in doctoral studies mainly because of work expectations. As mature-age students working full time in the tertiary teacher education sector, Chinese was their main language of communication. Most of them had previous undergraduate and/or postgraduate experiences in Western universities, and were fortunate to receive some level of employer support for university fees and study leave during their candidature. Because of the nature of the tertiary sector which they worked in,

participants were able to take study leave during the summer to be engaged in more focused study. Fortuitously, half the participants were able to arrange for their supervisors to visit their country of residence, and a few were visited several times a year (e.g., A14). In spite of their struggle to manage heavy work responsibilities and the demands of their doctoral studies, most of the participants were able to graduate within five to six years. Most had presented at conferences and a handful managed to get at least one journal paper published. Participants did not express any unhappiness about the relationship with their supervisors. In fact, many of the descriptions of supervisors and the key roles they played in the doctoral journey of participants were very complimentary. However, there were two aspects of the doctoral experience which were not as positive. Only three of the fourteen supervisors provided assistance to participants in their quest to have their papers published in journals. This is unexpected, especially when both supervisors and supervisees were academics and should be well aware of the expectations and pressures to be published. Indeed the employer support given to participants would indicate employer desire for staff to be upgraded in their research skills. The second aspect has to do with supervisor-supervisee communication. Supervisor response time was clearly an issue for many participants during the periods they were off campus. One might expect academic supervisors who were supervising other academics to model sound management and communication skills throughout the research process. For fledging academics engaged in doctoral research, this kind of modeling provides a useful foundation for their expected roles as future supervisors of postgraduate research. This is another form of mentoring that seems to be lacking from the accounts of participants in this study. As noted earlier in this paper, mentors are:

1. "advisors, people with career experience willing to share their knowledge;
2. supporters, people who give emotional and moral encouragement;
3. tutors, people who give specific feedback on one's performance;
4. sponsors, sources of information about, and aid in obtaining opportunities;
5. models of identity, of the kind of person one should be to be an academic" (Zelditch, p. 11), and who
6. "give mentees exposure and promote their visibility, [as well as]
7. be an intentional model" (Johnson and Ridley, 2004).

When the above are applied to the two aspects of mentoring doctoral students to write papers for publications and managing communication in the research process, we see that most supervisors fall short of being true mentors. They could be more willing to share their career knowledge, give their students exposure and promote their visibility, and be intentional models of excellent academic researcher and supervisor.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has revealed that the overall doctoral experience of fourteen Asian arts educators who completed their research training in universities in the United Kingdom, USA and Australia was a very positive one. Participants expressed forming close relationships with their supervisors, articulated the special qualities of their supervisors which impressed them, and acknowledged the diverse roles played by their supervisors in their doctoral journey. Having to juggle between full time work and part time doctoral study was a major challenge for participants, many of whom experienced difficulties communicating with their main supervisors when residing away from campus. While participants were not critical of the majority of supervisors who did not help them with getting their papers published, this aspect of mentoring should constitute a regular activity

in the supervision process. Supervisors play an important role as mentors to fledging academic researchers, and this applies to those who have come from overseas. This study has identified two areas which supervisors' institutions should be more supportive of: (1) enhancing the ability of supervisors to be more effective models in managing communications, and (2) empowering supervisors to be more proactive in initiating and sustaining students' publishing activities. Elton (1994) is right when he observes that "[s]upervision is a teaching activity and academics traditionally learn how to teach, not through training, but from their experience as students and teachers … At the level of research supervision, where there is usually a unique student experience – learning from experience can hardly ever be an adequate preparation" (p. 26). Mentoring prepares the future generations of researchers and supervisors, and should be an integral aspect of the doctoral experience for all, regardless of the background and country student researchers may come from.

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