

## *Learning and Teaching in Practice*

# Problems Faced by Overseas Research Students

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*(Received 20 June 2003; In final form 23 October 2003)*

**Studying as an overseas research student is a challenging experience. Both overseas students and their supervisors are likely to encounter problems due to differences in culture, language and expectations. The experience of studying overseas can be made easier if the supervisor and especially the student make themselves aware of the problems which can make studying overseas difficult. This essay outlines some of the issues overseas research students may encounter while studying overseas from the viewpoints of both students and supervisors. Although demanding, studying as an overseas research student can ultimately be enlightening and invaluable.**

*Keywords:* Overseas students; Learning culture; Dcotoral studies; Language

## INTRODUCTION

Research students are the unsung workhorses of the scientific enterprise. During the PhD course a student may be the servant of his/her supervisor and expected to work at least a hundred hours a week. Abuse may occur through negligent supervision and, more seriously, through the practice of using research students as unacknowledged assistants or as a cheap teaching force for the department. They are expected to work for little more than a subsistence allowance and yet make a major contribution to keep the scientific flames burning brightly.

The number of international students in United Kingdom universities has remained amazingly constant. The figure has ranged in the past sixty years from a low of 10.4 per cent in 1939 to a high of 11.6 per cent in 1963 (Perraton, 1997). The proportion

of international students in the humanities is low, but in architecture, business, engineering, paramedical studies and science and mathematics, international students can be the majority in some classes (Biggs, 1999).

Various challenges arise as soon as a student is offered a place in an overseas university. Literature surveys show that the range of comments, complaints and shortcomings felt by the overseas student and the supervisor was substantial. At one extreme, the student sometimes tried to shift the blame for their difficulties onto the supervisor when they were largely his own fault. At the other extreme, there were cases of grave neglect and dereliction of duty by the supervisor. In between these extremes were many cases, which might reflect the different views held amongst university staff on the nature and scope of a supervisor's duties and on the best way of carrying them out (Rudd, 1985).

## EDUCATIONAL ABILITY AND PREPAREDNESS

### Time

When a student comes from overseas, they may only have a few days opportunity to talk to various people and for first impressions to be made. In this case, there is a particular responsibility on the supervisor to develop the working relationship in the early stages.

There exist conflicting views about time management between students and supervisors. On one hand, it does not matter how long a post-graduate student spends on his research, and in many cases a longer time is justified if it appears the contribution

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to scholarship will be great. On the other hand—more often in the science disciplines—it is argued that the longer a student spends on his research, the greater the likelihood that he will not complete it, and thus will make no contribution to scholarship at all (Rudd, 1985). If a strong co-operation exists between the supervisor and the student, this can be easily overcome.

Some doctoral students may not have realised that they need to work steadily for 30–45 h a week, possibly because they were successful undergraduates by coasting and cramming in bursts. Students may have inaccurate ideas about what researchers do and may not realise that the production of an 80,000-word thesis in three years needs to be a full-time job. Others may be overworking because the task seems so overwhelming.

A substantial number of students who fail to submit a PhD thesis do so because they move on to some other line of work. They leave the department with every intention of writing up the thesis, but find their days full, working in an interesting job, which they obtained partly as a result of their research training, and as time goes by the importance of submitting a thesis recedes steadily into the background and finally dies.

It is worth looking at some of the reasons a thesis may take a long time to complete or fail to be completed. There can be no doubt that the major barrier is time. Often, everything takes much longer than the inexperienced research student expects. The student, with the help of a supervisor, needs to plan the time carefully if a PhD thesis is to be completed in a three-year period. For many students, three years may seem to be a long time and the necessity for advance planning is not always particularly obvious. This leads to one quite common reason for late completion—a slow start. The start to a student's research career is nearly always slower than the student initially expects, but even so he or she needs to put in a lot of work. If insufficient effort is put into the formulation of the problem, to make a literature survey where appropriate, or other initial activities as are desirable, the result is that the remaining portion of activities is a scramble and the programme inevitably slips (SERC, 1992).

It may be beneficial to have a master's degree before the start of a research degree. During the masters, students gain experience conducting small research projects for a period of time. These students may find it easier to cope with the pressure of a research degree. Students who have no prior experience may find it difficult to cope.

Careful organisation is generally regarded as indispensable to successful and timely completion of a research project. Planning and management are needed at every stage and not just at the start.

The supervisor should understand the capability of the student and the overall planning should be made on this basis. It is also agreed from the supervisor's point of view that he is the one responsible for answering the queries made by the funding agencies.

### **Perfectionism**

The student who is never satisfied is another common cause of failure to complete a research project. In the mind of this type of student, there is always room for improvement. The result of this attitude is that nothing can be brought to a conclusion. It might be a good idea for this type of student to write up what he/she has already achieved and he/she can see more clearly if any improvement is actually necessary, if the amount of effort required is desirable, and/or whether it is sensible to attempt the work in the time available. All this forms some part of the process of time management.

### **Distraction**

A common distraction is for a student to get "hooked" on computing, resulting in over-analysis of the experimental data, largely because of the sheer pleasure of manipulating the computer; but with inevitable delays, leading to a delayed thesis.

### **Inadequate Collation of the Data**

To be able to conduct a research project effectively, students should acquaint themselves with, and thoroughly understand, the whole process of doing a research project. This includes the details of each stage, for example, research methods available, samples and sampling, data collection and how to analyse the collected data. This understanding enables students to select the most appropriate methods to deal with their own research topics.

The student often does not realise this inadequacy until he/she starts to write the thesis and has to pause in order to perform a further experiment or calculation. This may result in a delay of at least six to twelve months. This can be avoided if the research is planned better from the outset.

### **Research Topic**

The final decision about the research topic must be reached reasonably early to aid timely completion of the project. In some areas, the student has no alternative but to accept one of the main on-going lines of research within the department. In other areas, the supervisor may have a general idea of a project which may be possible to develop in various

directions. In the second case, at least with an able student, it is possible for the student to play a significant role in the final decision of the research topic.

## LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

Many overseas students in Britain have difficulties with the English language. One survey suggests that only 12% of overseas students are first language English speakers (Todd, 1997). Another study of 1800 students found that 34% experienced problems with English and that for 13% this was their most serious problem (Todd, 1997). Commonwealth students are less likely than others to have difficulties, as it is more likely they have been exposed to English instruction at school (Todd, 1997). If English is not the first language, evidence of satisfactory English proficiency (e.g. 6.5 overall in IELTS or 600 in TOEFL with 4 in TWE or 240 on computerbased TOEFL) is becoming one of the selection criteria imposed by universities.

Sometimes, the supervisor asks the students to undertake an English course on thesis writing. Does this work? At the end of the course, the students are usually good enough in speaking and reading capabilities, but substantial improvements are not always observed in listening and writing capabilities. Also, the teaching methodology adopted in the course is good enough for a student to manage their day to day activities where as it does not help to improve scientific writing. Improvements in scientific writing would help the student to complete the thesis in time.

To overcome this problem, students have to keep their eyes, ears, as well as their minds open to the new language. To adapt, they should organise their time not only for studying but also for doing other activities, such as watching television, going to the movies and participating in social activities.

The language barrier also contributes to difficulties in communication between students and their supervisors. Overseas students may feel uneasy talking to them or asking about some academic problems because of this barrier. To deal with this, students may find it helpful to write their questions down and show them to the supervisors during meetings. It may also be useful if the supervisors write down any points they have suggested.

## CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Students should make themselves familiar with the universities and the countries where they are going to undertake their studies. They should find out as much information about the countries as possible, in

terms of, for example, government, religions, culture, languages, weather and ways of life. Familiarising themselves with the background knowledge about the countries will contribute to their own peace of mind in that at least they know something about those countries and will not suffer from extreme culture shock on arrival, although some is inevitable (Premkamolnetr, 1999).

Some lecturers characterise the learning strategies of overseas students as relying on rote learning and memorisation, making it more difficult to participate in class discussions or to think critically and analytically (Todd, 1997). However, this is not surprising if we consider how students' educational backgrounds have shaped their expectations. Many overseas students achieved success by reproducing what their teacher gave them. Many students believe there are correct answers, and the lecturer should supply such answers. They quote the lecturer and expect to be rewarded, but to many lecturers this is inappropriate. Previous experience memorising and respecting the written word may lead students to try to read everything on a reading list in impossible detail (Todd, 1997). These problems are quite common with overseas students and if they want to be successful they have to learn these techniques. It is the student's responsibility to learn new techniques and the sooner they do, the easier it becomes for them.

Authority relations are very different between Western and non-western societies. Westerners tend to play down the authority they have, where as non-westerners tend to view lecturers similar to "gods" (Biggs, 1999). Due to this cultural tradition, they will never criticise a supervisor. Is this a problem? On the one hand, a supervisor may not like the criticism from students, a lack of input from the student might lead to lack of communication and then delay in submission of the thesis, or possibly the rejection of a thesis.

Some overseas students dare not express their real feelings or concerns, or make negative comments regarding their supervisors' suggestions or behaviour patterns. This issue may contribute to students bitterly accepting unpleasant situations unintentionally caused by the supervisors. It is therefore, recommended that students put their traditional approach toward teachers/supervisors aside when they experience academic problems. They should approach the supervisors the way other local students do and try to talk to the supervisors in the same way as they talk to their close friends (Premkamolnetr, 1999).

Overseas students may come from countries outside of Western cultures where sex segregation is much stricter than many supervisors are used to. Men doing PhDs may be genuinely appalled at the prospect of a woman supervisor, and vice versa. It may be impossible for women students from some

cultures to have unchaperoned supervisions with a male supervisor. Supervisors need to be sensitive to these issues; it may be that the latter problem (female student, male supervisor) can be resolved by agreeing to keep the door open, having a female secretary or technician in earshot or supervising students in pairs.

Even if mainstream attitudes are alcohol-tolerant, groups of students and staff come from cultures where alcohol may be forbidden on religious grounds. Sensitivity regarding attitudes to alcohol goes beyond being aware that all students may not be able to stop at the pub on the way back from a field trip or a visit. Class discussions about alcohol marketing strategies or pub social behaviours may be offensive or alien to students (or staff) whose cultures forbid alcohol.

## **SOCIAL ISSUES**

### **Financial Hardship**

Most overseas students arrive to study after arranging adequate funding for their research program although, volatile economic scenarios of their home country may occasionally make funding difficult. Poverty is a crippling problem for many research students. They may be living in poor quality housing, with inadequate food and clothing, unable to buy books, a computer, a decent work station, a proper typing chair and so on. The consequences which impact upon their research include, a poor diet that can make them ill, spotty, tired and lethargic, inadequate heat, light and facilities that may make work at home difficult or even damaging to health. All these problems are multiplied if the student has dependent children and/or a dependent spouse (Delamont *et al.*, 1997).

### **Foods**

Coping with a new culture is a hurdle for students from different backgrounds and cultures without imposing the additional burden of having to cope with "majority" food habits. To ease this burden, advise those arranging catering at induction events to be especially sensitive about labelling food, so that international students don't become anxious about what they can and cannot eat. Additionally, sometimes it is difficult for overseas students to understand different types of food.

### **Emotional Problems**

Due to language and cultural difficulties, many overseas students feel isolated. The primary reasons for this involve difficulty in communicating with others about the project they are working on and also

the secretness to be maintained throughout the research period due to the intellectual property rights. In some cases, the lack of opportunities for intellectual exchange may be a welcome relief. According to Becher *et al.* (1994), one student got depressed when she talked to the occasional fellow students because she felt inferior to them. A number of students are reluctant or ambivalent about sharing their intellectual preoccupations and problems, or feel that isolation is inherent either in the position of research student or in the nature of research in a particular discipline (Becher *et al.*, 1994).

Overseas students may find vital support from a university or locally based national or religious society. If there do not seem to be enough students from a country to make up a society, meeting undergraduates who can speak their language can help. In one example of this scenario, a PhD student was able to speak in his own language and about his own culture and the undergraduate got free conversation classes from a native speaker (Delamont *et al.*, 1997).

Emotional problems provide huge challenges that may discourage and affect studying. These include problems such as homesickness, feeling of being neglected, loss of former sense of identity and belongingness, loss of motivation, general discouragement and stress, as well as emotional problems related to other people, such as family, the supervisor and friends. There is no single suggestion for how to cope with this issue because much depends on each individual situation, but it may help if supervisors are sensitive to the emotional problems that can go along with being an overseas student.

### **Support during Emergencies**

International telephone or fax charges are high, and students may not have access to locations where they can use these communications in relative privacy. The costs, both financial and academic, of students having to make emergency visits home are more serious, and ways need to be found to help students sort out some of the problems that could lead them into such costs.

## **TECHNICAL ISSUES**

### **Implications of Information Technology**

Many overseas students are out of touch with recent and continuing developments in their profession due to their busy engagements in their work (Premkamolnetr, 1999). Thus they may not be up to date with the implications of information technology, and innovations such as the Internet. Supervisors

may not be aware of such problems. It is the students' job to let the supervisors know, and at the same time, try to catch up with new technology by reading, discussing with friends, and attending available relevant workshops, seminars or conferences. Being aware of and acquiring skills in software packages can make it easier to produce the dissertation. These include software packages to deal with documents, tables, charts, as well as presentations. It may also be difficult for a student to acquire assistance with technology; due to language barriers, even if students interact with the technicians, it can be quite difficult for them to understand.

### Intellectual Property Rights

Students may need to have the issue of intellectual property rights explained to them; they may not know the difference between the author of a paper, the editor of the volume it appears in, the translator of a foreign text or the compiler of a bibliography unless the nature of these different scholarly tasks is made explicit for them. Because of their importance, these aspects of intellectual ownership make them excellent topics for student workshops.

## ISSUES RELATED TO PROGRESS AND EVALUATION

### Assessment

Assessment cultures vary widely round the world, and what is regarded as normal practice in some places is seen as cheating or plagiarism in others. It is important that all students are aware of the ways they are expected to behave in preparing for and undertaking any kind of assessment. It can be particularly important to help students adjust to the independent study parts of their courses, and about how to prepare for the assessment associated with such studies.

### Assessing the Progress

At the end of the first year a formal assessment of the research project in the form of viva voce based on the written report can be quite useful. This arrangement has the virtue that the student can be cross-examined on the details of the work by an expert, and is also likely to be asked simple but fundamental questions by the non-expert. A clear, well-defined process of assessment allows the student to know where he or she stands, makes for a reasonable objective judgement of his or her suitability for further work, and can assist in

identifying problems in the project earlier rather than later.

### Systematic Records

Without systematic research the student will have considerable difficulty when it comes to the final write up. It is in the second year and the early portion of the third year that the student should obtain the bulk of the results, which are going to form the main body of the student's thesis. It would be ideal at this stage if appropriate milestones could be erected, determining where the student should be with his/her research at various times in the year. One must, however, remember that we are talking about original research where, by definition, things do not necessarily go the way intended. Nevertheless, it is a good idea at this stage for the student and supervisor together to do their best to lay out a critical path. This critical path should be reviewed at various stages throughout the year, and become more sharply defined as time goes by.

### Celebrating Success

With research students, celebrating success completely depends on the types of contact the student has established during the period of research. If the student realises at the beginning of the research that it is important that they develop friendly relationships during their research, celebrating the completion of the project will be an affair they can celebrate with others. If they do not have good relationships, they will be isolated and unable to celebrate. Sometimes students who come to study from other countries are unable to celebrate their achievements at the times when their results are available, by which time they might have gone home.

## CONCLUSIONS

Conducting research overseas is not limited only to first-class honours students. There are always opportunities for any person who is willing to work hard and make a commitment. The task is not easy as there are many difficult challenges. However, these challenges can be overcome as long as the student is prepared. Doing research overseas may give researchers not only the degree they hope for, but also may contribute to make them a more tolerant, flexible and broad minded person.

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Editor's Comment:

Pharmacy Education welcomes future contributions on the subject of studying in an overseas university—either from a student or faculty perspective. Prospective authors should read the Instructions for Authors [<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/authors/gpheauth.asp>] or contact the Editor directly.

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