



# Doctoral Supervision in a Cross-cultural Context: Issues Affecting Supervisors and Candidates

Theresa Winchester-Seeto<sup>a,b,1</sup>, Judi Homewood<sup>b</sup>, Jane Thogersen<sup>b</sup>, Christa Jacenyik-Trawoger<sup>a</sup>, Catherine Manathunga<sup>c</sup>, Anna Reid<sup>d</sup> and Allyson Holbrook<sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Learning and Teaching Centre, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia; <sup>b</sup>Faculty of Human Sciences, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia; <sup>c</sup>School of Education Policy & Implementation, Faculty of Education, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand; <sup>d</sup>Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia; <sup>e</sup>School of Education, Faculty of Education and Arts, University of Newcastle, Callaghan, NSW, Australia

This briefing is a shortened and adapted version of a journal article, which originally appeared as Winchester-Seeto, T., Homewood, J., Thogersen, J., Jacenyik-Trawoger, C., Manathunga, C., Reid, A., & Holbrook, A. (2014). Doctoral supervision in a cross-cultural context: issues affecting supervisors and candidates. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33(3), 610-626. It is adapted and re-printed by the kind permission of the authors and the publisher Taylor & Francis Ltd, [www.tandfonline.com](http://www.tandfonline.com)

## Introduction

Over the past decade, the doctoral student population has become increasingly diverse (Pearson, 1999). Along with the general trend in the internationalisation of higher education, an important phenomenon has been increasing numbers of students pursuing their doctorates in a country other than that of their origin (Taylor, 2012). These students face the particular complexities of adapting to, and assimilating into, new cultural environments (Robinson-Pant, 2009). In addition, there has been increasing pressure on universities to ensure that doctoral candidates complete their studies in time (Green & Usher, 2003).

This article presents a qualitative study of a relatively large and diverse group of candidates and supervisors from three Australian universities. In this study, we aim to determine the main issues facing such candidates and supervisors, and to ascertain why international candidates and their supervisors, and others in similar cross-cultural situations, often find the supervisory process difficult and problematic.

## Overview of the Study

Data for this project draw on semi-structured interviews, conducted in 2008 and 2009, with candidates and supervisors from three Australian universities. Candidates and supervisors with experience in cross-cultural supervision were invited to participate, including international candidates – the biggest group in this category – and a very small number of Indigenous Australian candidates. Supervisors represented the broad mix of Australian society, some born in Australia, some first-generation migrants and some recent arrivals in Australia whose main education experience was overseas. The interviewees were drawn from a wide range of disciplines including Science and Humanities. It is beyond the scope of this study to delve into differences based on discipline, although this may sometimes be a factor.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour and focused on in-depth qualitative data to explore issues that were problematic for candidates and supervisors. Parallel sets of questions were developed for candidates and supervisors, covering various aspects of the supervisory relationship, including: What aspects of your involvement with supervisors are beneficial and useful? What do you most need from your supervisors? What are the main sources of misunderstandings and problems that arise between students and supervisors? What are the most serious types of misunderstanding that may arise between students and supervisors? Interviews were transcribed and numbers were used to designate interviewees. Thirty-four interviews were conducted, and focus groups totalling 12 candidates were held, giving an overall total of 46 candidates. There were also 38 interviews with supervisors.

Four team members undertook an independent thematic analysis of the transcripts to determine the main issues and themes. As themes emerged from the data, they were sorted into categories, using a constant comparative approach (Thorne, 2000). Transcripts were re-examined to specifically look for any intensifiers, using the same constant comparative method.

## Major Themes

The themes identified fell into four major areas: issues outside the thesis; mismatched expectations of roles and responsibilities; maintenance of a positive candidate/supervisor relationship; and written and oral communication. Most have been identified as issues for candidates regardless of their cultural background (Deem & Brehony, 2000; Sinclair, 2004; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). Written communication issues were cited regularly for both international and domestic candidates (McClure, 2005; Singh & Fu, 2008). To a greater extent, oral communication issues are viewed as primarily an international candidate concern both in this study and in the literature (Robinson-Pant, 2009; Zhao & Han, 2007).

*Sometimes of course when I speak English it's ... not the same flow in my language or I don't have the ... fast academic words right away then I just take the words that ... come. (Candidate 9)*

## Intensifiers

While there is substantial overlap between the concerns of all candidates, regardless of background, our research identified factors that make the experiences for candidates and supervisors in a cross-cultural context more complex and potentially more difficult (Homewood, Winchester-Seeto, Mackaway, & Jacenyik-Trawogger, 2010).

*Understanding that things are kind of double when it comes to difficulties for [international students]. Because first of all we are in a system where we are not familiar. Language is one thing but still the way things work is another. We don't have the family to support us. (Candidate 25)*

In the quotation above, a candidate identifies three such factors and suggests that these magnify or intensify the difficulties, that is, lack of familiarity with the system, language, and lack of family support.

We found eight such 'intensifiers' identified by candidates and supervisors. These are:

- language
- cultural differences in dealing with hierarchy

- separation from the familiar
- separation from support
- cultural differences (excluding dealing with hierarchy)
- stereotypes
- time
- what happens when the candidate returns home

## Language

Poor proficiency in English has been reported to affect various facets of communication and interpersonal relationships (Adrian-Taylor et al., 2007; Guilfoyle, 2006; Walsh, 2010), as well as promoting misunderstandings, mismatched expectations, and conflict between supervisors and candidates (e.g., Cargill, 2000; Zhao & Han, 2007). Handa and Power (2005) discuss the impact of low levels of English proficiency on successful acknowledgement of sources in academic writing. Participants in this study cited several aspects of communication affected by poor language skills, including: the speed with which the candidate can read and write, the speed with which they understand and respond, their ability to negotiate and disagree politely, and limited skills leading to language that is more blunt and less nuanced than intended:

*I still have difficulties in understanding the whole discussion, and in that case then sometimes I'm a bit reluctant to join. (Candidate 1)*

*In some meetings, I just can't get to the point, and I think it's language, and I don't want them to feel that I don't know the things. (Candidate 37)*

As described in the quotations above, these factors also affect relationships with other candidates, contributing to their social isolation. Moreover, both candidates and supervisors report impacts on the supervisory relationship including the need for more meetings to clarify communication, as well as an expectation by the candidate, and perhaps the institution, that the supervisor will provide language and editing support that they may or may not be qualified to provide. Some supervisors are happy to provide this support, but others feel that it is an imposition:

*I think that one has to be very careful how much is asked of the supervisor in terms of the language side. I'm very happy to provide feedback if I'm asked, but I'm not really happy to re-write the text in English for somebody. (Supervisor 2)*

## Cultural Differences in Dealing with Hierarchy

This intensifier features prominently in the literature (e.g., Cargill, 2000; Zhao & Han, 2007), mostly in relation to Asian candidates. In our study, it was also reported from candidates from Africa and South America:

*I'm from Africa where lecturers or senior academics of repute ... are viewed as demi-gods in a sense ... and it is very difficult for them to always have one-on-one personal talks to their students. ... always there's this line of separation drawn clearly between students and academics. (Candidate 17)*

Differences in dealing with hierarchy mostly pertain to dealing with older people and those in positions of power, in a different way to that commonly encountered in 'Western' society. This manifests in several ways including: difficulties in approaching and talking with the supervisor or asking for guidance; difficulties with being assertive or disagreeing with the supervisor; the necessity to please the supervisor; reluctance to take any action when things go wrong; and different expectations of the supervisory relationship:

*In our culture the teacher is like a very big boss and it's a kind of disloyalty to criticize him, no matter what experience we might have. (Candidate 21)*

*I find that there's an element of just wanting to please the supervisor. (Supervisor 34)*

## Separation from the Familiar

This is a large and diverse category covering many aspects of a candidate's life. Interviewees in our study reported lack of familiarity with the everyday interaction protocols; university procedures; emphasis on publishing research in journals; difficulties in knowing how to find accommodation, schools for children, familiar foods, and so forth; and dealing with other cultural conventions:

*When you are not from the culture and you want to be polite and don't want to offend anybody, you don't want to cross the line and you're not sure where the line is. (Candidate 38)*

*It's hard to know how you're supposed to organize your salutations, your greetings, how you start a conversation how you end it. (Candidate 11)*

Relationships can be particularly affected by this intensifier, which may lead to a mismatch of expectations of the roles of candidates and supervisors (McClure, 2005). Guilfoyle (2006, p. 5) refers to difficulties when for many candidates 'past learning experiences are associated with high expectations of a close, regular and "authoritative" relationship with teaching staff'.

## Separation from Support

Candidate circumstances vary enormously, some bring families with them and this has its own challenges, but many leave behind all significant others. Hence, there is a separation not only from familiar surroundings, but also from support networks that might help mitigate problems that arise:

*It's a difficult process, a difficult journey and it can become quite emotional, especially working away. You don't have the support you would normally have at home, you don't have a family to relate to, you don't have our friends to relate to. (Candidate 23)*

*[There] you're able to call anybody and they are there, or call your family and go there. And you have friends for every day of the week, and here you just have one, and he's busy. (Candidate 37)*

The literature suggests that consequences include loneliness (Walsh, 2010), lack of support to negotiate and handle new situations, and lack of emotional support for personal crises. There can be pressure on the supervisor to fill this gap (Adrian-Taylor et al., 2007), sometimes increased due to cultural expectations (Whiteley, 2004), or because the supervisor is the first, and often the only, person they know:

*In my culture your supervisor will be representing your family, with the support that you get from your family. (Candidate 28)*

*Particularly for Chinese my culture because very deeply embedded, not only in the educational system but also in the daily life, the relationship between teachers and the students it's very different, very different so we need this kind of emotional support. (Candidate 8)*

## Cultural Differences

This intensifier overlaps with separation from the familiar and separation from support. It excludes cultural differences related to dealing with hierarchy, but it is sometimes difficult to determine why certain behaviours occur. Candidates may be reluctant to speak up because of 'respect' for the older person, or for another reason, such as viewing 'listening' as a more appropriate approach to learning. Kim (2002) suggested that East Asian cultures 'do not assume the connectedness between talking and thinking' (p. 829), and this may also explain this hesitation to talk and debate. Whatever the reason, difficulties can arise when the supervisor and candidate have different cultural traditions:

*[The supervisor] says in her culture if you don't respond, if you don't argue, if you don't respond very fiercely, very strongly, it means you don't respect. It means not productive. So they prefer someone who protests them rather than sitting there being quiet or being attentive. (Candidate 36)*

Other areas where cultural differences act as an intensifier include: a reluctance to open up to people you do not know; differences in learning styles and approaches to solving problems; very particular ways of expressing opinions in Asian cultures and the lack of knowledge about how to do that successfully in English; differences in cultural approaches to acknowledging research materials; and expectations about the degree of closeness of the relationship between supervisor and candidate:

*There's also a tendency to offer one presents. That's difficult too. There is an implication with that, you don't want to refuse, but you can't accept. It requires tact I think. (Supervisor 20)*

Differing cultural norms related to gift-giving and acceptability of certain topics of conversation were cited, particularly related to financial questions such as the salary of the supervisor, issues related to sexuality, or other personal information. Some interviewees related stories where insufficient consideration was given to the need for gender-segregated accommodation for candidates and the intense distress this caused. It should be noted that making assumptions about cultural differences can be problematic because of heterogeneity within cultures:

*Even for the Chinese it's different. People come from different parts of China, particularly different religions, a different age and come from different family and study different things. (Candidate 38)*

## Stereotypes

One pervasive stereotype held by supervisors is the concept that Southeast Asian candidates are 'passive, non-critical, rote-learning students who do not engage in deep learning' (Kutieleh & Egege, 2004, p. 1). This is not supported by evidence and may reflect differences in approach based on cultural traditions, rather than real academic deficiencies (Kutieleh & Egege, 2004). Some supervisors suggested that European candidates are 'well trained' and better able to meet expectations of supervisors, and that certain groups of students do not meet these expectations. It is unclear how much of this view is influenced by a belief in cultural superiority of Western, or Australian ways of operating in academia, or from direct experience, or by hearsay. Supposed superiority of 'Western theories' and a view held by some that 'Asian scholarship is seen as lagging behind the West' (Singh & Chen, 2012, p. 187) may also exacerbate these stereotypes:

*The third phase [of development as a researcher], if everything goes well, is a very high expertise, independent phase, under right conditions in their own area they are well ahead of the researcher ... The degree of background knowledge they [some international candidates] have in their area of the discipline, language, also social aspects about the way they regard academics, impedes them from developing to that third level. (Supervisor 21)*

*The European and South American thought processes are much closer to ours than the Asian are and I've not seen issues of reluctance to talk or a desire to confirm the thoughts and hypotheses of the supervisor in South American or European anywhere near like I've seen in some Asian cultures. (Supervisor 24)*

Not surprisingly, candidates reported feeling pre-judged, for example, as always needing additional help with academic literacy, having their ability as a researcher doubted and feeling disrespected or made to feel inferior:

*I think at the beginning they were treating me as very paternal kind of way. I don't know, maybe people have the impression that we are slower, or something. I have the sense that they have more confidence with the domestic. (Candidate 37)*

## Time

All candidates face difficulties if they do not complete their studies in the required time. For many international candidates, this difficulty is intensified by cultural expectations or because their government or families are paying to send them abroad, entailing a real or perceived financial or other obligation. In response to these pressures, candidates may limit social interaction in favour of their studies (Guilfoyle, 2006), consequently increasing social isolation:

*International student feel like they're always isolated, because ... they came here, they want to finish as soon as possible so they want to lock himself in the room and try to finish it. (Candidate 29)*

Towards the end of their studies, candidates reported becoming increasingly anxious about finishing the thesis so they could return to their home country. Interviewees reported instances where this conflict affected the supervisory relationship, as candidates were keen to complete and supervisors did not feel the work was ready for submission:

*I was on scholarship and I needed to finish it before that due [date], otherwise I'm an international student so I have to pay the fee or whatever complicated thing would happen. So she finally she agreed that I could stop here and that is quite sufficient for the PhD so that's good. (Candidate 6)*

*They have a very set time-line because their visa runs out, so they need to submit their thesis and their supervisors are not returning any comments and that's putting enormous stress on international students. (Supervisor 2)*

What happens when the candidate returns home

*For some cultures, having gone back home without having succeeded is not possible. So a loss of face is an issue. (Supervisor 18)*

In addition to pressures exerted by issues related to failure as shown in the quotation above, the literature suggests that there are also questions about cultural or even political ramifications or conflicts caused by the topic, methods and conclusions of the study undertaken by the candidate. Koehne (2006) and Robinson-Pant (2009) report on the limitations this imposes.

## Frequency of Intensifiers in Interviews

A measure of the relative impact of each intensifier can be inferred from the number of interviewees that mention or discuss them (Figure 1). The most frequently cited intensifier was separation from the familiar, reported by 84% of the interviewees. The high frequency is related to the breadth of this category and the number of aspects of life affected. The second most cited intensifier, language, was mentioned by 61% of the interviewees. This is not unexpected given its undisputed importance for successful research candidature.

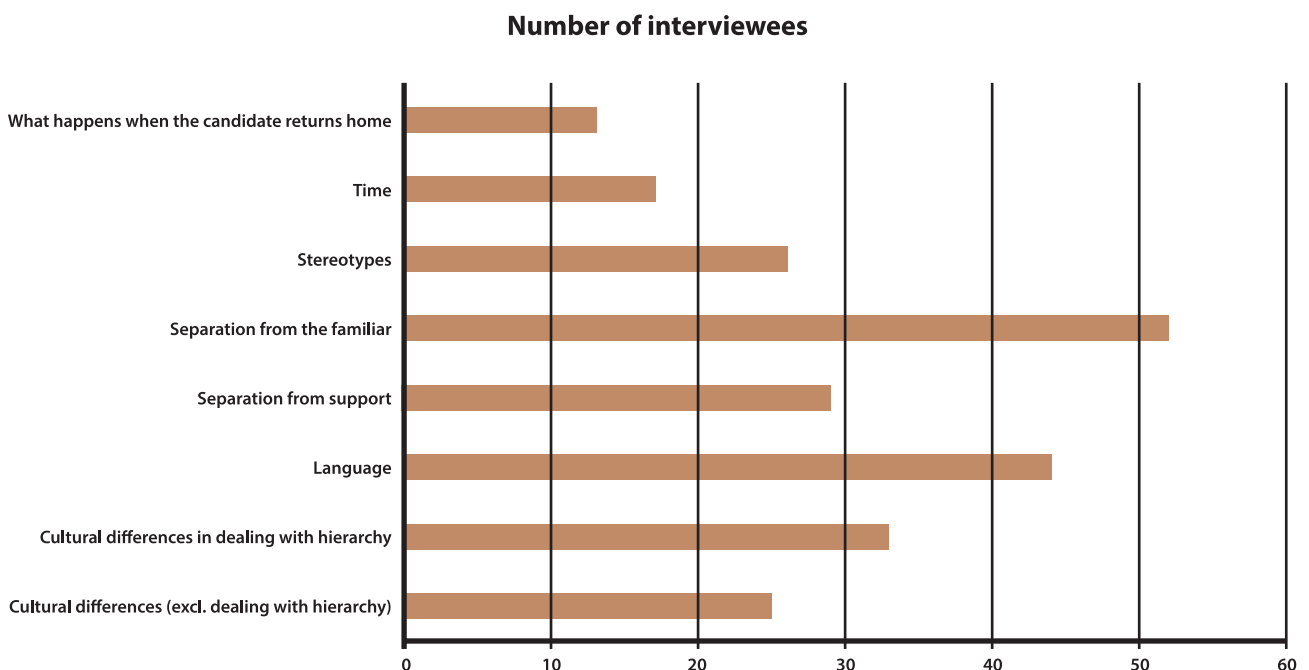


Figure 1. Intensifiers listed with the number of interviewees reporting this intensifier in their interviews.

Cultural differences in dealing with hierarchy features highly in literature around supervision, particularly for East Asian candidates, and was cited by 46% of the interviewees as an intensifier. Separation from support is reported by 40% of interviewees, closely followed by stereotyping cited by 36% of interviewees and cultural differences at 35%.

Given the definite time limits for international candidates, it is somewhat surprising that time is only reported by 24% of interviewees. Similarly, what happens when the candidate returns home is cited by a smaller but still significant 18%.

## Concluding Remarks

This study identified eight intensifiers affecting candidates and supervisors from different cultural backgrounds. Understanding these intensifiers may help universities to better understand the root causes of difficulties and, therefore, better target resources, mitigate distress to international candidates, and reduce pressure on supervisors. This study has provided a conceptual framework to cut through the complexities of cross-cultural doctoral supervision. This, in turn, will promote better understanding of the issues and is a key step in improving doctoral supervision experiences for all involved.

For more information about the project, including some resources to support professional development of academic supervisors please visit the webpage. [http://www.mq.edu.au/ltc/altc/cross\\_cultural\\_supervision\\_project/](http://www.mq.edu.au/ltc/altc/cross_cultural_supervision_project/)

## Notes

1. Theresa Winchester-Seeto has since moved to Charles Sturt University and can be contacted at [twinchester-seeto@csu.edu.au](mailto:twinchester-seeto@csu.edu.au)

## References

- Adrian-Taylor, S.R., Noels, K.A., & Tischler, K. (2007). Conflict between international graduate students and faculty supervisors: Toward effective conflict prevention and management strategies. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 11*(1), 90–117.
- Cargill, M. (2000). Intercultural postgraduate supervision meetings: An exploratory discourse study. *Prospect, 15*(2), 28–38.
- Deem, R., & Brehony, K.J. (2000). Doctoral students' access to research cultures – are some more unequal than others? *Studies in Higher Education, 25*(2), 149–165.
- Green, P., & Usher, R. (2003). Fast supervision: Changing supervisory practice in changing times. *Studies in Continuing Education, 25*(1), 37–50.
- Guilfoyle, A. (2006, February 1–2). *Peers, family, community, supervisors and governance: A review of key sites for supporting international postgraduate students' transitional learning experiences*. Experience of learning. Proceedings of the 15th Annual Teaching Learning Forum. Perth: University of Western Australia.
- Handa, N., & Power, C. (2005). Land and discover! A case study investigating the cultural context of plagiarism. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice, 2*(3), 63–84.
- Homewood, J., Winchester-Seeto, T., Mackaway, J., & Jacenyik-Trawoger, C. (2010). Development and evaluation of resources to enhance skills in higher degree research supervision in an intercultural context. *ALTC Final Report, 2010*, pp. 1–42.
- Kim, H.S. (2002). We talk, therefore we think? A cultural analysis of the effect of talking on thinking. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 83*(4), 828–842.
- Koehne, N. (2006). *Imagining: International students talking about the possibilities and limits of international education*. AARE 2006 international education research conference, Adelaide; papers collection.
- Kutieleh, S., & Egege, S. (2004, July). *Critical thinking and international students: A marriage of necessity*. First year in higher education 2004 conference: Dealing with diversity. Monash University.
- McClure, J.W. (2005). Preparing a laboratory-based thesis: Chinese international research students' experiences of supervision. *Teaching in Higher Education, 10*(1), 3–16.
- Pearson, M. (1999). The changing environment for doctoral education in Australia: Implications for quality management, improvement and innovation. *Higher Education Research & Development, 18*(3), 269–287.
- Robinson-Pant, A. (2009). Changing academies: Exploring international PhD students' perspective on 'host' and 'home' universities. *Higher Education Research & Development, 28*(4), 417–429.
- Sinclair, M. (2004). *The pedagogy of 'good' PhD supervision: A national cross-disciplinary investigation of PhD supervision*. Canberra: Department of Education Science and Training. Retrieved June 16, 2010, from [http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/07C6492B-F1BE-45C6-A283-6098B6952D29/2536/phd\\_supervision.pdf](http://www.dest.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/07C6492B-F1BE-45C6-A283-6098B6952D29/2536/phd_supervision.pdf)
- Singh, M., & Chen, X. (2012). Ignorance and pedagogies of intellectual equality. In A. Lee & S. Danby (Eds.), *Reshaping doctoral education: International approaches and pedagogies* (pp. 187–203). Oxon: Routledge.
- Singh, M., & Fu, D. (2008). Flowery inductive rhetoric meets creative deductive arguments: Becoming transnational researcher-writers. *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies, 4*(1), 121–137.
- Spencer-Oatey, H., & Xiong, Z. (2006). Chinese students' psychological and socio-cultural adjustments to Britain: An empirical study. *Language, Culture and Curriculum, 19*(1), 37–53.
- Taylor, S.E. (2012). Changes in doctoral education. *International Journal for Researcher Development, 3*(2), 118–138.
- Thorne, S. (2000). Data analysis in qualitative research. *Evidence Based Nursing, 3*(3), 68–70.
- Walsh, E. (2010). A model of research group microclimate: Environmental and cultural factors affecting the experiences of overseas research students in the UK. *Studies in Higher Education, 35*(5), 545–560.
- Whiteley, A.M. (2004). Preparing the supervisor and student for cross-cultural supervision. International. *Journal of Organisational Behaviour, 7*(6), 422–430.
- Zhao, D., & Han, J. (2007). *Case studies on quality supervision of international research students at Australian universities*. In AARE 2007 International Education Research Conference, Fremantle; papers collection.