Cold Micro-Climates and Cultural Mishaps: The Perils of PhD Life for Overseas Students

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Summary

Researchers from outside the European Union represent an increasing proportion of the doctoral student body in the UK. However, relatively little research has been done on their experience from their own perspective. This research, based on interviews with students from a range of countries and from various scientific and engineering disciplines, seeks to address that deficit. It looks in particular at the difficulties the research group. Groups with a more cohesive micro-climate presented a more supportive environment for international students, partly by encouraging greater integration between researchers of different nationalities. Second, some evidence emerged of a widespread deficit in understanding of cultural issues. This, when combined with language difficulties, aggravated the problems experienced by the overseas students in the study.

Reasons for the study

Local
• Overseas students represent 29% of the postgraduate research student body at Imperial (46/07 figures).
• Their four year PhD submission rates are slightly lower than those of home students (56% vs. 51%).
• Informal evidence of problems including isolation and lack of support.

Global
• Increasingly competitive marketplace and concerns for future recruitment.
• Lack of integration of overseas students identified as a concern in the literature (e.g. Otten, 2003, Majer, 2005).
• Little research from the perspective of overseas PhD students in the UK.

The research questions

What do overseas PhD students at Imperial perceive as the major difficulties they encounter? What, if anything, could or should be done to address these difficulties?

Method

After obtaining ethical clearance, this small-scale qualitative study was carried out in two phases.

Phase 1: A call for letters to be written as to relatives or friends about to begin doctoral study. Letters should describe difficulties and problems experienced and give advice to newcomers.

Phase 2: Analysis of phase 1 issues, then semi-structured interviews with 9 participants from the following countries: Australia, China, Colombia, Iran, Pakistan, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand.

Results

Participants identified many difficulties including accommodation, transport and weather. However, this analysis focused on those linked to their immediate working environment.

Finding 1: the research group “microclimate” (see central table) has a major impact on the individual’s experience of isolation. A synthesis of the perceptions of the participants led to the development of a continuum model of research group micro-climate. They are classified according to their degree of perceived cohesion and support: “fragmented” on the one hand, and “inclusive” on the other. Fragmented groups have little cohesion and lack of support, while inclusive groups have high cohesion and strong support. The research group was assessed along this continuum.

Conclusion

As other parts of the world advance technologically, it may not be the technical advances of UK universities that attract, but, increasingly, the social capital they contain. As one participant stated: “the most important thing that attracted me is the culture, in terms of the life culture and you know the research atmosphere and the different style of life.”

Overseas students themselves are not shy of taking their responsibility, asserting often the need to be proactive. However, this research has demonstrated that supervisors have an important part to play, since they exert a major influence upon the microclimate of their group. However, universities should also respond at a higher level to support supervisors and encourage a more integrated, internationalised experience for all. It has been said that overseas students represent the “canary in the coal mine” (Carroll and Ryan, 2005) - they are the first to reveal the presence of dangerous conditions. Arguably, steps taken to improve their experience would benefit all students.

References


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1. The Graduate Schools are the winners of the Times Higher award for “Outstanding Support for Early Careers Researchers” in 2006 and 2008.

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