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Programme number: P2.2

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Disruptions to the Doctoral Researcher Narrative: some international stories of the UK experience (0083)

Much of the research into the experiences of international doctoral researchers focuses primarily on the supervisory relationship (e.g. Li & Seale, 2007, Ku et al., 2008, Borg et al., 2010) emphasising the importance of support and collegiality, of establishing clear communication, and the value of orientation activities in supporting researchers to become familiar with learning and teaching cultures and with the nature of a PhD. The term 'international students' can be used occasionally, however, in pejorative ways, to discriminate against those who do not belong to the 'dominant culture' because of their ethnicity, first language or cultural background. Those such as Gannon (2009, p.71) consider categories such as race, ethnicity and culture as 'deeply unstable social constructs', proposing that we are 'continuously decomposing, reproducing and multiplying' differences (ibid, p.69), however, a 'liberal *disavowal of difference*' (Manathunga, 2007, p.95, original emphasis) can lead to people feeling that their 'difference', whatever that might be is not acknowledged rendering it problematic for them to have a voice. In this Discussion Paper, therefore, it was important to me that people wrote the stories that they wanted to write – rather than those that they felt I wanted to receive – in order to have their voices heard. The outcome was that, while many of the stories reiterate themes common in the literature, the contributors, in their different ways, present disruptions to a more orthodox narrative of doctoral research experiences.

Manathunga (ibid, p.93), in writing about 'intercultural postgraduate supervision' highlights the postcolonial themes of contact zones, transculturalism and unhomeliness, asserting that they allow exploration of how colonial overtones/stereotypes may impact, subconsciously, on perceptions. The concept of unhomeliness, which I find particularly valuable, is the ambivalence that supervisor and supervisee can feel in their adjustments to new cultural practices. With some caveats, one might usefully use this framework when working with any doctoral researcher yet using it to analyse the experiences of those from other contexts can enable us to support their transition to UK higher education more effectively – an area that I will highlight in the Symposium.

The principles of good supervision, as of effective learning and teaching, obtain across contexts. There are, however, some important differences reflected in many of the

accounts, ones that need to be established as central when supervising doctoral researchers who are not from the 'local' context. The first one is that of expectations. People who come to the UK – or study with a UK university - from other contexts and academic traditions carry with them many accrued experiences. Given that the majority of people who undertake doctorates in education tend to be more mature, usually with extensive professional experience, they will have formed expectations of supervision. Such expectations also apply to 'local' doctoral researchers, but the latter are more likely to be working in their first language, are usually more familiar with the learning and teaching approaches and tend to expect an informal relationship with their supervisor. Secondly, it is rare that 'local' researchers will have left their family several thousand miles away to undertake their doctorates. Oduro, one of the contributors, begins her story with the words 'Mum when are you coming home'? and writes poignantly of the sacrifices that she made, in leaving her 3 children in Ghana, to do her PhD in Cambridge. The third is that of managing and reframing the supervisory relationship so that one does not feel disempowered by it, in particular by the supervisor's use of language, and so that it is not the dominant relationship in the researcher's life. The majority of writers mention the support they gained from 'other international' researchers, whether from their home context or from elsewhere and indicate the difficulties encountered in getting to know their 'local' peers. Such frustration and disappointment at this lack of interaction is, unfortunately, well documented in the literature (e.g. Hyland et al., 2008, Montgomery, 2010); it is, however, even more salutary to read that such paucity of interaction exists for doctoral researchers.

Many of the stories bear witness to what some writers refer to as 'cultural shock'. I have been working with postgraduate students from and in different parts of the world since 1999; indeed my research continues to focus on how we all navigate the rapidly changing, often uneven landscapes of higher education and how our identities are influenced by our encounters in these landscapes. I like to believe that I am developing cultural capability, that is an understanding of how we are all shaped by values and systems that have different consequences for some people and societies, often resulting in social division. Being culturally capable, for me, means understanding those values and systems and being challenged to question my own beliefs and values, in particular about learning and teaching (Trahar, 2011). Yet, in reading these stories, I realise how much I still have to learn - of the importance that Kai Ren placed on the doctoral hat;

of how Shawanda Stockfelt feels that she is continuously “categorised” in different ways; of Cheryl Rounsaville’s anger at people feeling they have the right to be critical of ‘her culture’, yet not of others’ culture; of Thushari Welikala’s journey of ‘coming to (un) know in another culture’.

Some writers describe experiences of the hegemony of methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks that are informed, mainly, though not exclusively, according to Shawanda Stockfelt’s narrative by ‘white (usually dead) philosophers and the white feminist ideals’. Such a perspective highlights the importance of drawing on work from many contexts and cultures when ‘teaching’ research methodology and to encourage all doctoral researchers to create methodological approaches grounded in their local narratives.

The supervisory relationship is therefore, only one of the themes in the stories recounted here. Using a postcolonial framework to attend to themes of courage, developing new knowledge, learning to survive and thrive in different contexts, challenging perceptions – in others and in ourselves – we can develop more effective strategies to develop inclusive learning environments that are much richer for all of us involved in the doctoral research endeavour.

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