Research

For many international and domestic students from culturally diverse backgrounds, the stakeholders in the research process are many and varied, and may place expectations and pressures upon both the student and the supervisor. A significant aspect of students’ research experience is their supervision. An effective supervisor will recognise the challenges faced by such students, and will realise how high the stakes are when aiming to satisfy the aspirations and ethical considerations of a number of people and organisations.

Often, pressures stem from cultural expectations about the ways that things need to be done, both from the student’s immediate community, and from the university and the student’s supervisor. In light of differing expectations, how can such problems and challenges be overcome?

In the supervisory relationship students expect understanding, empathy and respect. Supervisors have the opportunity to respond by mentoring, guiding, supporting and facilitating learning about culturally specific issues within the supervisory process.

Thinking about culture and being self-aware

A good start for thinking about culture, your own and alternate cultures, is noticing what you find surprising about differences in everyday behaviour of someone from an alternate cultural group to your own. When this happens, try to think about the cultural rules that are being used by those involved in the interaction (Carroll, 2000). It is important for people employed within the university system, whichever background they come from, to think about their own culture, and where they stand in relation to cultural viewpoints that may be unfamiliar.
Creating and maintaining a culturally inclusive research supervision relationship

Get off to a good start

In the early stages of the supervisory relationship, it will be useful to learn about your students’ cultural and education systems. Other considerations could include finding out about student’s learning styles, English language competency and ESL needs.

Communication with supervisors is an integral part of the FIRSTatUWA project which facilitates international research students’ transition at UWA. Details can be accessed at http://www.studyat.uwa.edu.au/postgrad/international/firstatuwa

The Pre-departure Guide for international students provides support in dealing with adjustment issues, and can be accessed at http://www.studyat.uwa.edu.au/_nocache/?a=11541

Establish clear expectations in regular meetings

Explain and clarify academic expectations and standards regarding written work. It is also useful to check that your research students understand the Australian university context and what is expected of them. For example, some students may not have had experience working in laboratories and may need some initial support if this is required.

For further details on guidelines and good practice relating to graduate research supervision see http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/supervisors/policies/good-practice

Questions to guide self-reflection

It is important to reflect upon your own and the student’s role in the research process and to ask such questions as:

What is my cultural viewpoint? How could it impact on my supervision of this student?

How can we talk about cultural differences and the ways in which they may affect the research?

Do I feel comfortable with this student (both their academic background and in everyday interactions)?

Am I willing to adapt my supervision strategies in response to the students’ needs?

What does the concept of ‘supervision’ outside the academic framework mean in various cultural contexts and how might this impact on the supervisory relationship?

Questions to guide the beginnings of the research supervision process

How relevant is the topic to local, national or international interests from the student’s cultural perspective?

What expectations exist regarding the topic to the student’s professional situation and application within their culture?

Where should the data be collected – in Australia, in the home country, or in another country – and what advantages accrue with each?

How do-able is the project in each location?

What implications are there for the student’s future life and employment in the dissemination of the likely research outcomes?

Appreciate the challenges and adjustment processes

- When people begin to live and/or work in an unfamiliar culture, they may experience culture shock. This is characterised by a series of phases influencing how people perceive and respond to others and events around them. For more information, see GIF 4: Understanding and Supporting People Experiencing Culture Shock. See also http://www.worldwide.edu/planning_guide/Culture Re-entry_Shock/index.html

- Use a respectful tone of verbal and non-verbal communication. Be aware that there may be an unconscious inclination to talk down or to talk simplistically to students for whom English is a second or subsequent language.

- Show an interest in the wellbeing of your culturally diverse research students. Find out about appropriate additional support services and networks so that you can refer to them should that become necessary (refer to the following websites) http://lace.uwa.edu.au/
  http://www.international.uwa.edu.au/
  http://www.studyat.uwa.edu.au/postgrad/international/firstatuwa

- Appreciate that the students may not only have language challenges but also alternate beliefs and value systems about the nature of knowledge and learning.
Establish appropriate modes of address

- In your one-on-one interactions with your research students, establish what form of address they prefer early in the relationship.
- Students from very formal educational cultures, where status differences related to age or educational qualifications are important, may be uncomfortable in addressing their research supervisor by their given names. A compromise can be for students to use your title and given name e.g. Professor Marie, Dr Ivan.
- If in doubt, ask.

Create a safe place for your research students

- Establish an environment in which the supervisor and the student demonstrate mutual respect.
- Be aware of varying cultural issues and of how they can lead to misunderstandings between supervisors and students. Open, sensitive communication can be the key to handling such misunderstandings as they arise.
- Use experienced students from similar countries/communities to establish informal support relationships so that they will be available to provide culturally appropriate advice if difficulties occur.
- Faculties and schools are encouraged to facilitate interactions between domestic and international students. See the Good Practice Guide on Encouraging Interactions between Domestic and International Students http://www.teachingandlearning.uwa.edu.au/staffnet/policies/interactions

Be responsible for your own cultural competence!

- Avoid over-generalising behaviour (expecting particular culturally based behaviour from an individual because that person comes from a certain cultural group).
- Do not have stereotypical expectations of people, either positive or negative.
- Avoid making any student a cultural representative, but do give them the opportunity to speak about their own experiences.
- Utilise diverse experiences and perspectives as a resource.
- Orientate yourself to absorb information about a diverse range of cultures.
- Understand the individual (recognise diversity among all students).
- Be culturally sensitive with regard to student’s learning styles and also to the possibility of eliciting negative responses through the adoption of preferred supervision strategies.
- Be aware of your own unconscious biases, race-based power ‘differentials’ and historical privilege (See GIF Race, Power and Privilege).

Recognise English language usage as a challenge for many international postgraduate students

- What resources do you know of (e.g. language and learning support) that can help the student? See for example, http://www.studentservices.uwa.edu.au/ss/learning/studying_smarter/English
- Recognise that people for whom English is a second or subsequent language can experience frustration and isolation from not being able to express themselves fully in English, especially when they are used to being highly successful in their own language and culture.

It is important to acknowledge that English language usage, particularly in the academic context, is a significant challenge for many students. In relation to the supervision process, it is expected that students will engage in debate and critique of ideas. Academic debate can be difficult because it may produce conflicting ideas or values between the student and the supervisor. To express ideas in such ways in a second language is a considerable challenge for many students. Variable cultural attitudes towards knowledge also shape student’s understanding of and willingness to engage in questioning of ideas.
## Reviewing your approach to postgraduate research supervision

Use this exercise to help get a picture of your own individual approach to postgraduate research supervision.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent do I ...</th>
<th>What evidence do I have that my approach is effective?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highly evident = 5</td>
<td>Somewhat evident = 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardly evident = 1</td>
<td>Not evident = 0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Utilise diverse experiences and perspectives as a resource?

- 5
- 3
- 1
- 0

### Recognise diversity among all students?

- 5
- 3
- 1
- 0

### Acknowledge my own biases?

- 5
- 3
- 1
- 0

### Recognise that many students experience language difficulties?

- 5
- 3
- 1
- 0

### Establish a mutually respectful environment and atmosphere with my postgraduate research students?

- 5
- 3
- 1
- 0

### Acknowledge cultural issues and how they can lead to misunderstandings?

- 5
- 3
- 1
- 0

### Ensure that postgraduate students I supervise understand the Australian university context?

- 5
- 3
- 1
- 0