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## **“Defining the doctorate with Asian research students”**

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### **Introduction**

The essential aim of supervision is to support an individual student’s development to enable them to become a competent, autonomous researcher with a mature and logical mind. The key is in the “students’ sense of agency - what enables them to act with confidence as learners” as stated by Ingleton and Cadman (2002:93). In order to nurture a student’s ‘sense of agency’, which is particularly fragile in the cases of foreign students, supervisors are required to have a wide range of responsibilities, a flexible attitude, maintenance of a balanced and open minded view and being practiced in dealing with intellectual, psychological and cultural issues. Denicolo and Pope (1999:65) claim “successful supervision ... rests on the sensitivity to the uniqueness of each student’s experience and on a professional flexibility which allows us to respond appropriately to it”. Considering the recent globalisation of the academic environment and the dramatic increase in students with different cultural backgrounds (both international students and those originally came from other countries) in Australia, this paper focuses on the difficulties experienced by Asian research students during the process of their development into competent researchers in a Western academic environment. Various conspicuous issues, such as language incompetence, have been addressed, although the depth of the problems should be looked at in a more comprehensive and integral way.

Having been situated in both the role of supervisor, in my work as a lecturer, and a PhD student conducting research into Japanese classical literature here in Australia, I have acquired the ability to explore multiple perspectives or ‘bilingualism’ to understand the complicated amalgamation of issues associated with Asian research students. Immediate issues may appear to be personal, individual or emotional, and involve both the supervisor and the student, however, they are at the same time, closely related and directly affected by the prevailing political, financial, systematic and philosophical issues of the involved institution and the broader influences of the Australian and global academia.

### **The supervisor’s awareness of cultural differences**

The essence of supervision should be consistent regardless of the student’s background, yet with appropriate, practical modifications to accommodate those from different cultures (Knight 1999). Pragmatism works effectively to overcome the conflict caused by cultural differences, upon the establishment of amicable relationships. The cultural differences can be diverse and complicated. Therefore, the supervisor’s insight into cultural issues is the most crucial key to establishing and maintaining a good, productive relationship, by identifying the individual student’s problems embedded in cultural differences during the earliest period of the supervision.

Cultural differences vary widely, yet are essentially ‘relative’ issues, not issues of right/wrong or superior/inferior. The supervisor’s lack of understanding of cultural differences may cause serious yet unnecessary frustration and misunderstanding, with accusations of inattentiveness,

rudeness, immorality and so forth. For example, in Asian and African cultures, in a supervisor-student relationship, the avoidance of eye contact is regarded positively, being an expression of respect toward the speaker whereas in western cultures such behaviour is regarded negatively, being evidence of sullenness, shiftiness or boredom (Okorochoa 1997). Similarly, many Asian students try to show their gratitude with gifts and invitations to dinner, which can be seen as bribery in western culture. Mutual understanding and effort by both parties are vital to create a positive relationship and to avoid unnecessary harm to either side.

Cultural differences are expressed on two levels, one related to customary, that is pragmatic, behaviour and the other is deeply rooted in the student's psychology, which is difficult to deal with. Okorochoa identifies various issues: the student's perspective of time, interpersonal space, body language (eye contact in particular), deference to age and authority and how to express thanks. These are considered as behaviour issues, most of which are relatively easy to overcome, when the student understands the cultural implications. To tell a student "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" does not generally cause a response of personal pain or anger, as it is not the rejection of their culture but rather, it is practical advice about settling down in a different environment. It is also important to make sure that the student comprehends the particular issues at stake on grounds commonly understood by local culture. Otherwise, an encouragement of the student to assimilate into Western culture may cause unexpected misunderstandings on the student's part. An example of this could be that keeping direct, attentive eye contact and/or forcing the student to call the supervisor by their first name may be interpreted as a mark of special intimacy or friendship (Okorochoa). It should also be noted that for students, leaving their own country where they may have experienced many restrictions and constraints and coming to a western country where there is greater freedom, can often create a wrong impression in students such that they believe they can do anything they want and/or that they have to be aggressive to survive. Such behavioural problems are often transient and improve when the students have settled down and understand the new environment more clearly.

It is therefore important to identify student behaviour problems that cause the supervisor to feel uncomfortable, and vice-versa. Any problematic customary behaviour should be discussed with the student not as a personal matter, but as a practical issue, as early as possible. Once a relationship is set, particularly with a negative atmosphere (e.g., feeling the other party is rude), it is hard to rectify later and may continuously undermine and complicate the student-supervisor relationship and adversely affect the student's work.

More difficult is the psychological issue, such as the mindset of the student. Western academic research requires independent thinking and objectivity. As detailed later, this fundamental requirement may cause great difficulties for Asian students, as in their native culture studying often means 'memorising' and 'respect' means 'acceptance without questioning'. The student's effort to establish their independence as a researcher inevitably involves a challenge to the cultural makeup of their personality and identity. The serious nature of this challenge should be recognised. In this regard, it is important to solve the pragmatic issues in the early stage and build a basic trusting relationship between the supervisor and the student, which allows the student to steadily expand the horizon of their perspectives, without experiencing an intense identity crisis through self-denial.

In order to make a fair evaluation of the students, the supervisor should take time to understand the individual student's personality, specific needs, the aims and intention of their research, and their strengths and weaknesses of their academic ability, distinguishing their

pragmatic, behavioural issues from their individual/personal issues. The supervisor requires a relaxed, flexible and balanced mind, probably similar to the approach of Jungian psychiatrist, Hayao Kawai (1982). He states that until he becomes familiar with a patient or his/her specific problem, he remains intentionally relaxed, unfocused and fully open to the patient.

### **Common problems associated with Asian students**

The challenge for Asian students is the holistic development of their language skills, thinking, autonomy and self-esteem, which supervisors should be aware of at philosophical and pragmatic levels. It takes time for students to acquire autonomy, which is gradually achieved through a process involving their responsibilities, initiatives and various decisions about their research and thesis writing (Boud 1981). Considering that many students have progressed their study under the constant instructions and encouragements of teachers and families, a 'hands-off' policy during the early stage does not help the development of a student's autonomy, but intensifies their confusion and lack of confidence. Therefore, the supervisor's understanding of their current situation and identification of their needs are critical.

First, the magnitude of the language barrier should be recognised as it affects all academic practice: speed of absorption and thinking, quality of comprehension, as well as difficulties in academic writing. Second, different ways of thinking should be understood not as cultural and/or personal immaturity or lack of ability, but as differences. Third, it should also be noted that students' heavy dependence on their supervisors, a serious obstacle for the development of their autonomy, is often deeply rooted in their customary perspective and practice that respect for others is expressed by their complete trust and obedience.

Regarding the language issue, a student's academic aptitude in English academia should be carefully evaluated, by distinguishing their English language proficiency from their intellectual capacity. Language proficiency is often considered as a preliminary issue to be dealt with before students commence their candidatures, yet in reality, it often remains unresolved until the later period of their thesis writing. English tests are carried out to ensure their language proficiency prior to the commencement of their candidature, however the level is not sufficiently high for the actual research, particularly in non-factual areas, such as the humanities, where their ability in written expression is vital.

The improvement of language proficiency includes: the speed of reading comprehension; the expansion of vocabularies and idiomatic expressions, particularly the key concepts and technical terms of the area of study, and familiarisation with the specific style of writing in the area; and writing skills. These require time and constant effort. Although there are various intensive courses to support students, they are often only conducted for a short period (from a few weeks to 12 weeks), and focus on providing general guidance on how and what to study (read/write), and it is not practical to expect such a course to meet individual students' needs, whose levels and research interests are diverse.

All languages are intrinsically cultural productions and thus translation from one language to another inevitably implies some level of influence by both cultures. Word for word translation usually does not make sense or indicate the nuances, unless the writing is very simple. Moreover, it should not be ignored that the nature of language influences thoughts and concepts. For instance, the neutrality of the word 'objectivity', the essential concept of western academia, may be lost in other languages, such as in Japanese. The Japanese language

evolved as a tool of close interpersonal communications and intrinsically implies some emotional quality. The word 'objectivity' may suggest slight coldness, which is not neutral. Therefore, the data collected from questionnaires, particularly when they are translated (e.g., as exemplified by Hird 1997), needs special consideration with regard to the nature of the language and the cultural influences on the respondents and the examiners/researchers. Assessment needs careful triangulation with regard to the real meaning of the questions and answers. In addition, the differences between the objectivity as fact, and the linguistic presentation of objectivity, should be distinguished. A student's inability to depict a matter objectively in English does not necessarily mean that they are subjective in their perception and thinking.

Foreign students often suffer from a feeling of helplessness and alienation, so a supervisor's sympathy about the difficulties encountered over the language alone can improve their morale and consequent development in research skills. The supervisor's simple words of encouragement can function to considerably expand a student's ability, if they are capable of study. The opposite frequently and easily occurs, causing students to become disheartened and lose their energy to continue their candidature. Trying to absorb information through an unfamiliar language is exhausting. Supervisors, like good counsellors and psychologists, should be attentive to the students' responses in meetings and measure their level of concentration and absorption. If a student appears to become rather absentminded or sleepy during a meeting or lecture, it is most likely that the input exceeds their capacity of absorption. Some pragmatic means may also be employed to assist; for example, important points may be written in dot form in clear-cut language, to which students can easily refer when needed.

The second issue, that different ways of thinking may often cause misunderstandings between a supervisor and a student, although related to a culturally influenced mindset, is harder to solve. In the case of Asian students, supervisors should be aware that, for example, academic writing in most Asian countries is often 'descriptive' rather than 'analytical'. Moreover, students are often trained not to criticise or review by themselves, but to accept and understand the given materials, memorising them. This is related to the social environment, for example, in Japan, where the pressure for conformity is strong. People are sensitive about their social appropriateness and promoting their own views and preferences tends to be regarded negatively, being seen as 'self-centred'. Consequently, students from Asian educational environments are generally good at describing details but unfamiliar with questioning and troubled by conceptualisation, that is, a 'Top-Down' approach (Stephens 1992). This explains why many students cannot easily narrow down their research topic. The reversal of this kind of perception by a student is a dramatic experience which takes time, a fact which should be more readily recognised. Diligent yet rigid students often struggle with this issue, ending up with a loss of confidence, although such a mental condition may be avoidable if the potential difficulties are perceived and the student is mentally prepared.

To liberate the students' thinking and develop their scholarly capability, it is important to make them understand the need for logicality and objectivity. Tipton (2001) encourages her students to expose themselves to a wide range of interpretations to see that there is more than one way of looking at a problem. Such dialogues between students and materials with different perspectives within their area of interest appears to be effective in developing not only their thinking patterns but also their linguistic capability.

The third issue, Asian students' dependence on their supervisor, is also often cultural rather than personal, or a mixture of both. Some students are hardworking and enthusiastic, however psychologically, very susceptible to their supervisors' influence/attitudes. The supervisors' continuous encouragement and support functions positively with these students, however the opposite is also true. These students are easily hurt and discouraged by the supervisors' indifference and criticism. As Ingleton and Cadman (2002) examined, an essential issue lies in the fact that many students' academic achievement has been instigated and constantly re-enforced by external influences (e.g., teachers and parents), and their self-confidence has been built up on their continual success in competitions (e.g., tasks and examinations). In other words, many students lack true self-esteem, and need constant approval from others.

This is combined with the fact that, in terms of the teacher-student relationship, obedience is usually demanded of students in Asian societies so as to show respect towards their senior/superior. However, there are also some students whose dependency, particularly regarding financial and everyday life matters, is promoted by their parents who spoil them by exempting them from all other chores, such as looking after themselves, in order to make them focus on their study. In return for their (blind) respect and obedience, these students may equally expect their supervisors to fully look after them. Such mentality makes them intellectually inactive and lazy in their activities. This type of student is increasingly evident, perhaps reflecting the affluence of today's society and the normalisation/popularisation of higher education degrees. For such students, the rules, their tasks and responsibilities should be articulated and consistently reconfirmed.

Encouraging their autonomy and initiatives in their research without consideration of their cultural background, can cause those students' serious loss of self-confidence. Building 'basic trust' (in Erikson's terms) is needed. In consideration of such Asian students' cultural and psychological tendencies, the traditional mentor relationship may work well with the particularly serious, diligent and gentle students. Bennetts (2002) claims that intimacy is essential within the traditional mentor relationship with creative people, whereby they can fully develop their potential. To facilitate such intimacy within a supervisor-student relationship in academic areas however, there are various practical considerations: for example, a timeframe needs to be clearly set regarding progress and the supervisor's availability; and it is necessary to distinguish between supervisory and personal issues, and between practical and mental issues.

Once a stable relationship has been established, the supervisor's introduction of the student to the wider academic environments will effectively cultivate their confidence and independence as a researcher (e.g. Simpson 2001). It may be achieved in various ways: for example, the encouragement of creating their own human network, involving them in departmental, divisional and interdisciplinary seminars and conferences; and providing opportunities for the preparation of publications, such as conference papers and journal articles.

In order to respond to recent governmental change concerning higher education policies, particularly the importance of completion, rather than learning processes, and the shortened period of candidatures, it is obvious that more practical support systems are required for both the supervisor and student. The aim and expectation of the candidature should be articulated and agreed upon by both parties. It is therefore important that in the initial stage of the candidature, substantial discussions take place between the supervisor and student to build a trusting and respectful relationship. Agreements need to be established, such as the timetable, how to build a realistic framework for the candidature, the orientation of support functions

including language issues, the supervisor's availability and means of contact (e.g., meetings, email, phone) and the method of monitoring progress. Promotion of orientations/workshops (e.g., departmental, divisional, library and/or university-wide) will be beneficial to assist learning of necessary computer, multimedia literacy and research skills, and how to conduct preliminary investigation and reference acquisitions. Regarding language problems, it is desirable in the early stages to have individual/group tutoring to check the accuracy of the student's comprehension of bulk reading materials in the areas of interest and to develop critical/analytical discussion skills on their reading. In addition, it may be effective for the student to make notes in dot form and/or a paradigm, to ensure that they clarify the outline of their thinking, as sentence writing may be influenced by the thought patterns of their mother tongue. For thesis writing, individual language assistance services provided by language professionals should be more widely accessible, as individual's needs differ greatly and editing and correcting of a lengthy thesis is painstaking and time consuming. Many supervisors are capable of helping students with the correction of English, however, it easily consumes significant time and energy which should otherwise be more constructively directed to developing the academic quality of the thesis' content.

## **Conclusion**

In response to the dramatic increase in students from different cultural backgrounds, particularly Asia, in higher degree (including doctoral) education programs in Australia, this paper has focused on the cultural issues experienced by many Asian research students in their professional development to become competent researchers in Western academia.

Three critical issues are highlighted: language problems; cultural influences on individuals' perspectives and ways of thinking; and students' dependence on their supervisors. These are interrelated and become a serious impediment to the development of the students' autonomy and ultimate success.

On the one hand, it is crucial for supervisors to distinguish a student's intellectual capacity as a researcher and their culturally orientated specific/problematic behaviours and frame of mind, in order to support the student's holistic development, not replacing one culture with another. Further, supervisor's need to exhibit considerable commitment, maturity and a substantial and balanced knowledge of the situation to maintain objectivity and not interfere with the student's autonomy. On the other hand, students should be made aware of the cultural problems and promoted to re-examine how and to what extent they are influenced by their own culture. By doing so, they can maintain the respect for their supervisor yet successfully develop their autonomy and the wider perspectives based on their native culture to nurture their multicultural intellectual activities. When both supervisor and student are able to share mutual awareness and compassionate understanding, and discuss pragmatic solutions without reservation, the quality of the candidature is greatly improved.

Doctoral supervision is a profound and lengthy joint venture involving both the supervisor and student, to nurture the development of a competent, autonomous researcher and to explore, and make a contribution to, the global academic environment. It is a demanding yet rewarding, once-in-a-lifetime experience involving two individuals' interactive, complete, personal and professional commitment.

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