

# **A consideration of the challenges involved in supervising international Masters students**

**By Lorraine Brown**

## Abstract

This paper explores the challenges facing supervisors of international postgraduate students at the dissertation stage of the masters programme. The central problems of time pressure, language difficulties, a lack of critical analysis and a prevalence of personal problems among international students are discussed. This paper makes recommendations for the improvement of language and critical thinking skills, and questions the future policy of language requirements at HE for international Masters students.

**Keywords:** time, language problems, critical analysis, personal problems, supervisor as counsellor, Higher Education

## 1. Introduction

Since 1997, the number of international students studying in the UK has soared (Pelletier 2004; Taylor 2005), and is continuing to grow, with a specific 67% and 31% increase in the number of Chinese and Indian students respectively (UKCOSA 2006). Nationally, international students make up 16% of the total student population, with the percentage varying across institutions. Following the London School of Economics (LSE), which records the highest proportion of international students (at 62%), the top five recruiting universities at which international students make up 25% of the total student population are The University of Warwick, The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), The University College London, The University of Surrey, and The Imperial College of Science, Technology & Medicine (UKCOSA 2006).

There is a clear relationship between income generation and the recruitment of international students into Higher Education (Harris 1995; Pelletier 2004; Ryan and Carroll 2005), as income from international students represents almost a third of the total fees income for universities and higher education colleges in the UK, with £4bn earned in fees and as much again in spending on living costs in the UK in 2004 (MacLeod 2006). In 2006, this figure grew to £5bn (ibid). Increasing international student recruitment is the target of most universities (Ryan and Carroll 2005), and in the UK, this has been encouraged by the Prime Minister's Initiative 2006, which urged British universities to extend recruitment to 100,000 more international students by 2011.

Accompanying the steady rise in the number of international students in global HE over the last twenty years has been a growth in the research dedicated to the international student experience (Pelletier 2004). Given the economic dependence of British universities on the fees from international students, it is important that there is a clear understanding of the issues facing students if an optimum service is to be delivered (Eland, 2001; Ryan 2005; Smith 2006). This is seen by many writers (e.g. Ackers 1997;

Lord and Dawson 2002) as not only the moral duty of universities seeking to attract full-paying students, but it will also result in improved student retention, positive word of mouth and therefore more successful recruitment (Allen and Higgins 1994; Smith 2006). Though much has been written on academic cultural dissonance, one of the areas that has received little attention is that of the impact of international student recruitment on academic staff (Ward 2001), and there has been very little research on the supervision of international students at postgraduate level.

The education system of a country is intimately linked with its national culture (Chan and Drover 1997; Ballard and Clanchy 1997), therefore it is to be expected that academic culture shock will be experienced by most international students in the initial stage of the academic sojourn (a term used by Ward et al. (2001) to refer to temporary between-society culture contact). For international students, much stress is caused at the start of their stay by the differences between the academic conventions of the students' origin country and those of the UK. As noted by Persaud (1993), all students are challenged by the demands of Higher Education, but international students are particularly placed under pressure by confrontation with an alien academic culture. According to Ballard and Clanchy (1997), students enter university with expectations shaped by their previous learning experience. As different cultural traditions embody different attitudes to knowledge, the most significant difference is not just language but also the education system. Thus academic difficulties may arise not just because of linguistic differences but due to a failure to understand or communicate at a cultural level. Culture shock is noted for its transitory nature (Searle and Ward, 1990; Furnham 1993): as the dissertation supervisor meets the Masters student more than halfway through the academic sojourn, one might expect that much academic dissonance will have dissipated. One might also expect that students have arrived at a functional level of academic fitness, since to progress to the dissertation stage, students need to have passed the taught component of the programme, and surely academic success is dependent on the assimilation of the norms of the academic culture (Blue 1993)? However, adjustment in some key areas of academic discourse has not always been made, and supervisors often have to deal with many problems that are specific to the international student<sup>1</sup>. Drawing on the author's extensive experience of supervising international students, this paper will consider the special nature of the supervision of international Masters students.

## **2. Language difficulties**

One of the first problems that meets the supervisor of international Masters students is the discrepancy between their linguistic ability and the level of linguistic competence needed to write a Masters dissertation. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) tends to be the preferred entry qualification by British universities (Macrae 1997), and on most postgraduate programmes the entry level for study at degree level at most universities in the UK, is IELTS 6 (or less commonly TOFEL 550/213); therefore all students have this qualification as a minimum. However the level of

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spoken and written ability varies significantly across a cohort, and in any case, there is no guarantee that holding this minimum level of English for study at HE level in the UK is reliable as a predictor of language ability (Ryan 2005). Without language proficiency, academic and sociocultural adjustment is limited (Hofstede 1991), as language ability is critical as medium of communication. Language is a core problem for those studying in a country other than their home (Cammish 1997), and is a source of strain for students especially in terms of acquiring sufficient linguistic competence in written work. As Channell (1990) points out, dealing with international students can be demanding; for the supervisor, time is often consumed through the correction of poorly-written drafts of work, and lengthy tutorials in which students often have difficulty in articulating themselves. Frustration is therefore common on the part of the lecturer, who may ask the question: what are students doing on the course if they cannot follow the spoken word?

It is possible that if lecturers are made aware of the difficulties in comprehension faced by students and of the consequent dips in self-esteem, they may become sensitive to the need to make themselves understood, to monitor their own use of language with a heightened awareness of the extent to which they are communicating successfully (Cammish 1997). Meanwhile, students need to make individual efforts to overcome linguistic problems, by speaking in English as a route to improving linguistic ability (ibid), however, as Bochner (1986) states, the majority of students prefer the company of fellow nationals, which give succour and facilitate psychological health (Ward and Rana-Deuba 1999). Given the stress imposed by difficulties in communication (Ward et al 2001), by the dissertation stage of the programme, most students are confirmed in the interaction patterns established early on in the sojourn. As monoethnic interaction is most often the norm (Ward 2001), there is little chance that at this point, students will adopt interaction behaviour that will lead to improved English language capability.

### **3. Contact with the supervisor**

A second area of difficulty for the supervisor of international students often concerns the issue of contact time. According to Dickinson (1993), for many international students, the ideal supervisor is one who offers regular tutorials and considerable structure. Students and lecturers often have different expectations of the teacher-pupil relationship, the roles of student and lecturer and the locus of responsibility for learning (Todd 1997; Ballard and Clanchy 1997): in the West, it is assumed that supervisors should develop students as independent learners (Ballard and Clanchy 1997). According to Channell (1990), if the expectation of the western academic system is that students work independently and creatively, then they will need more supervision at first as they do not know that this is the learning style: students often feel they need to be eased into self-responsibility. For staff, however, they simply may not have the time to dedicate to a student unused to Western academic culture, and they may expect the student to be independent straightway. Meanwhile, whilst desiring more contact than the supervisor is willing to give (in most institutions an allocation of 8 contact hours is made to each student), owing to their former mode of education in a hierarchical structure, many international

students find it very difficult to approach their supervisor (Channell, 1990; Harris 1995). As students rarely ask for help, supervisors may assume that they don't need it since they do not express the need (Cortazzi and Jin 1997). Furthermore, according to Rogers and Smith (1992), academic staff are perceived by international students as being too busy. On the other hand, Channell (1990, p.73) advises those working with international students to "set boundaries on what you can and will do for them. Demands and expectations otherwise become limitless." The CVCP code of recommended practice on postgraduate teaching states that overseas students require sensitive treatment. However, as staff are often too busy to deal with the particular needs of international students (Dickinson 1993), there is clearly a conflict between an institution's desired income and the level of resources available to deliver the service expected by students. A pertinent question is whether or not it is the responsibility of the individual supervisor to cater to their student's needs or of the institution to make more time available to the student in the form of an increased allocation of hours.

#### **4. Critical analysis**

It is widely acknowledged that many international students do not engage in critical evaluation (Skelton and Richards, 1991). As Hofstede (1991) points out, South East Asian students in particular are uncomfortable with critical exchange and contradiction, as they may not consider it appropriate to subject lecturers and academic texts to critical scrutiny: the learner's duty is to understand and students will hesitate before offering an opinion (Barker 1997). This can be explained by the cultural dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance (UA): those from strong UA cultures look for certainty and expect their teachers, not the students, to have all the answers; argumentation is not the norm (Hofstede 1991). Such students' educational culture puts emphasis on rote learning or reproductive learning (Harris 1995); therefore there is a problem of a mismatch in attitudes to knowledge (Ballard and Clanchy 1997). However, in the UK, students are rewarded for the quality of their thinking and argument, and the application of knowledge to new problems (Skelton and Richards 1991; The British Council 1999). Students are expected to develop as individuals with their own opinions; independence of mind, creativity and originality are prized. It often takes international students many months before they assimilate the required norm to engage with the literature they read; with the result that many marks are lost under the criterion of critical evaluation: for many, the adjustment is never made.

The failure to engage critically applies not only to written work but also to the tutorial situation, as deference to the supervisor may inhibit debate and discussion (Sharples 1995). As Okorochoa (1996) points out, at first tutorials can send students into learning shock, with the realisation that a lecturer from a western country expects students to volunteer an opinion and to engage in debate (Hofstede 1991). For many students however, this is a demand that is overwhelming, as expression of opinion may not be their cultural norm (Okorochoa 1996; Persaud 1993). Cortazzi and Jin (1997) note that British academic culture has an individual orientation, emphasising equality between individuals and their opinions, whereas in other cultures hierarchical relationships are important between those who are

older, senior or in authority and those who are younger, junior or subordinate (Barker 1997). Whereas British tutors will expect discussion and disagreement from students, Asian students in particular prefer to listen to the teacher as expert (Cortazzi and Jin 1997). The tutor in the East is seen as a mentor who can provide advice through all stages of learning: in the West a tutor advises a student whilst respecting individuality and autonomy (Chan and Drover, 1997). The tutorial therefore constitutes a cultural as much as a linguistic challenge (Furieux et al. 1991).

This presents a problem not only for the student, however, but also for the supervisor, who as a consequence of asymmetrical expectations may come to view their student as passive and lacking in initiative and opinion (Cortazzi and Jin 1997). Many believe that at postgraduate level, students should think of their research questions and methods themselves, as part of their development. However the student's academic culture may give supervisors a more leading role. According to Cortazzi and Jin (1997), supervisors need to realise that the Asian culture of learning includes the need to listen, to think and reflect, to respect and obey the tutor and not to volunteer comments, unless asked; for Asian students, learning is an apprenticeship, involving heavy memorisation. To anticipate problems, Ballard and Clanchy (1997) advocate a relativist stance in supervisors, including an awareness that western academic conventions are not universal. Students should be sensitively encouraged to adapt to the norms of British academic culture, but tutors need to take into account the linguistic and socio-cultural background of students (Lynch and Anderson 1991; Louie 2005). For the supervisor, this requirement imposes further demands on their time and personal resources. However, according to Case and Selvester (2000), academic staff must undertake a repoliticisation of their approach to instruction, involving a reflective review of the cultural dimension of learning.

## **5. The pastoral role of the supervisor**

The mental health literature documents a variety of stress-related illnesses deriving from the international sojourn, resulting in psychological disturbance and an imbalanced internal capacity (McIntosh and Kubena, 1999). International students tend to get more ill than home students (Cochrane 1977; Kleinberg and Hull 1979; Hofstede 2001). In the role of study support lecturer over ten years, and Programme Leader over two years, the author has observed that international students regularly present problems of a financial, personal and even political nature, with as many as a quarter of a cohort of 150 students affected every year, with problems ranging from bereavement to financial crisis, relationship problems, childcare difficulties, depression, and physical illness. This has implications for students' ability to function both psychologically and academically: stress can have a detrimental effect on study ability (Storti 1990), and there is a clear link between emotional well-being and academic fitness (Moon 2004). For the international student far away from home, contact with their supervisor can take on a function that is more than academic in nature, especially as the supervisor in the dissertation stage of a Masters programme may be the only contact the student has with the university, and some students may expect tutors to adopt a parental role (Todd 1997; Chan and Drover 1997;

Cortazzi and Jin 1997). To be precise, the supervisor, when confronted by a distressed student who confesses to personal problems in order to justify or explain a lack of academic progress will often shift between the roles of academic advisor and therapist, necessitating receptive and empathetic skills that are more recognisable in the counselling community. It may be considered then that a dissertation supervisor might benefit from counselling training, in order to adequately respond to serious personal problems, as well as to cultivate the necessary skills to move between the academic and pastoral roles when dealing with an emotionally disturbed student. Is it reasonable, for example, to stick to the academic role, and to offer only an extension on a deadline, or is the student seeking more than academic input? Does the untrained supervisor run the risk of exacerbating the pain of a student who discloses sensitive information, if they do not have the appropriate social or professional skills? And at what point in the dialogue is it reasonable to end the tutorial, after sensitive disclosures have been made by the student? Finally, a further consideration for supervisors dealing with students' personal problems is knowing when to refer students on for professional counselling. This can be complicated as students may feel rejected if the supervisor recommends that someone else deals with them: interestingly, the feeling of abandonment is common in the therapeutic scenario. In addition, students from a collectivist culture (applicable to the majority of international students in the UK) do not expect to be referred on for help, but expect the supervisor to help them personally (Hofstede 2001). However, it must be acknowledged that a supervisor, even if they are willing, is not always capable of dealing with the particular psychological disorders that a student may present.

This leads to the second impact on the supervisor of an emotionally needy student, which relates to time. Whilst the supervisor may want to engage on a pastoral level with their student, an important feature of the student-supervisor relationship (Ballard and Clanchy 1997), they may not have the time or energy to do so. This may lead to resentment and disappointment on the part of the student when less time is conferred than they would like, particularly during times of stress. This is particularly the case among those students who come from cultures in which the tutor is equated with a parent, from whom care is expected (Hofstede 2001). In such a situation, the student can be left feeling rejected, whilst the supervisor can feel guilty about not doing enough to help, but powerless to do more than they are already doing. This is especially exacerbated on programmes where there is a high number of international students: demands on time are constant, and there is a relentless sense of not giving enough. As Macrae (1997) notes, the altruism that is required for dealing with international students is seldom neither acknowledged nor rewarded. Is it unreasonable to speculate whether or not management takes into account staff resources when they impose higher international student recruitment targets?

## **6. Conclusion**

The problems experienced by international postgraduates at the dissertation stage of the programme can be linked to cultural dissonance, personal problems and linguistic ability. Inadequate language skills mean that students will have difficulties in self-expression and in completing the relevant

reading. A central question that comes to mind is this: should HE English language requirements be reviewed? At present, the minimum entry qualification for most British universities is IELTS 6. However, we must question whether or not this represents an adequate language level for international students who have to study not only in a foreign language but also often in a foreign academic culture. The suggestion that the minimum IELTS level should be increased conflicts with the desire of most HE institutions in the UK to continue to attract, and indeed to improve their recruitment of, full-fee paying international students, and of course this feeds into a debate over the increasing targeting of international students as a source of income generation. International student recruitment is primarily a way of increasing revenue for institutions (Ackers 1997), but if it is to be ethically driven, if we continue to recruit students whose language level we know *may* impede their adjustment and be counter to psychological health, the institution has the moral duty to put in place systems of support to facilitate the acquisition of language skills. Furthermore, the shorter the period of study, the better a student's English needs to be before study starts: indeed, on a Masters course, there is little time for in-session language improvement.

Being an extension of national culture (Chan and Drover 1997), the academic culture of the new country requires an adjustment on the part of students, with the assimilation approach, defined by Berry (1994) as the renunciation of original culture norms and their replacement by the norms of the host culture, being the only option open to students if academic success is to be achieved. The supervisor often meets a student who is ill-equipped to engage in critical discussion, either in writing, or in discussion with the supervisor of key concepts and theories, with the effect that extra time has to be spent on training their student in the art of critical analysis. If this is not possible because of either time constraints or an inability on the part of the student to adopt this skill, the result is that students will achieve only an average mark for their dissertation. Academic staff working on Masters programmes which recruit heavily may find themselves in a position of supervising as many as fifteen international students per year. Whilst they may wish to give their students the time they need to adequately meet the task of writing a Masters level dissertation, they may not have the time or the energy to do so, with a resultant sensation of frustration and disappointment in both supervisor and student respectively. The recruitment of international students should be accompanied by a commitment on the part of institutions to put the relevant systems of support (pastoral and academic) into place: it is now also time to revisit the time allocated to supervisors to responsibly supervise their students.

Ward (2001) argues that though many writers (e.g. van der Wende 1996; Ackers 1997) claim that international students challenge and encourage academics to consider new methods of instruction that are more consistent with their previous learning experiences, the extent of internationalisation of both the content and process of education has not been sufficiently investigated, that for the most part, few, if any, changes are made in an institution's educational activities. In common with many writers on international education, Holland (2005) calls for a change in approach by academic staff. But is it feasible to expect supervisors to adapt their expectations of international students without a revision of the generic HE assessment criteria? Given the desire to recruit increasing numbers of international



students into HE, is it not time to review our approach to education, or at least to concentrate our attention on the impact of the internationalisation of the university campus on receiving institutions, the positive outcomes of which are, according to Ward (2001), hypothesised rather than empirically justified.

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