The GLOCAL Conference in Asia,
The Conference on Asian Linguistic Anthropology

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Editors:  Asmah Haji Omar
          Susan Needham
          Nathan Hill

# The GLOCAL Conference in Asia 2020

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# Conceptualising Doctoral Supervision in Malaysia as Small Cultures: PhD Graduates' Perspectives

Rafidah Sahar[a]

[a] Kulliyyah of Languages and Management, International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia

Nur Nabilah Abdullah[b]

[b] Kulliyyah of Languages and Management, International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia

## Abstract

Research on doctoral supervision in the field of Intercultural Communication has traditionally been applied to cross-cultural comparison, especially across national systems and cultural boundaries. However, recent years have witnessed that such comparison is being challenged and re-analysed in light of potential risk of over generalisation and stereotyping in its observation. In this research, we consider the relevance of small cultures notion (Holliday, 1994, 1999) as an alternative approach to conceptualise doctoral supervisory practice as a dynamic on-going group process through which its members make sense of, in order to operate purposefully within particular contexts and shared behaviours. Narrative-based qualitative research was designed to generate and analyse the data. The participants were a purposive sample of six recently graduated PhD students at a Malaysian public university. One-on-one narrative interviews were conducted with the students to gather their supervisory narratives. Analyses of the students' transcripts were completed using a holistic-content approach (Lieblich et al. 2008). Findings reveal a distinct set of behaviours and understanding that constitute the cultures of supervisory practice in the Malaysian university context. Through small cultures notion, this research proposes that cultures of PhD supervision can be best understood through an analysis of shared norms, behaviours and values between students and supervisors during supervisory practice. This research hopes that the move from a focus on large culture (i.e. Malaysianness per se) to a focus on the meaning-making process between students and supervisors from different backgrounds can avoid education practitioners, especially PhD supervisors, from making stereotyping and overgeneralising assumptions.

*Keywords:* PhD supervision, Small Cultures, meaning-making process, intercultural communication

## Introduction

In the last 35 years, studies on the subject of doctoral supervision have been undertaken by various scholars, mainly in countries such as England, Australia, Canada and the US. Many of those studies have cited the link between good supervisory practice, low attrition rate and timely completion of a PhD (Golde, 2000; Marsh et al., 2002; McAlpine and Norton, 2006). Recognising the importance of doctoral supervision for doctoral students' success, many of the studies on doctoral supervision have focused on either: the mechanisms for supervisor training and development, such as supervisory styles