

# **Report: Regional Symposium**

## **Cultural relationships in PhD supervision: a symposium to explore the experiences of international doctoral students and supervisors in UK universities**

**Mayfield House, University of Brighton, 14<sup>th</sup> May 2009**

Organiser: Jennie Jones: Centre for Learning and Teaching

**Funded by: BAICE**

The Centre for Learning and Teaching at the University held a Symposium on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2009, designed to encourage discussion and debate among supervisors and international doctoral students about the influence of cultural factors on cross-cultural doctoral supervision. This event was funded by BAICE, in conjunction with the University of Brighton; and the overall aim was to encourage the “internationalisation of Educational Research, Learning and Teaching (BAICE, 2008).” Eight supervisors and eleven students attended from seven Universities in the Southeast region: Brighton, Chichester, Kent at Canterbury, Portsmouth, Southampton, Surrey and Sussex. Students of a wide range of nationalities took part from the EU and other countries. Separate symposia were held for students in the morning and supervisors in the afternoon. All participants also attended lunch.

During the symposia, there was a brief introduction by Professor Gina Wisker and Jennie Jones, followed by group discussions which focused on three main themes:

- Cultural factors which international doctoral students and supervisors identify as having a significant effect on the supervisory process and student learning
- The effects of these factors on supervision
- Ways in which cross-cultural supervisory practice can be developed in order to enhance the learning and achievement of international doctoral students

At the end of group discussions, main points were summarised during a plenary. These then formed the basis for further discussion among the whole group; who were also invited to discuss possible similarities and differences between universities, disciplines and cultural educational background with regard to the main points raised during the discussions.

The main points which emerged from the symposia discussions and plenary are as follows:

### **Students and supervisors**

#### ***1. Cultural factors which influence cross-cultural supervision***

- Students’ educational cultural background in terms of geographical area and nationality
- Students’ age, maturity and professional experience
- Life and education trajectories
- Points of transition and thresholds within PhD: from being a taught student to being an independent PhD student
- Cultural differences between disciplines and associated research methodologies in the UK
- The relative importance placed on the research methodology in the doctoral thesis in the UK, in comparison with other cultural educational backgrounds
- Language and communication: students’ level of linguistic expertise, mastery of technical language, alien concepts and unfamiliar research terms in English.
- Supervisors’ and students’ interpretation of each others’ language; and the need for directness and clarity in communication.
- Clarity about UK PhD academic expectations from supervisors.

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- Some supervisors are not clear enough about criticism and praise; or the need for students' independence in doctoral studies.
- Power relations and deference customs in different cultural educational backgrounds
- Supervisory teams
- Supervisor/ student personality
- Students' family expectations
- Funding issues and tension in relations to fees: international doctoral students' expectations – are they receiving good enough value for money? Do the Universities have a sufficient understanding of what international doctoral students expect? Students may expect more direction from their supervisors.
- Universities differ in the level of support offered to international doctoral students
- Level of supervisors' experience is a factor. Less experienced supervisors may be more accessible. More experienced supervisors may be more distant, inaccessible and lack empathy. They may not always know about current trends in discipline related research methodology.
- Supervisors may find it difficult to step outside a European standpoint in the context of research.

### **2. *Effects on supervision***

Positive effects on supervision described:

- Good supervisory relationships which are warm and supportive
- Students' confidence
- Students' trust of supervisor
- Students' self-esteem
- Good intellectual environment

Less positive effects described:

- If supervisory relationships are too informal this can cause a possible role conflict.
- Misunderstandings about academic expectations causes communication barriers between supervisors and students; and students' uncertainty and fear.
- Supervisors may not realise that students understand complexity of doctoral study, but may not be able to express it in English.
- Students' feelings of being under high pressure: the challenges of working in a foreign language are tiring and hard work.
- Students can feel isolated
- Students can feel intimidated

### **3. *Strategies to enhance cross-cultural supervision***

- Good quality and quantity of supervision should be provided consistently and be monitored through institutional evaluation
- Administration procedures with regard to PhDs should be clarified

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- PhD students should be made to feel that they are valued by the University
- The University should have systems in place when things go wrong in supervision; supervisory teams are a good idea. Also an independent ear outside the supervisory team would be beneficial.
- Directness needed between supervisors and students
- Supervisors need to make expectations clear in relation to PhD structure, procedures and functions; and give students clear feedback about milestones within these
- Supervisors need to repeat expectations to students if there is a language barrier
- At the beginning of the PhD, roles and responsibilities within supervisory relationships need to be negotiated
- Supervisors need to give students permission to contradict them, and to engage in debate, if necessary.
- Supervisors need to understand the individual background of their supervisees; this may entail cultural awareness, particularly with regard to education, discipline and research
- but this should be very specific in order to avoid stereotyping or misconceptions
- Training could be provided which will challenge misconceptions and stereotyping; taking account of cultural complexity, and variety within UK cultural differences.
- Social opportunities could be provided for relationship building between supervisors and students
- Supervisors should learn some words from their students' language
- Supervisors would like opportunities to share practice with regard to cross-cultural supervision; maybe through a supervisors' forum
- Supervisor mentoring may be a good way for them to keep up to date with supervision skills

One of the most significant findings of this symposium was that cultural factors which affect international doctoral student supervision are complex and relate very much to individuals and individual relationships; although students' and supervisors' experience of culturally inflected educational backgrounds do affect cross-cultural supervision. Moreover, cultural factors mentioned often relate to the transition of being a taught student to being an independent student; and strategies suggested to enhance the supervision of international doctoral students would therefore be of benefit to all students who are going through that transition process.

### **Participants' feedback about the Symposium**

Overall feedback about the Symposium was very positive. It was described as useful, relevant and well organised. Participants enjoyed discussions with other supervisors and students, particularly those from different disciplines and universities. They welcomed the opportunity to talk about actual situations and exchange experiences with colleagues. It was felt that there was a good range of participants from different universities and cultural backgrounds. Supervisors were interested in the possibility of a regular supervisors' forum. They appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their role, and became aware of the need to establish social relationships with students. Students and supervisors became more aware of the potential cultural issues involved in cross-cultural supervisory relationships, but also were aware of the complexity of human interactions and cultural variety as a whole. More events like this would be very welcome in the future.

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*It is important that the points raised above are general and anonymous in order to protect the anonymity of participants, and institutions. Moreover individual nationalities are not referred to in order to avoid stereotyping or misconceived cultural references.*

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