

RESEARCH DIGEST 12

July 2017

ENHANCING
THE EXPERIENCE
& OUTCOMES OF
INTERNATIONAL
HIGHER DEGREE
RESEARCH
CANDIDATES:
RECIPROCAL
INTERCULTURAL
SUPERVISION

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Many universities around the globe are now strategically focusing on increasing the number of international candidates enrolled in their higher degree research (HDR) programs. Australia hosts more than 20,000 international HDR candidates, which constitutes around 32 per cent of the total HDR cohort (DET, 2017).

International HDR candidates can make original contributions to knowledge and the enrichment of research as well as to the development of cultural understandings and transnational networks in their host universities. However, many of these potential contributions often remain under-recognised and international HDR candidates continue to report substantial challenges in successfully completing their studies.

Considerable research in the UK (Borg, Maunder, Jiang, Walsh, Fry, & Di Napoli, 2009; Evans, 2007), the United States (e.g. Sato & Hodge, 2009; Trice & Yoo, 2007) and in Australia (e.g. Cadman, 2000; Dang & Tran, 2017; Ingleton & Cadman, 2002) has focused on the lived experiences and aspirations of international doctoral candidates. However, less research has been devoted to theorising the dynamics and complexities of supervising international HDR candidates. Here we argue that recent attention to the concept of reciprocal intercultural supervision (Soong, Tran & Pham, 2015) is a welcome development, because it draws attention to the potential for reciprocal learning between supervisors and HDR candidates and the benefits of the transnational intellectual resources, ideas, cultures, and relationships associated with international HDR supervision.

Reciprocal intercultural supervision is concerned with the generation of new knowledge and skills based on how transnational intellectual resources, multiple perspectives, cross-border networks and cultural repertoires can be shared, exchanged and mutually developed in HDR research and research education. Reciprocal intercultural supervision that seeks to empower international HDR candidates in their own research education – and provides them with opportunities to make choices about capitalising on their transnational resources – aligns closely with one of the Australian Council of Learned Academies' key recommendations:

'Enabling candidates to make an informed choice about HDR training' (McGagh, Marsh, Western, Thomas, Hastings, Mihailova, Wenham., 2016). Reciprocal intercultural supervision also aligns with one of the good practice principles recommended by the Australian Council of Graduate Research; that is, HDR training programs must take into account candidates' diverse prior learning, skills and educational, professional and cultural backgrounds (Australian Council of Graduate Research, 2016).

As most Australian universities strategically position their graduate research programs as being international or global (Choy, Singh, & Li., 2017), and both HDRs and supervisors are expected to engage in global research networks and international collaborations, building on the transnational networks afforded by international HDR supervision is essential. Reciprocal intercultural supervision is critical in the current context of HDR education because both the HDR cohort and the supervisory team have become increasingly intercultural.

The HDR cohort in any Australian university is likely to include rising numbers of indigenous, immigrant and refugee candidates. With the increasing mobility of the academic workforce, it is also not difficult to find intercultural supervisory teams. For example, a native English-speaking Australian academic and an academic originally from China could be in a position of co-supervising an international HDR candidate from Indonesia. Moreover, in an increasingly interconnected world, dualist distinctions between 'western/eastern (or west and 'the rest') do not reflect the convergence of ideas – including ideas about teaching and learning – across borders, or the real differences of thought within societies.

According to Cousins (2011, p.592):

[P]edagogic preferences and approaches [to learning and teaching] travel the world, adapting to local contexts. There is no reason to assume that any pedagogic culture has a simply explained provenance. Categories like 'the far east learner', 'national teaching scripts', the 'Socratic and Confucian' tradition or more broadly 'western or non-western pedagogies' yield to this simplicity and to cultural relativist readings of the world.

THE FIVE FUNDAMENTALS

The following literature review demonstrates that international HDR supervision must become more responsive to the educational needs, knowledge, experience and values of international candidates. Conceptualising international supervision in a transnational social field is essential for building a supervision pedagogy based on five fundamental factors:

1. The challenges and competing pressures facing international candidates in negotiating their expectations and experiences of research education in the host environment;
2. The transnational social field of international HDR supervision, which is shaped by candidates' and supervisors' prior education, cultural background, social and professional spaces in which they are situated;
3. The dynamic and fluid movements of diverse ideas, knowledge and skills in the transnational space of intercultural supervision as a potentially rich source for reciprocal learning for both candidates and supervisors;
4. The evolving intercultural relationships and networks afforded by international HDR supervision;
5. The enactment and transformation of identity and agency in transnational spaces for international HDR candidates and their supervisors.

However, the possibilities for constructing new forms of knowledge, understanding and different logic of international supervision practice in transnational spaces cannot be realised without active effort from key stakeholders: supervisors, international candidates and the institution's HDR management. It is also important to take into account the policy structures of nation-states, including receiving and sending governments in shaping international HDR candidates' education.

Research digest and accompanying guides

Although this research digest and its associated guides address the possibilities and challenges presented by international HDR candidates in Australian universities, much of the material will be relevant to any intercultural supervisory relationship. The digest aims to support a research education environment that validates and builds on the language, cultural and intellectual resources (Ryan, 2012; Singh, 2009; Singh, Manathunga, Bunda & Qi., 2016) of international HDR candidates. To effectively support and optimise HDR candidates' education requires a coordinated effort and collaboration of multiple stakeholders. This includes the research training office, faculty and school leadership and management, supervisors, language and learning advisers, cultural diversity and equity advisers, counselling, accommodation and welfare services, librarians, student associations in the host country, and sponsors and employers in the home country.

This digest and associated guides focus primarily on the three key stakeholders in higher degree research: HDR candidates, supervisors and research training managers. Specifically, this research digest:

1. Defines key terms
2. Reviews the body of research on the benefits and challenges in international HDR candidates' supervision
3. Proposes a conceptual framework of reciprocal intercultural supervision as a transnational social field
4. Identifies pedagogical implications for supervising international HDR candidates
5. Identifies areas for further research.

Approach

This research digest draws on the narrative review technique to synthesise and analyse findings from existing research on supervising HDR candidates, especially in the context of international education. A narrative review is used to summarise, interpret and integrate existing research findings and insights into a particular phenomenon (Green, Johnson & Adams, 2006).

The databases used included IDP Database of Research on International Education, A+ Education, ERIC, and HEDBIB with the selection of the research across different disciplines based on the key words: international HDR candidates, international doctoral students, multilingual HDR candidates, international HDR supervision, HDR supervisory pedagogies, HDR education and intercultural supervision.

Key policy documents and guidelines were also consulted. Selection of the included literature was based on whether the aims and key findings (or key points) addressed the issue of HDR supervision, especially in relation to the international cohort. It is worth noting that different disciplines have variances in epistemologies, research requirements, concerns and organisational configurations that influence the approaches to research education of international HDR candidates.

Definitions

Higher degree research (HDR)

Australian universities offer several postgraduate research programs, the most common being Masters (Research), Doctor of Philosophy and Professional Doctorates. In this digest, HDR refers to those programs where the primary component is a research project undertaken by the student/candidate.

HDR candidates

This digest considers those enrolled in HDR programs as emergent independent researchers, and uses the term candidates, rather than students. This is in line with current practice in Australian universities.

International HDR candidates

In the literature, the terms 'non-English-speaking-background (NESB) postgraduate students' (Ryan & Zuber-Skerritt, 1999) or 'overseas research students' (Todd, 1997) have been used to refer to candidates who undertake research degrees in a country other than their own and whose first language is not English. In this digest, we use the terms 'international HDR candidates' to refer to those who undertake HDR study in a country other than their own. The term is inclusive of international candidates from English and non-English speaking countries.

CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF INTERNATIONAL HDR SUPERVISION

Intercultural supervision has long been acknowledged as a challenging endeavour for both the supervisor and the candidate (Phillips & Pugh, 1987; Wang & Li, 2008; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014; Zuber-Skerritt & Ryan, 1994). Over the past two decades, the rapid internationalisation of universities and the considerable increase of international HDRs, has given rise to more research on this issue (Adams & Cargill, 2003; Manathunga, 2015; Sakurai, Pyhälä, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2012; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Soong, Tran, & Pham, 2015; Wang & Li, 2011; Woodman & Yarlagadda, 2015; Yu & Wright, 2016).

In addition to the challenges faced by all HDRs, international candidates can face many academic challenges, arising from cultural differences that impact upon the research approach but also the supervisory relationships and non-academic challenges, including isolation, financial constraints, ill health, and transnational family commitments (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Phillips & Pugh, 2010; Robinson-Pant, 2009). Writing is a common site of tension among international candidates, especially those from non-English speaking countries (Cotterall, 2011, 2013a; Nagata, 1999; Wang & Li, 2008).

How international doctoral candidates are positioned in the process of negotiating and building knowledge during the doctorate is critical to intercultural supervision. To date, there have been two major streams of research into international HDR supervision. The first, well represented in the early research, construes the supervision of international HDRs as 'problematic', 'remedial' work. The second, more recent stream focuses on the concept of reciprocal intercultural supervision (Soong, Tran & Pham, 2015). The key features of both these streams are elaborated below.

INTERNATIONAL HDR SUPERVISION AS 'REMEDICATION'

A plethora of literature over several decades has constructed international candidates as being deficit in their capacity to respond to the academic demands and conventions in 'Western' host institutions (Eisey, 1990; Laciná, 2002; Samuelowicz, 1987).



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Research from this remedial perspective is characterised by phrases, such as 'problems, difficulties, challenges, complications' (Cryer, 2006; Phillips & Pugh, 2010; Y. Ryan & Zuber-Skerritt, 1999; Taylor & Beasley, 2005; Yeoh & Terry, 2013). Within this frame, cultural and national differences are often constructed as deficiencies (Tran, 2013, 2011, 2009). While the importance of mutual knowledge, understanding and respect between candidates and supervisors is acknowledged, it is the international candidates who are seen to bear most responsibility to 'acculturate and assimilate' or 'adapt and adjust' to the host academic environment.

From this perspective, the most obvious challenge is language and this has been the focus of much research (Choi, 2006; Cryer, 2006; Phillips & Pugh, 2010; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Taylor & Beasley, 2005). International HDRs who have to work in a language that is not their first can face challenges in reading and writing at the level required for PhDs (Robinson-Pant, 2010; Son & Park, 2014); they can have problems expressing themselves, presenting their academic work and contributing to academic discussions, especially when intense negotiations and collaborations are required (Adams & Cargill, 2003; Okorochoa, 1997; Wisker, 2001).

However, a remedial focus on language has been critiqued; many researchers argue that, beyond language, it is cultural differences – in pedagogical practices and approaches to learning – that present major challenges, due to unexamined differences in student and staff expectations of each other's contribution in academic work (Cadman, 2000; Wisker, 2001; Yeoh & Terry, 2013).

International candidates who come from cultures where teachers are considered the source of all wisdom, might expect their supervisors to play a similar role, to 'adopt a role close to being a guide and/or parent ... to make major contributions towards the research and the thesis' (Ryan, 2000, p. 69). However, these expectations are inappropriate in a 'Western' education system (Phillips & Pugh, 2010) and can lead to misunderstandings. Challenges for both candidates and supervisors may arise from the mismatches in the expectations about 'aspects of candidature and supervisory practice' (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2008).

While the additional and unique challenges of being an international student must be acknowledged, the conception of international HDRs in terms of remediation has meant that many international candidates experience 'disempowerment' (Robinson-Pant, 2009). Not uncommonly, international HDRs experience stereotyping by supervisors; for example, as 'passive, non-critical, rote-learning students' (Kutieleh & Egege, 2004, p. 1). Many Asian candidates feel 'pre-judged' (Aspland, 1999; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014) when their reluctance to question is interpreted as lack of criticality, rather than modesty or respect for their supervisors (J. Ryan, 2012). Most recently, studies have highlighted the subtle ways that international candidates from the Global South can be 'assigned subaltern status' by their departments/schools (Kidman, Manathunga, & Cornforth, 2017), or when supervisors from ex-colonial countries take a 'patronising and paternalistic position' (Taylor & Beasley, 2005) towards international HDR candidates.

International candidates, therefore, can find it difficult to establish a sense of belonging in their host institution (Deem & Brehony, 2000), or feel academically connected with their academic supervisor – especially at the beginning of the course (Dang & Tran, 2017). If the community that international candidates seek upon arrival remains 'imagined and intangible' (Starfield, 2010, p. 139) – and the supervisory relationship is complicated by feelings of worthlessness, inadequacy and lack of academic success – international HDR candidates can experience confusion, disorientation and loss of identity (Cotterall, 2013b; Ingleton & Cadman, 2002).

In becoming a researcher, the HDR candidate enacts and defines their scholarly identity through both formal and non-formal sites of learning (Barnacle and Mewburn 2010). Therefore the transnational spaces of learning and socialisation to which candidates are exposed presents not only challenges, but also sites for identity formation and reformation.

Failure to perceive the intellectual benefits of international HDR supervision has long-term consequences. When investigating the experiences of academics in Australia who use English as an additional language and obtained their first degree outside of Australia, Guerin & Green (2016) found that although these academics reported very positive stories of cultural accommodation, their 'transnational identity capital' (Kim, 2010, p. 577) too often remained unacknowledged. Guerin and Green (2016, p. 10) ask: "what is lost in this process of flattening cultural difference and diversity?"

In contrast to the remedial perspective outlined above, the other stream of literature presents an ethnorelative perspective focussed on developing mutual, transcultural learning in intercultural supervisory relationships.

INTERNATIONAL HDR SUPERVISION AS RECIPROCITY

With few exceptions (such as Todd 1997), the body of literature on engaging international candidates' intellectual and intercultural resources in making original contributions to knowledge is represented by recent studies (Singh, 2009, Singh & Han, 2017; Ryan, 2012; Soong, Tran & Pham, 2015; Tran, 2009). Building on Todd's view, that cultural/national differences in learning approaches should be seen as 'valid formative experiences', not as deficiencies (Todd, 1997, p. 179), later researchers contend that intercultural supervision should be seen as a venue for reciprocal and transformative learning (Ryan 2012), which arises from the encounter of differences in knowledge, skills, values and relationships (Soong, Tran & Pham, 2015; Dang & Tran, 2017).

Soong, Tran and Pham (2015) argue that 'reciprocal interculturality' is to develop, both supervisors' and candidates' capability to become more ethnorelativist in how they relate to each other (p.445). Reciprocity in supervision values diversity of knowledge, ideas and cultural backgrounds and transnational intellectual resources (Soong, Tran and Pham 2015), and enables all members involved in this process to take advantage of 'opportunities for the generation of new knowledge and skills' rather than remain 'complacent about the superiority of 'Western' academic ways' (Ryan, 2012, p.55).

In contrast, 'pedagogies of intellectual equality' (Singh, 2011, p. 358; Singh & Han, 2017) recognise the original contributions to knowledge and understanding that international candidates can make. 'Pedagogies for intellectual equality' focus on how multilingual HDR candidates can mobilise and capitalise on their full linguistic repertoire to enhance their research and research education (see Singh, 2011; Singh & Han, 2017, for further details about 'pedagogies for intellectual equality').

Also essential to reciprocal interculturality is recognition of the heterogeneity of international HDR candidates (Due, Zambrano, Chur-Hansen, Turnbull, & Niess, 2015; Fotovatian, 2012). Like local HDRs, international candidates differ from each other in the way they approach their PhD, research questions, factors influencing what they write, objectives for doing a PhD and their intended outcome/audience (Robinson-Pant, 2010), as well as their ethnicities, class, languages and educational traditions. Unlike local HDR candidates however, the approach of international candidates to their research may have to take into account their sponsor back home, relationships with the diaspora community in the host country as well as how these are connected to their future professional pathways (Rizvi, 2010; Robinson-Pant, 2010).

Therefore, they may have to go through multiple adjustments (Robinson-Pant, 2009) – adjusting to a different academic culture, conducting field research in their home country using new research approaches, and writing their thesis so that it will be well received by international examiners and at home.

They not only have to learn new approaches and skills but also 'unlearn' their old ones (Ryan, 2012) while they negotiate old and new personal and professional identities (Dang & Tran, 2017; Tran & Gomes, 2017).

In short, reciprocal intercultural supervision means engaging with international candidates' knowledge traditions (Singh 2009), and opening up a 'dialogic space' (Robinson-Pant 2010, p. 148) in which the supervisor and candidate can learn more from each other. The internationalisation of research education should not only support supervisors (and their institutions) to better respond to international candidates' needs, but also encourage supervisors and candidates to 'challenge their assumptions and enhance their research practice' through international/intercultural dialogue (Robinson-Pant, 2010, p. 156). Such reciprocity would enable all of us to create 'an imagined, unified community' of genuinely cosmopolitan citizens in our multicultural academies (Guerin & Green, 2016).

THEORISING RECIPROCAL INTERCULTURAL SUPERVISION IN TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL FIELDS

In order to understand and enhance the experience of international HDR candidates, it is important to locate the supervision of this cohort within a transnational social field (Fouron & Schiller, 2001; Gargano, 2009; Rizvi, 2010). A transnational social field is characterised by the transnational flow and transformation of ideas, knowledge, practice, intellectual values and social networks. International students' cross-border mobility is embedded within dynamic, evolving and multi-directional intercultural and transnational relationships.

Situating international HDR candidates in a transnational social field may have different implications in different disciplines. However, international candidates in any discipline are likely to face challenges in mediating their expectations and experiences. They will need to interpret and negotiate the logic of their research education in the host environment (Rizvi, 2010), the professional and social spaces which they inhabit, their dispositions developed by previous education and experiences in their home country and their future aspirations.



Transnational conditions affect the ways candidates interpret and 'accord a sense of legitimacy and utility' to the forms of knowledge they encounter and possess, as they 'forg[e] their professional identities as researchers who are globally oriented but ... linked, in a variety of complicated ways, to their countries of origin' (Rizvi, 2010, p.4).

The conceptual framing of supervision as a transnational social field sheds light on how international candidates 'construct identities and negotiate social spaces, physical locales and the geography of the mind' (Gargano, 2009, p. 331). It allows us to move away from a supervisor-centred approach, which oversimplifies intercultural/transnational dynamics and enables reciprocity to develop between students, supervisors and their institutions.

Supervision of international HDR candidates is shaped by many factors related to candidates, supervisors, HDR education management, institutional cultures and HDR education systems and policy in both home and host countries. All of these factors intersect in transnational social fields in which mobile student cohorts can be conceptualised as active and 'self-forming agents' (Marginson, 2014), who are potentially capable of mediating the complex cross-border world, re-defining their 'being' and engaging in the process of 'becoming' (Marginson, 2014; Tran, 2016; Tran & Vu, 2017).

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPERVISING INTERNATIONAL HDR CANDIDATES

Student empowerment and agency is at the heart of the intercultural supervisory relationship (Soong, Tran & Pham, 2015), and intercultural supervision pedagogy builds mutual understanding, respect, sensitivity and reciprocal learning (Choy, Li, & Singh, 2015; Cree, 2012; Manathunga, 2015; Silfver & Berge, 2016; Soong, Tran & Pham, 2015; Wang & Li, 2008; Wisker, 2012; Yeoh & Terry, 2013). It recognises and values international candidates' diversity and transnational intellectual capital (Soong, Tran & Pham, 2015).

Singh (2009) endorses attempts to engage international HDR candidates in using non-Western intellectual resources to make original contributions to knowledge and enrich research education.

'Reciprocal intercultural supervision' stresses the importance of learning for both supervisors and students for developing agency. Supervisors need to be aware of international candidates' possible challenges as well as the tensions and dilemmas they have to face studying in the host country, and become reflexive in their communication with their international research candidates. Singh (2009) urges supervisors to recognise their 'ignorance' of the research practices and ways of knowing brought to 'Western' institutions by, in the case he discussed, Confucian heritage and Chinese research candidates. Further, the author endorses attempts to engage international HDR candidates in using non-Western intellectual resources to make original contributions to knowledge and enrich research education.

To realise cultural reciprocity, both sides need to have some understanding of each other's cultures, expectations and learning backgrounds (Wisker, 2012). For example, the often muted critical response of Chinese research candidates needs to be taken as a 'culturally constructed response' rather than as lack of engagement (Wisker, 2012, p. 293). Good supervision means 'nudging' the best learning and research through enabling, empowering, intellectually challenging, in just and sensitive supervisory relationships' (p.280).

Reciprocal supervision is a 'heavily relational' pedagogy. Candidates need both academic and social integration in an interdependent space of mutual learning, hospitality and generosity (Manathunga, 2015). According to Cree (2012) 'respectful supervision' is both an educational activity and a moral one: what the candidates want from their supervisors is not only academic support, but also 'an interest in them as a whole person' (p. 459).

Lack of attention to the personal can lead to 'accidental imperialism', stemming from 'cultural arrogance' (Wisker, 2012, p. 281) – an assumption that certain ways of going about research is superior.

Finally, from a post-colonial perspective, Manathunga (2015), critiques 'assimilation pedagogies' in intercultural supervision and advocates instead the need to situate place, time and diverse cultural knowledge at the centre of supervision. Also from a post-colonial perspective, Silfver and Berge (2016) insist that knowledge production cannot be understood outside of power relations. Manathunga (2015) advocates that supervisors model the recognition of the ongoing development of Southern, Eastern and Indigenous knowledge, and encourage their candidates to investigate the multiple histories of the phenomenon they are studying. Acknowledging students' home places creates opportunities for candidates to extend their understanding about their places, histories and cultures and assists them to make their own unique contribution to knowledge. It also ensures supervision becomes a place of mutual and reciprocal learning (Manathunga, 2015).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In light of the literature reviewed above, we have identified some key questions for further research on international HDR education:

1. What impact are current trends in globalisation and the globalisation of higher education having on the international HDR supervision landscape?
2. What are the key constructs of reciprocal supervision and how might these differ across different disciplinary contexts?
3. What key strategies and approaches should universities draw on to enhance reciprocal international HDR supervision?
4. What professional development approaches and strategies best enable supervisors to engage in reciprocal intercultural supervision?
5. What is the role of university research governance at all levels from schools and/or faculties through to the many forms of central university management in influencing international HDR supervision? What professional development is needed for research managers to enhance their capacities in managing international HDRs' education?
6. What induction and professional development approaches and strategies best enable international HDR candidates to engage in reciprocal intercultural supervision?
7. What are effective approaches to support international candidates to mediate competing pressures facing them international research education, such as the new research training environment, their own intellectual traditions, their aspirations for future trajectories and their identities?
8. In what ways might international HDR candidates' and supervisors' cultures, values and agency influence the enactment of reciprocal cultural supervision?
9. What challenges do academic supervisors and candidates face in engaging in reciprocal intercultural supervision, and what factors inhibit and motivate them?
10. What are the key characteristics that shape the transnational conditions, which forge the formation of professional identities of international HDR candidates?

The authors wish to thank Professor Michael Singh and Dr Jing Qi for reviewing the draft digest and guide. They would also like to acknowledge the support of Deakin University and the University of Tasmania for the development of this research digest and the accompanying guides. This project was funded by IEAA.

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