



Society for Research
into Higher Education

Supervising International Research Students

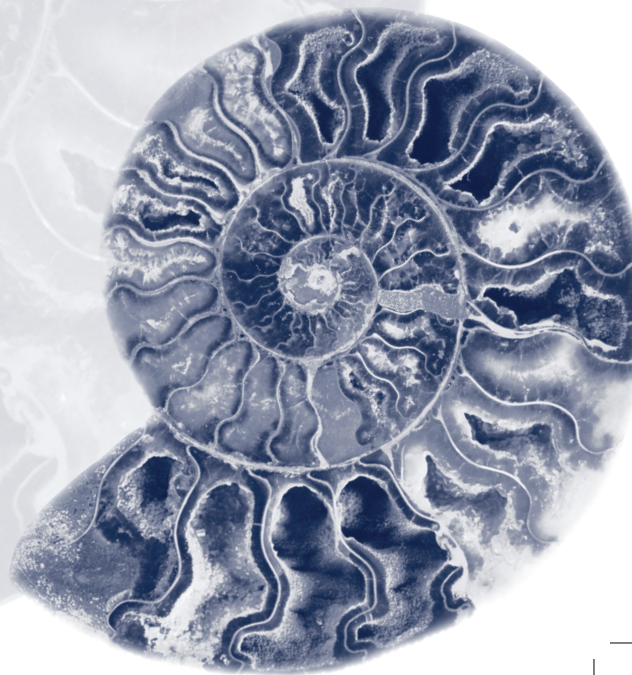
Eunice Okorochoa

Editors: Françoise Carénas & Martin Gough

**ISSUES IN POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION:
MANAGEMENT, TEACHING AND SUPERVISION**

A Series of Consultative Guides produced
by the Postgraduate Issues Network of the
Society for Research into Higher Education

Series Two | Number Four





Society for Research into Higher Education

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FOREWORD TO THE SERIES

The SRHE Postgraduate Guides have proven a very popular series and meet a growing demand for advice and guidance on the practical issues involved in the management, teaching and supervision of postgraduates who come from a wide variety of disciplines and backgrounds often with widely different needs.

This new series of the Postgraduate Guides, launched in 2007, contains a number of new titles as well as some revisions of the most popular guides from the first series.

As with the first series the aim has been to produce clear practical guides, devoid of jargon, intended as a useful set of tools that will help deliver and support the delivery of high quality postgraduate training.

The guides are developed by the SRHE Postgraduate Issues Network. The executive team responsible for conceiving and directing this new series is led by Pam Denicolo and comprises: Alistair McCulloch, Martin Gough and Helen Perkins, Director of SRHE.

The SRHE Postgraduate Issues Network

The Postgraduate Issues Network was set up in January 1995 to help its members find out about new developments in the field of postgraduate education and to interpret these for their own use and benefit. In particular the network is concerned with: financial issues, quality issues, issues of good practice, issues specific to and independent of discipline and issues relating to employment. The network has more than a hundred members, including a number in the USA, Canada, Australia and Hong Kong, and it continues to grow.

The network offers its members much more than a series of meetings: it aims to be a true network of mutual support. It does this by:

- providing speakers at meetings to focus on a topic of general or topical interest
- ensuring that there is the opportunity for members to raise their own issues to discuss in or after meetings
- circulating material from members between meetings, and
- stimulating informal support and collaboration outside meetings.

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Members of the Editorial Board help steer the Postgraduate Guide Series and individual members are invited to contribute as readers on specific Guides.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

We found the first edition of Eunice's Guide (number 1 in the original SRHE Postgraduate Guides series and published in 1997) quite unique. It is a short Guide and devoid of jargon. It provides a level of awareness of intercultural matters yet should appeal to a wide variety of people with relatively little time for exploring such matters in depth. It deftly points the reader away from easy stereotyping, by opening up opportunities for reflection on practice and creating an awareness of the potential for constructive solutions to communication problems in a university or college context. The Guide presents issues which have remained fairly constant through the decades of the existence of research degree programmes. Technologies evolve, money and people move faster in our frenetic global age, but we still have to learn to communicate and decode each other's meanings in our everyday personal interactions.

We draw variously from our experiences overseas and in Britain, particularly working in research on policy in higher education and from extensive reviews of the literature. To our delight we found, for this second edition ten years on, nothing that we needed to do to improve the basic structure of the Guide and relatively little editing needed to improve the content. With the additional assistance of Tim Brown contributing as Reader for this revision, we have provided some more recent references and resources arising from the ongoing work of organisations which make international research students their particular concern. It is fitting that, just as this Guide launched the first series, so it should take its place amongst the new titles beginning the second series.

About the editors and reader

Françoise Carénas is a teacher of overseas students in Britain, and has successfully completed her PhD in Education at the University of Reading in 2006, on the impact of British higher education on the identities of international students. Dr Martin Gough and Dr Tim Brown are both former General Secretaries of the National Postgraduate Committee of the UK as well as members of the editorial board of this series of SRHE Guides. Martin is a Research Fellow in University College London's Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching, researching under the auspices of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Higher Education, and co-convenes the SRHE Postgraduate Issues Network. Tim has returned to the department where he obtained his PhD in 2004, as Lecturer in Mobile Communications in the Centre for Communication Systems Research at the University of Surrey, via postdoctoral research at the University of Aalborg.

Françoise Carénas and Martin Gough

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The material for this Guide has been gathered from many sources.

As a former international student in the UK myself, I have for some years been interested in the experiences of international students quite generally (see the Introduction for a discussion on the use of the term 'international student' as used in the Guide). More recently I have been fortunate to be able to develop this interest as a doctoral student at the University of Surrey. The research involved surveys of the literature and interviews in twelve higher education institutions across England, Scotland and Wales, and it led to a number of presentations and publications.

My interest from the perspective of postgraduate research students and their supervisors developed when I was invited to present to the National Postgraduate Committee of the UK and to the Postgraduate Issues Network of the Society for Research into Higher Education and to publish in the area. I have learned much from these activities and acknowledge in particular the benefit of discussions with members of the Postgraduate Issues Network.

This Guide is intentionally not written as a research paper but as a handbook designed to be informative, practically helpful and easy to dip into. The aim is to stimulate readers to think about their own preferred courses of action when interacting with international students. Justifications for the assertions in the Guide lie either in my own source material or in referenced literature. Additional help and advice are offered in the sub-sections on further reading and useful contacts.

I am grateful to the following individuals for commenting on drafts of this Guide, although any errors are my own: Dr Tom Black, University of Surrey; Fiona Cownie, University of Leicester; Professor Lewis Elton, University College London; Arthur Henderson; Dr Paira Sanguansai, Hat Yai University, Thailand; Dr Nick Sutcliffe, Leeds Metropolitan University; Dr Ronnie Swain, Queen's University Belfast; Dr Nicholas Watts, University of North London. I hope this Guide proves helpful. I would very much appreciate hearing suggestions from readers on how it could be improved in future editions.

More about the author

Eunice Okorocha completed her PhD in 1997 in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of Surrey. Her work includes the following papers and publications:

'Some Cultural and Communication Issues in Working with International Students', *Journal of International Education*, 7, (2), (1996), 31–38.

'The International Student Experience: Expectations and Realities', *Journal of Graduate Education*, 2, (Winter 1996), 80–84.

'Supervisors from the Western Tradition and Research Students from Non-English-Speaking Backgrounds: Potential Pitfalls and their Avoidance' (co-authored with Pat Cryer), in Ryan, Y. & Zuber-Skerritt, O. (ed.) *Supervising Postgraduate Students from Non-English-Speaking Backgrounds* (Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, 1999).

Eunice Okorocha

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INTRODUCTION

Call them what you will, variously, 'international students', 'overseas students', 'students from non-English-speaking backgrounds': many adapt quickly to studying in a Western culture, and most adapt in good time, given professional and caring supervision and a supportive environment, and assuming their own commitment. Nevertheless, in the UK we do find that there are problems associated particularly with supervising international students and seemingly more problems than we find with home students. My suggestion is that many of the problems could, with knowledge, attention and goodwill on all sides, be nipped in the bud before developing out of hand, and in this spirit this Guide aims to provide help.

The Guide begins with a section on institutional and departmental procedures prior to admission of students, as a number of problems tend to occur when these are inappropriate. The bulk of the Guide is devoted to common causes of misunderstanding, so that readers can take action to avoid them. It is not the case that all the responsibility for action lies with staff, although staff may have to take the initiative to enhance the chances of avoiding misunderstandings. The students too have a general responsibility to adapt their own behaviour and approaches in such a way that they respect the cultural tolerance and diversity of the host country, even where they disagree with, or cannot endorse, aspects of it. The Guide suggests recommendations for supervisors, tutors, and institutional managers¹, and ends with sections on further reading and useful contact addresses.

Throughout the Guide, the emphasis is on students from those countries where it is common practice to study abroad in an English-speaking environment and where the home culture is not a Western one. Such students will be described, somewhat arbitrarily, as 'international students'. Necessary as an umbrella term it may be, but it is also misleading. International students are not an homogeneous group: they are individuals in their own right; and they come from a variety of cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds.

The Guide should be useful for new supervisors and tutors, for experienced supervisors overseeing the work of new supervisors, for experienced supervisors who may appreciate a different perspective on what they are doing, and for academic managers with responsibility for staff development, quality assurance and improved support facilities for international students. The Guide addresses issues pertinent to postgraduate research students, but its insights should also facilitate productive and enjoyable interaction with international students at the taught postgraduate and undergraduate levels.

¹ I use 'Institutional manager' as an umbrella term for anyone who has a special responsibility for postgraduates, postgraduate research and research generally. It could include individuals with a departmental responsibility for postgraduates; members of certain committees; heads of research groups; heads of department; staff of graduate schools and students' unions, etc.

Although the Guide considers issues that are seen to cause the most common concerns, it cannot address all concerns. For this, expert advice may be necessary. Most institutions have an academic administrator, study advisor or students' union officer, with special responsibility for, and knowledge of, international students, who should be available to provide assistance.

The Guide is not prescriptive. It aims to draw issues to readers' attention so that they can make timely decisions about appropriate courses of action. Please read the Guide in this light, and modify what it says to suit your own discipline, your own department, the needs of your international students and of course your own preferences. Then act on your concerns as early as reasonably possible. The longer problems are left, the more difficult it becomes to dismantle behaviour patterns and build new ones. Open discussion may suffice but, if you think it likely to cause embarrassment, then adopt gentle and tactful exploration, giving students the benefit of any doubt in the first instance. It may also be useful to solicit the help of a more experienced person from the culture concerned.

Irrespective of your role and experience as a tutor or supervisor, reading this Guide and applying it to your own situation should help make your work with international students easier, more pleasurable and less time-consuming. Consequently, the international students in your care should not only produce high quality dissertations and theses more efficiently and enjoyably for them, but also become valuable members of your academic community and help market you and your institution in their own countries through their favourable reports.

I ENROLLING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS FOR POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH

Appropriate enrolment procedures are important for all students, but for international research students they are crucial². Box 1.1 analyses the typical spiral of negative outcomes from inappropriate enrolment procedures.

Box 1.1 Inappropriately enrolled international research students can result in:

- overworked and overstressed supervisors, who then experience disruption to other aspects of their own work, which has the knock-on effect of inhibiting service to the international students concerned
- expensive remedial action, which is the responsibility of the institution to take forward once a student is registered
- the students concerned having to cope with personal failure
- dissatisfied international customers who carry unfavourable reports back to their own countries.

Prior to admission, supervisors and tutors personally should satisfy themselves about the language competence and academic ability of prospective international students. Assessment by administrators, although necessary, is not sufficient on its own (and so I do not make that my focus here). The main issue is that in the current financial climate, where international students' fees are a much needed source of income, there are institutions which have been known to accept international students without due consideration. Supervisors and tutors need to embrace responsibility for the requisite judgements about admission.

How supervisors and tutors should satisfy themselves about the suitability of prospective international students rests significantly on individual preference, guided by the norms of the discipline and general support that the research group, the department and the institution can provide. If prospective students are out of the country at the time of making their initial approach, it may be helpful to converse with them by email, being cheaper and quicker than normal post and less intrusive than fax. Another possibility is to set a test in the form of asking for extensive written discussion on a relevant journal article. Yet another is via a quick phone call, for countries where this is possible, to ensure at least that the international student and supervisor can understand each other's spoken communication. It may also be possible to arrange a video-conference link. The applicant's supporting references can be of varying quality, ranging from extremely helpful to unreliable. So it really is advisable to use a range of methods for checking the suitability of the candidate.

² See Further Reading (on page 16): UKCOSA publications and Universities UK (formerly Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals).

2

RECOGNISING AND DEALING WITH COMMON MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT THE ROLE OF A SUPERVISOR

There is a concern that some international students tend to expect too much from supervisors and tutors in the way of guidance, support and even actual participation in the work. A related factor is the difficulty often experienced by supervisors when trying to form relationships with students as colleagues and equals. The first step towards addressing these concerns is to understand the likely reasons behind them.

Many international research students come from higher education systems where it is normal to venerate age and experience and where it would be impolite to treat academics as anything other than near infallible. Consequently, when removed to a Western culture, the students find it inconceivable even to consider entering into debate with supervisors. It would be impossibly rude to imply that supervisors' judgements could be anything other than perfect, or the best around at least, and it would be arrogant for students to assert their own ideas and opinions. Their role, as they see it, is to follow whatever instructions their academic superiors choose to give them.

It is important that supervisors identify such behaviour as early as possible, so that they can do something about it before patterns of interaction become set. All that may be necessary is for supervisors to give a form of 'permission' that independent thought is acceptable and valued. Several ways of doing so may need to be found because students may feel uncomfortable acting on the 'permission' unless it is reinforced over time. Possibilities include directly pointing out the respective convention, tactfully applauding the behaviour of students who have made the adjustment, and soliciting the help of students from a similar background who have enjoyed more enculturation in the ways of the host education system.

Once students find the courage and confidence to debate and express their own ideas and opinions, they may need extra help in putting this into practice. Supervisors can help by allowing the students time to express themselves and by making openings for them in group discussions. Since the students may lack experience of how to express disagreement or offer their own ideas and opinions in a socially acceptable manner, their comments and questions can come across as rude when they do manage to speak out. Supervisors can help by advising them tactfully on acceptable forms of words and body language. With some international students such training in self-expression can be a lengthy process, so the earlier in their programmes it starts the better.

There are additional reasons why international students may seem to expect more from supervisors than the supervisors think reasonable. One is that international students are usually away from home on a grant or bursary for a fixed period only. They know that they have to complete within this time or they must face the disgrace of going back home as failures. Being a 'writing up' student (continuing after the 'normal' period of study) outside the home country presents many more hurdles than being in this position in one's home country. So it is particularly important for international students to set and stick to time schedules, and supervisors would do well to show that they are aware of this and are prepared to do what they can to help.

Failure of students to be aware of the understanding and support of the supervisor may lead to frustrations and despair. If they do not simply withdraw from their studies, they may try to take matters into their own hands and become unreasonably demanding of supervisors. Some students may be too afraid to complain, or do not know how to do so, when they have actually been let down by their supervision arrangements. This is indeed a bad enough problem for home students too, so it is important that complaints procedures are publicised clearly.

One possible reason why international students, as well as home students, may expect too much from a supervisor is the etymology of the term 'supervisor', with its connotations of overseeing work in a controlling, directing manner, with potential close involvement. The North American term 'advisor' is a more accurate description of how most supervisors understand their role: once an initial weaning process is over, they would advise, encourage and sound warnings in response to the student's own ideas and suggestions, but they would not assume a directing role³.

In conclusion, international students are not inherently rude or dull, at least no more than home students, but they do need help to overcome inappropriate culturally-based patterns of interaction and expectations. Most international students do appreciate this help and will use it then to help themselves.

³ For elaboration, see Cryer (1997).

3

RECOGNISING AND DEALING
WITH UNDUE DEMANDS

A common concern is that some international students seem to make unreasonable demands on the time and attention of others. The reader may wish to reflect on whether the concern is really just about the behaviours of international students or about the behaviours of many home students too.

The deference to authority which we discussed earlier can result in some international students making excessive and inappropriate demands on academics who are not their supervisors, and initially often unbeknown to their supervisors. One rationale for this will be that, since academics are so superior to students, the greater the number of them involved the better the research will necessarily be. Such students need to be made aware that there is a professional etiquette for asking other academics for help and advice.

Etiquette demands a number of considerations. It includes not approaching the others without the main supervisor's knowledge and, at least in general terms, agreement. It includes informing their supervisor of any contact that happens by chance. And it includes not asking others for additional help that could be construed either as an expectation to do the student's work for them or as an implication that their main supervisor is inadequate⁴. Another reason behind students making inappropriate demands on other academics could be the mistaken belief that there is added value in flitting from supervisor to supervisor for advice on what to do. We should, by contrast, promote the added value generally of collaboration, where all parties are willing participants for purposes of stimulating creative thinking—organising forums for discussion being an illustration.

Insofar as international students make excessive demands on clerical and technical support staff, the most likely rationale stems from 'status-shock' and not laziness, rudeness or an inflated sense of self-importance. Many international students have been enjoying prestigious professional status in their home countries, where others do mundane work for them. They need to have explained to them that in Western higher education systems, research students normally do their own photocopying, typing, etc. Once they understand this, they are normally glad to comply.

Because some international students are used to others doing mundane tasks for them, they may be unfamiliar with quite commonplace equipment, such as photocopiers, fax machines and computers. The students need to have to have the use of the equipment explained to them, which may require some action on the part of supervisors in terms of finding others (research students or clerical or technical staff) who are prepared to help. It is seldom a job for supervisors themselves.

4

RECOGNISING AND DEALING WITH
MISUNDERSTANDINGS DUE TO MORE
PARTICULAR DIFFERENCES IN CULTURE⁵

Good supervisor-student relationships are of prime importance for successfully completing research degrees. Yet, where supervisors are not familiar with students' cultures, behaviours can all too easily be perceived as rude and lead to a deterioration in relationships. Again, the first step to redressing such situations is to understand likely sources of problems.

One source of misunderstanding concerns aspects of time. Western culture is dominated by the twenty-four-hour day and seven-day week in which work activities and leisure are firmly structured. Some cultures, particularly African and Asian ones, may not be used to this rigid concept of time, although they may be taught it prior to leaving home for their studies. So international students may regard time as more flexible than it is. This applies to times assigned for appointments and the duration of discussions, the length of time necessary for people to become acquainted, times appropriate for unannounced visits, time schedules, etc. So international students may not regard lack of punctuality as inappropriate. Yet lateness for supervision can irritate supervisors because it wastes their time and disrupts their schedules. Lateness for seminars can insult the speaker and seem arrogant, for instance in terms of the latecomer presuming that they are able easily to pick up the thread of what is going on.

Some misunderstandings are due to cultural norms of interpersonal space, the physical space that individuals in social situations find comfortable to maintain between them. These vary not only from culture to culture but sometimes too for different sexes within the same culture. Since people from some cultures stand and converse at a much closer distance than do people from other cultures, feelings of discomfort can soon be generated in anyone who feels that their space is being violated. When Western supervisors and research students meet international students, this can lead to some embarrassment: supervisors move to restore their interpersonal space only to have the international students draw closer to intrude into it once more. Again, gentle and tactful exploration of assumptions and preferences can help, as can open discussion or the help of a more experienced member of the student's culture.

Body language is a significant aspect of all cultures, but the meanings associated with various gestures can vary considerably from one culture to another, again leading to misunderstanding. Across cultures, gestures can easily communicate the opposite of what is intended. Examples include the use or avoidance of eye contact, the nodding or shaking of the head, and the acceptability or otherwise of touch. Different cultures have their own implicit understandings of the meanings of variations in speech, facial expression, and

⁵ Parts of this section are based on: British Council & UKCOSA (1997).

other non-verbal cues. So non-verbal communication patterns of international students can be grossly misinterpreted. For example, in the West, the use of eye contact is a sign of attentive behaviour; whereas Africans 'listen' just with their ears and may or may not look at the speaker. For them the avoidance of eye contact is a culturally essential indication of politeness and respect for the older or professionally superior person. Yet uninformed supervisors, immersed in their own cultural norms, may regard it as indicating sullenness, shiftiness or boredom – each case bordering on rudeness.

We saw in section 2 that the cultural value of deference to age and authority affects how the role of the supervisor is perceived. There are related issues. One is the difficulty that some international students have in addressing academics by their first names. This form of address is the norm in many UK departments, and signals solidarity between members. In such a context, supervisors will find the use of their academic titles embarrassingly formal. However, insistence on use of first names can in turn constitute a social signal to be misunderstood. International students from some cultures will interpret the use of first names as signalling a form of friendship that would permit them, for example, to stop a supervisor in a corridor to chat, as they would a friend. Yet, in normal work time, most supervisors are far too engrossed in their various roles to find it easy to switch into more relaxed and sociable conversation mode, even if they are not pressed for time.

Potentially dissonant behaviours and attitudes which are rooted in cultural differences come in various forms: how to express thanks; whether a 'present' is regarded as a bribe or an indication of appreciation; whether gifts should be opened in the presence of the giver; modes of problem-solving; whether food should be left on a plate; whether to eat silently or with more obvious audible enjoyment; greeting norms such as the form of spoken words, the handshake, the faint smile or cursory nod. In the more specific academic context, deference to authority is usually behind the widespread complaint that certain international students quote excessively and unreflectively from the works of others. By doing so, they usually believe that they are honouring the author, but they will need guidance on how to express their own voice and on the balance between quoting in moderation and on using their own words.

The list of potential misunderstandings is endless. What matters is readiness on the parts of supervisors to extend their knowledge and understanding of what could be on such a list, so as to have a wider perspective and foresight concerning any behaviours on the parts of international students that might, on the face of it, seem strange and even rude. Supervisors can thus help international students to overcome culture shock in their new environment and to settle down to productive work. Accordingly the supervisor-student relationship can become positively enjoyable as well as productive.

5

DEALING WITH LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

International students from non-English-speaking backgrounds necessarily have some degree of language difficulty, just because their first language is not English. The demands of writing and discussing in academic English are high, so a great deal will be expected of those who are less practised. The effort required to bring oneself up to speed will vary from one student to the next: every student will have a different set of needs for each of the tasks of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Supervisors need to be sympathetic to such problems, but that does not mean that it is their responsibility actually to provide remedial help; neither does it mean that they should have to put up with language difficulties which are a serious impediment to the normal work of a research student.

It is of prime importance that an international student's language competence should be fully checked out prior to admission. Then, if it is inadequate and would require significant tuition to bring it up to standard, the student should not be accepted. Prospective supervisors should be given the opportunity to verify the candidate's language competence for themselves (see section 1). That way, they do not have to rely just on the assessment by institutional or departmental administrators. Once the student is accepted, it becomes the responsibility of the supervisor, department and institution to do everything that is reasonable to raise language competence to a standard appropriate for effectively conducting the work, even if this can cause frustration and be time consuming and expensive.

Most international students find 'receptive' language functions – reading and listening – easier than the 'productive' ones of writing and speaking. However, the development of good oral communication is important if international students are to become full members of the department, participating in debate, problem solving and creative thinking. Furthermore, many international students may be expected to teach in English when they get back home, which again requires oral competence.

To some extent, vocabulary and pronunciation patterns should improve naturally through immersion in English-speaking society. However, a major contrary influence is students' natural preference for spending their leisure time with other members of their own indigenous community, so that they can eat familiar food, relax in familiar ways and speak their own language. So home and international students tend to develop separate social networks. Understandable as this is, it does nothing to improve competence in spoken English for the latter. It is helpful for supervisors to point this difficulty out to their international students and advise them to find some way of interacting regularly on a social basis with native English speakers. As sojourners, international students are grateful for an introduction to facilitators such as international study advisors, national societies, local churches, etc. Student peer groupings, such as department-based forums and the institution-wide postgraduate representative association or social society⁶, will prove useful

⁶ The postgraduate-oriented association should function as institution-level representation for postgraduates and so can provide a forum for raising issues pertinent to international research students. Historically, it has varied across institutions how these bodies have been set up and run: in many, it is a body governed by the students' union; in others, it has been set up by an office of the institution; for discussion of this, see Gough (2004) and Brown (2003, 2004).

provision for integration.

Until such time as the spoken English of the less articulate international students improves, it is important for supervisors to bear in mind how easy it is to misunderstand international students who have yet to appreciate the more hidden nuances in the practice of a language, that take longer to absorb than its vocabulary and grammar alone. For example, tones of voice carry different meanings in different languages: in some, an ordinary conversation can sound at first hearing like an international incident; requests that are polite in one language can sound abrupt in another through a straight translation; and certain types of humour can come across as insulting.

Supervisors need to ensure that they themselves are not misunderstood by their international students, for which it is important to bear in mind the range of regional accents, figures of speech and the varying more hidden elements which the student may, or may not otherwise, be encountering across British culture. Essential instructions are best given in writing, and speech should aim to adopt a measured pace and be sparing with colloquialisms, jargon, acronyms and overly complex verbs or grammatical structures.

Many institutions have their own language centres which cater specifically for students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. It may be helpful to find out about such facilities and even lobby for their enhancement, to include, for example, the provision of oral communication classes and help with thesis writing, if those are undeveloped.

It is important that international students be encouraged to write on a regular basis to enable any problems with written English to be identified at an early stage. Many institutions accept a six-monthly progress report as the appropriate mechanism. Problems can then be given attention before the main writing of the thesis.

The writing of the dissertation or thesis should begin sooner rather than later. Supervisors should communicate exactly what their students may expect from them in the way of feedback and help on their writing. How much copy-editing and stylistic work supervisors are prepared to do on their students' theses varies enormously from one tutor or supervisor to another, but most experienced supervisors and tutors agree that their major responsibility is with academic rather than linguistic matters⁷. If international students know this sufficiently early on, they should be able to find alternative forms of help with the linguistic aspects of their writing. It is, for example, normally entirely admissible for them to solicit the help of an English friend to check their grammar and spelling, albeit not to provide the contents of their dissertation.

Cultural as well as linguistic matters can come into play in the outcome of the viva examination, such that the student does not respond to the examiners in ways demonstrating their academic potential, and it is not unheard of for the outcome to go to appeal. It is especially appropriate for the supervisor to prepare the student for the viva, so they know exactly what is expected for a successful defence of the thesis.

⁷ For a fuller discussion on the extent of supervisors' involvement in thesis writing, see Cryer (1997).

6

HELPING STUDENTS OVERCOME PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH THEIR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Higher education institutions are multi-faith environments. Yet students' religious beliefs and practices inevitably have a considerable bearing on their behaviours in these institutions and hence on the satisfactory progress of their work. For example, some religions demand a different status for males and females, such that it has gender implications for assigning supervisors, if we wish for the interpersonal relations to be as happy as possible. Some religions do not allow females to shake hands with males. Some religions have dietary regulations which may have implications for departmental social activities; many have holy days which may have implications for organised activities in general.

Taking account of international students' religious beliefs and practices involves knowing what these are in detail, determining the commitment of the individual concerned to them and anticipating consequent behaviours. This is too much to expect of most supervisors. If, however, other aspects of the relationship are right, having awareness and sensitivity and encouraging discussion normally prevent embarrassment and misunderstanding. Then arrangements can be made for flexible accommodation of religious beliefs and practices.

International students are normally prepared to discuss religious matters. Those individuals would find it difficult to understand that religion itself can be taboo in certain social interactions in the West.

7

HELPING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS COPE WITH PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION

Mention must be made of prejudice and discrimination, because it can be so devastating to international students, especially where they are deprived of the support system provided by the wider family and friends. They naturally feel vulnerable, anxious and sometimes disorientated. Isolation, loneliness and stress may affect their health and subsequently their academic performance.

Although there is little that supervisors and other members of a department and institution can do about prejudice and discrimination from agents amongst the general public, they can help to ensure that the research environment is friendly and supportive towards their international students. Where it is, students and supervisors alike will have a more comfortable and enjoyable working life: the students should become valuable members of the academic community and produce quality work more efficiently and enjoyably; and they should also be natural ambassadors for the institution back in their own countries.

8

RECOMMENDATIONS

This section summarises recommendations on how readers can help international research students. Some recommendations emerge out of the previous sections; others are selected from accepted good practice in connection with all research students⁸ and are included because they are likely to be particularly important for international students. The recommendations are set against the background that international students themselves have responsibilities. Box 8.1 lists some suggestions for tutors and supervisors, who need to be understanding and sympathetic to the problems of their international research students and to work with them to help them to assimilate.

Box 8.1 Improving the experience of international research students: recommendations for supervisors and tutors for building good supervisory relationships

- Orientate yourself to acquire information about other cultures. This can simply be a matter of keeping your eyes and ears open, which does not necessarily involve a great outlay of time. Or, should you so wish, it can involve reading books and attending social events run by or for international students.
- Be aware of cultural issues and of how they can lead to misunderstandings between supervisors and international students.
- Examine your implicit assumptions about international students; try to make them explicit; and then question their validity.
- Initiate exploration with your international students to clarify the meanings behind any verbal or non-verbal communication which make you uncomfortable.
- Show an interest in the welfare of your international students, but find out about appropriate support services so that you can make referrals to them should that become necessary.
- At the outset of each student's research programme, devote specific attention to negotiating the respective roles of supervisor and student and your mutual expectations of one another.
- Explain the professional etiquette for seeking help from other academics.
- Pay particular attention to helping international research students to work within their time schedules and keep to their deadlines.
- Monitor the progress of your research students and give them regular feedback.
- Act before potential problems escalate and get out of hand.
- Where appropriate, lobby management to improve the provision for international research students (see Box 8.2).

Departments and institutions need to support supervisors by providing whatever training, development or other support that may be necessary to help them to fulfil their role. This necessarily includes providing their research students with whatever central support may

⁸ National Postgraduate Committee (1999); Higher Education Quality Council (1996) and QAA (1999, 2004).

be required to free supervisions for matters relating more specifically to the research programme. Departments and institutions also need to give and be seen to be giving value for money to international research students. Box 8.2 gives specific recommendations for management.

Box 8.2 Improving the experience of international research students: recommendations for institutional management

As each institution has its own norms about what responsibilities are delegated from central control down to departments, some of following recommendations are for heads of department, or their nominees as departmental postgraduate tutors or equivalent officers, and some are for institutional managers (including students' union officers). Responsibilities which are most likely to fall on the institution as a whole are at the beginning and those which are most likely to fall on individual departments are at the end. Institutions or departments should provide:

- a member of academic or administrative staff with special responsibility for international students
- encouragement, and where possible also modest funds, to facilitate involvement in international and national student societies, as well as to operate the local postgraduate student association
- ways to increase awareness among staff and students generally of the experiences and potential difficulties of international students, e.g. talks organised by the international/national student societies
- the circulation of relevant codes of practice
- institutional facilities available during vacations, since research students, particularly international research students, work through vacations
- full and regularly updated publicity on services and facilities in simple and clear English
- a channel whereby international research students can give feedback to supervisors, departments and institutions without fear of repercussions
- a face-to-face pre-admission interview or some other means by which all parties can check that the student, the department and supervisor are suitably matched
- realistic pre-admission information, including information on such services and facilities as the students' union, computing, printing, counselling, banking, services to help with language problems, chaplaincies; accommodation; nurseries; careers; shops; eating places, etc. Pre-admission information should also include details about the host department and the academic interests of potential supervisors
- cultural orientation on arrival
- institutional and departmental induction including guidance on access to facilities
- some form of repeat induction to accommodate research students who arrive at non-standard times in the academic year
- a protected and adequate workspace
- departmental facilities available during vacations.

Both the author and the editors have engaged variously in systematic and more incidental research into the situation of international research students in the UK, and some institutions have made investigations into their own students. However, we would welcome more comprehensive surveys at national, European, and the wider international level on issues addressed in this Guide.

9 RESOURCES

Further reading

General

Alien, A. & Higgins, T. (1994) *Higher Education: the International Student Experience*, London: Heist Publications in association with UCAS.

Brown, T. (2003) *Providing for the Postgraduate Market: an investigation into exclusive facilities for postgraduates*, Troon: National Postgraduate Committee.

Brown, T. (2004) 'Providing for the Postgraduate Market: Extracts', *Journal of Graduate Education*, vol.3, no.3, 86–92.

Cryer, P. (1996) *The Research Student's Guide to Success*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

The European Charter for Researchers: <http://ec.europa.eu/eracareers/europeancharter>

Gaskin, N. (2002) *International Students in Crisis: a Guide for Institutions*, UKCOSA.

Gough, M. (2004) 'Postgraduate Student Associations: an analytic, a synthetic, or an *a posteriori* ontology?', *Journal of Graduate Education*, vol.3, no.3, 68–81.

Greenaway, D. & Tuck, J. (1995) *Economic Impact of International Students in UK Higher Education: A Report for the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals*, London: Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals.

McNamara, D. (ed.) (1997) *Overseas Students in Higher Education*, London: Routledge.

The Missenden Centre: Bibliography for research students and their supervisors, <http://www.missendencentre.co.uk/biblio1.htm>

National Postgraduate Committee (1999) *The Postgraduate Resource Folder* (1st Ed.) Troon: National Postgraduate Committee; contains the original publications: *Guidelines on Codes of Practice for Postgraduate Research* (1992, 1995, ISBN 1 899997008); *Guidelines for the Conduct of Research Degree Appeals* (1995, 1996, ISBN 1 899997032); *Guidelines on Accommodation and Facilities for Postgraduate Research* (1995, ISBN 1 899997040); e-version of Folder at: <http://www.npc.org.uk/postgraduatefactsandissues>

Ryan, Y. & Zuber-Skerritt, O. (ed.) (1999) *Supervising Postgraduate Students from Non-English-Speaking Backgrounds*, Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

QAA (2004): Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, *Code of Practice on Postgraduate Research Degree Programmes* (Gloucester: QAA, revised version September 2004; online at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section1/> - previous version 1999; the QAA superseded the Higher Education Quality Council and its (1996) *Guidelines on the Quality Assurance of Research Degrees*. London: Higher Education Quality Council.

University of Nottingham Institute for Research into Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, 'The Learning Experiences of International Research Students', IRLTHE research notes – No. 2, <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/education/centres/irlthe/international-research-students-report.pdf>

University of Warwick Centre for Academic and Professional Development, Bibliography on 'Working with International Students in Higher Education', <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/cap/resources/books/intstuds/>

Enrolling international students for postgraduate research

Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals/Committee of Directors of Polytechnics (1992) *The Management of Higher Degrees undertaken by Overseas Students*, London: Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals.

Smith, P. (ed) (1988) *The Fairground of the Market*, London: UKCOSA; Chapter 11, 'Responsible Recruitment – UKCOSA's Model Code of Practice'.

UKCOSA, *Developing a Policy for Recruiting Overseas Students: Report of a Conference*. London: UKCOSA (All UKCOSA publications are available from UKCOSA. Its address and URL are in the Useful Contacts section below).

Watts, N. (ed.) (1999) *The International Postgraduate: Challenges to British Higher Education*, UK Council for Graduate Education.

Supervising international students

Cryer, P. (1997) *Handling Common Dilemmas in Supervision: Issues in Postgraduate Supervision, Teaching and Management*, Guide no.2, London: Society for Research into Higher Education and The Times Higher Education Supplement.

Denicolo, P. & Pope, M. (1999) 'Supervision and the Overseas Student', in Ryan, Y. & Zuber-Skerritt, O. (ed.) *Supervising Postgraduates from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds*, Buckingham: SHRE and Open University Press.

Todd, S. (1997) 'Supervising Overseas Students: Problem or Opportunity', in McNamara, D. (ed.) *Overseas Students in Higher Education*, London: Routledge.

Wisker, Gina (2004) *The Good Supervisor: Supervising Postgraduate and Undergraduate Research for Doctoral Theses and Dissertations*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.

Recognising and dealing with misunderstandings due to differences in culture

British Council & UKCOSA (1997) *Feeling at Home: A Guide to Cultural Issues for those working with International Students* (2nd Ed.), London: British Council & UKCOSA.

Lago, C. & Barty, A. (2003) *Working with International Students: A cross-cultural training manual* (2nd Ed.), UKCOSA: Council for International Education.

Dealing with language problems (oral and written)

British Council & UKCOSA (1997) *Feeling at Home: A Guide to Cultural Issues for those working with International Students* (2nd Ed.), London: British Council & UKCOSA.

Carroll, J. & Ryan, J. (ed.) (2005) *Teaching International Students: Improving Learning for All*, London: Routledge.

Recognising and dealing with problems associated with religious beliefs and practices

British Council & UKCOSA (1997) *Feeling at Home: A Guide to Cultural Issues for those working with International Students* (2nd Ed.), London: British Council & UKCOSA.

Recognising and dealing with prejudice and discrimination

Lago, C. & Thompson, J. (1996) *Race, Culture and Counselling*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Useful contacts

The following are contact details or URLs of organisations within the United Kingdom which are concerned with the support of everyone involved with improving the international postgraduate experience in all disciplines. Several websites include information about their publications.

Universities UK

Woburn House
20 Tavistock Square
London WC1H 9HQ
info@UniversitiesUK.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0) 20 7419 4111
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7388 8649
<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk>

The British Council

Tel. +44 (0) 161 957 7755
Fax. +44 (0) 161 957 7762
Minicom +44 (0) 161 957 7188
general.enquiries@britishcouncil.org
<http://www.britishcouncil.org>

The Council for International Education (UKCOSA)

provides advice and information to international students studying in the UK and to staff who work with them.
9–17 St Albans Place
London N1 0NX
<http://www.ukcosa.org.uk>

HOST UK

HOST brings together international students at universities and colleges in the UK with friendly British residents who welcome students to their homes for a short visit.
<http://www.hostuk.org.uk>

Friends International

(formerly International Student Christian Services) a Christian organisation offering friendship to international students (of any faith or none) during their time in the UK.
3 Crescent Stables
139 Upper Richmond Road
London SW15 2TN
info@friendsinternational.org.uk
Tel. +44 (0) 20 8780 3511
Fax. +44 (0) 20 8785 1174
<http://www.friendsinternational.org.uk>

Council for International Students in the United Kingdom (CISUK)

The national representative organisation set up and run by student representatives to promote the interests of international students studying in the United Kingdom.

<http://www.cisuk.org.uk>

The National Postgraduate Committee of the UK

NPC is a charity to advance, in the public interest, postgraduate education in the UK, made up of postgraduate student representatives from educational institutions with postgraduate students. The NPC aims to promote the interests of postgraduates studying in the UK, while remaining politically non-aligned.

npc@npc.org.uk

<http://www.npc.org.uk>

SHRE Postgraduate Issues Network

(One of several SHRE networks)

The Society for Research into Higher Education

76 Portland Place

London W1B 1NT

<http://www.srhe.ac.uk>

The UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE)

The Lichfield Centre

The Friary

Lichfield, WS13 6QG

<http://www.ukcge.ac.uk>

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- 3 Supervising Disabled Research Students
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- The Bologna Process and Beyond: Implications for Postgraduate Education
- Ethical Issues in Postgraduate Education
- Work Based Learning in Postgraduate Education

The series editors would be glad to hear from anyone who would like to write a Guide for the series. Please contact SRHE on srheoffice@srhe.ac.uk

The Series

The Guides in this series are designed for supervisors, postgraduate tutors, heads of department, deans, members of committees on postgraduate and research matters, students' union officers, technical and academically related staff – in fact anyone who in any way contributes to or is responsible for the support of postgraduate students. The Guides will also be useful for anyone involved in supervising projects at undergraduate level.

Each Guide is based on research and/or reflective practice as outlined in its Preface, but the Guides are not presented as research articles. They are short and practical handbooks which are designed to be helpful and easy to dip into. A range of alternative courses of action are presented, and readers are left to make up their own minds about what is best for them in light of the norms and requirements of their disciplines, departments and institutions, the needs of their students and their own personal predilections. In this way the Guides go far beyond basic codes of practice.

Considerable effort has gone into ensuring that the Guides are as useful and relevant as possible. To this end, each one is peer reviewed to maintain standards; it presents a list of suggested further reading and it requests that readers be kind enough to let the authors have suggestions for improvement in the next edition. The Guides are thus consultative.

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