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ENHANCING THE  
EXPERIENCE &  
OUTCOMES OF  
INTERNATIONAL  
HDR CANDIDATES

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a guide for  
**candidates**



Undertaking a higher degree research (HDR) program outside of your home country – and in a language other than your first language – is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It's an intercultural journey associated with the dynamic, evolving and transnational flow of ideas, knowledge, practice, intellectual values and social and professional networks.

International HDR candidates can make significant contributions to the development of cultural awareness, transnational networks and, importantly, to the enrichment and advancement of research at your host university.

However, being an international HDR candidate can also involve multiple struggles, possibly arising from unfamiliar socio-cultural and academic practices. These struggles can include loneliness, confusion, cultural differences in supervisory relationships and expectations, as well as other unforeseen professional or personal issues. Thus it is essential for candidates to develop the knowledge and skills to negotiate cultural differences and multiple cultural, professional and personal adjustments.

It is also important to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the multilingual and intercultural capabilities as well as transnational networks. Effectively navigating the international HDR experience requires not only considerable intellectual effort, but passionate commitment, determination and resilience.

This guide outlines six good practice principles for international HDR candidates who seek successful and positive experiences within the transnational field of higher degree research.

*This guide is supported by a research digest focusing on reciprocal intercultural supervision of international higher degree research (HDR) candidates. The digest, along with additional guides for supervisors and research training managers, are available online at [ieaa.org.au/hdr](http://ieaa.org.au/hdr)*

*All three guides specifically address the Australian higher education context, and are designed to complement the guidelines and review published by the Australian Council of Graduate Research<sup>1</sup> and the Australian Council of Learned Academies<sup>2</sup>.*

- 1 Australian Council of Graduate Research (2016), Australian Graduate Research Good Practice Principles, Retrieved from [www.ddogs.edu.au/guidelines](http://www.ddogs.edu.au/guidelines).
- 2 McGagh, J, Marsh, H, Western, M, Thomas, P, Hastings, A, Mihailova, M, Wenham, M. (2016), Review of Australia's Research Training System, Report for the Australian Council of Learned Academies, Retrieved from [www.acola.org.au](http://www.acola.org.au).

# 1

Recognise the learning opportunities that arise from the intercultural relationships with your supervisors and be prepared for the possible challenges.

- Understand that there may be cultural differences between you and your supervisors regarding the relationships, and expectations of roles and responsibilities, of both parties.
- Engage in open discussion/negotiation on expectations and roles. For example, talk to your supervisors about how you can best work with them, discuss your preferred communication style and agree on the expectations regarding each other's roles and responsibilities. It is also important to clarify the skills that are important for you to develop during your candidature.
- Actively and openly communicate with supervisors, either in writing or verbally, to deepen your understanding, clarify expectations and negotiate meanings.
- Demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility for your research and writing.
- Be open about your concerns and difficulties throughout your candidature.
- Be prepared for and actively seek your supervisors' support in navigating conceptual tensions and multiple cultural, professional and personal adjustments.
- Be prepared for the differences regarding academic writing conventions, conceptual approaches and research methods.
- Demonstrate a willingness to learn new ways of doing research and unlearn old ones if appropriate.
- Be open to criticism but also share with your supervisors about the conventional way feedback and criticism is communicated and received in your own culture.
- Be resilient and reflective when receiving feedback, bearing in mind your responsibility for the research and writing.
- Take a proactive attitude, critically reflect and let the supervisors' feedback inspire you, guide or challenge your ideas.
- Consider 'writing–revising' as a dynamic, iterative and transformative process. Understand that knowledge is constructed during the thesis writing process, rather than as information to be provided by the supervisors.
- Seek clarification and help with mediation and processes to resolve conflicts, misunderstanding or breakdown of relationship with supervisors when necessary.

# 2

## Appreciate and develop your academic and social networks within and outside your institution and host country.

- Recognise the importance of both academic and social networking to your wellbeing and success.
- Be courageous by leaving your comfort zone, building social relations and exploring learning opportunities in your new environment<sup>3</sup>.
- Take advantage of the opportunities to develop connections with your peers in the institution, research groups, research centres, department/faculty, institutional communities and international student associations.
- Establish and maintain connections with the broader research community including scholars and other HDR candidates working in related fields nationally and internationally, through different channels, online or offline.
- Establish and maintain connections with academics in your home and host countries to enhance your knowledge about research and teaching and learning practices.
- Recognise the importance of peer feedback through conference and seminar presentations, and of peer review on publications, to enhance your research education and capacity.
- Keep up-to-date with key information and activities in your field such as relevant conferences, seminars and forums (especially conferences offering prizes/awards/travel grants for HDRs), journals, research digests, professional blogs and articles relevant to thesis writing (e.g. [www.thesiswhisperer.com](http://www.thesiswhisperer.com), [www.doctoralwriting.wordpress.com](http://www.doctoralwriting.wordpress.com)) and thesis databases (e.g. [www.trove.nla.gov.au/general/theses](http://www.trove.nla.gov.au/general/theses)).
- Actively participate in, and contribute to, research events organised by experts and organisations in the field, by the faculty or university.
- Engage in interactions with domestic HDRs and international peers.
- Participate in appropriate social events, clubs and activities not only in your university community, but also in the broader host society.

Be courageous by leaving your comfort zone, building social relations and exploring learning opportunities in your new environment.

3 Elliot, D. L., Reid, K., & Baumfield, V. (2016), Beyond the amusement, puzzlement and challenges: An enquiry into international students' academic acculturation, *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(12), 2198–2217.

# 3


Be prepared for, and open to, possible transformation of your personal and professional identity in the host country.

- Be aware that undertaking HDR studies in a country other than your home country may involve challenges and rewards for your personal and professional lives.
- Be prepared for the possible confusion and disorientation you may face. The role and status you used to embrace in your home country might be completely different, and in some instances lower, in the new environment.
- Openly discuss with your supervisors and international HDR peers strategies to navigate the possible shift of identity and the personal and professional adjustments that may be required.
- Appreciate and build on your experience and knowledge gained from being exposed to transnational space and forge your professional identity in that space.

# 4

Be open-minded about different cultures and ways of learning. Be willing to learn from those differences.

- Be conscious of and value different ways of knowing and learning.
- Critically reflect on the different approaches to learning and constructing knowledge within your discipline in your home and host countries.
- Hold a positive view of what you don't know yet – see this experience as an opportunity to learn new knowledge, values and practices in your host country.
- Engage critically and creatively with new knowledge and your own cultural knowledge.
- Recognise that the adaptation and learning in intercultural HDR supervision should be from both sides – you and your supervisors – rather the onus being exclusively on one party.
- Work with your supervisors to build a positive and productive intercultural relationship based on mutual understanding, mutual respect, cultural sensitivity and reciprocal learning.



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# 5

Recognise and build on your own educational and professional history and traditions, as well as your connections with home and diaspora community.

- Recognise the value of your prior educational and professional experience in your current research project and position.
- Be aware of your contributions as an international/multilingual HDR candidate to knowledge production in your discipline, and to an internationalised institution<sup>4</sup>. Recognise that coming from another country brings certain advantages.
- Discuss with your supervisors effective approaches to build on and integrate your cultural knowledge, linguistic repertoire, experiences, values and networks in your thesis writing (or associated publications)<sup>5</sup>.
- Be open to the possibility of broadening the scope and topics for your research, drawing on your cultural knowledge and intellectual traditions, considering your familiar modes of expression and argumentation, and using resources in your language to enrich your research and make original contributions to knowledge.
- Recognise and act upon the possibility of establishing connections between your home and host institutions/networks for future research collaboration.

# 6

Make consistent efforts to improve your English language and academic writing. Be aware of and maximise institutional support throughout your candidature.

- Find strategies that enable you to develop your English language proficiency, especially your communication and writing skills. This often means learning new words or phrases for academic writing, peer learning and discussion.
- Discuss your needs for English language and academic skills support with your supervisors.
- Get to know the support services available for international HDR candidates at your institution. These can include the Language and Learning Support (LAL) Unit, Research Training Office, International and Scholarship Office and the library.
- Make the most of the LAL support services that provide targeted support for international HDRs early on and throughout your candidature. Take an active interest in skills development, for instance, thesis writing skills and presentation skills.
- Be aware of a range of services provided by the faculty or your university, such as editing and proof-reading, psychological counselling, private tutoring, career development events, mentoring, social clubs and alumni connections.

4 Kim, T. (2010). Transnational academic mobility, knowledge, and identity capital. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 31(5), 577–591.

5 Singh, M. (2009). Using Chinese knowledge in internationalising research education: Jacques Rancière, an ignorant supervisor and doctoral students from China. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 7(2), 185–201.

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