

Theory Into Practice Strategies: Supervising Research Higher Degree Students



Research

The University of Newcastle views cultural diversity as a resource which can be used to promote harmonious, inclusive relationships between all members of the university community. Such positive relationships enhance all aspects of university operations, from administration through to teaching, learning, research and community interactions. For further information on Newcastle's initiatives in this area, see the University of Newcastle Equity and Diversity webpage at

<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/equity/students/index.html>

Research supervision presents substantial challenges and opportunities for both students and supervisors. One reason for this is that for many international and Indigenous Australian students, the stakeholders in the research process are many and varied, and may place expectations and pressures upon both the student and the supervisor. A significant aspect of students' research experience is their supervision.

An effective supervisor will recognise the challenges faced by such students, and will realise how high the stakes are when aiming to satisfy the aspirations and ethical considerations of a number of people and organisations.

For many Indigenous Australian students, community responsibilities and family expectations carry a high priority. Additionally, Indigenous Australian methodologies and paradigms often incorporate ways of doing things that are influenced by culture. For example, the methodology may indicate who holds particular forms of knowledge, who is allowed access to that knowledge, and the positioning of actors within the research process. Expectations from various stakeholders may place strains on the supervisory relationship if positive, ethical guidelines are not established early in the research process.

Cahill (1997 p3) has found that stakeholders for international students include the student's family and country, both wanting for different reasons the student to succeed, together with the faculty and university themselves which, as well as wanting productive research, wish to maintain their image. Expectations back home, both in the family and at the home country workplace, may be extremely high.

Often, pressures stem from cultural expectations about the ways that things need to be done, both from the student's immediate community, and from the university and the student's supervisor. In light of differing expectations, how can such problems and challenges be overcome?

Thinking about culture and being self-aware

A good start for thinking about culture, your own and alternate cultures, is noticing what you find surprising about differences in everyday behaviour of someone from an alternate cultural group to your own. When this happens, try to think about the cultural rules that are being used by those involved in the interaction (Carroll 2000). It is important for people employed within the university system, whichever background they come from, to think about their own culture, and where they stand in relation to cultural viewpoints that may be unfamiliar.

Questions to guide self-reflection

It is important to reflect upon your own and the student's role in the research process and to ask such questions as

- what is my cultural viewpoint?
- how can we talk about cultural differences and the ways in which they may affect the research?
- do I feel comfortable with this student (both their academic background and in everyday interactions)?
- am I willing to adapt my supervision strategies in response to the student's needs?

Questions to guide the beginnings of the research supervision process

- How relevant is the topic to local, national or international interests from the student's cultural perspective?
- How relevant is the topic to local, national or international interests from an Indigenous Australian student's perspective?
- How relevant is the topic, and what expectations exist regarding the topic to the student's professional situation and application within their culture?
- Where should the data be collected in Australia, in the home country, or in another country, and what advantages accrue with each?
- How do-able is the project in each location?
- What implications are there for the student's future life and employment in the dissemination of the likely research outcomes?



Creating and maintaining a culturally inclusive research supervision relationship

Get off to a good start

In the early stages of the supervisory relationship, there are a number of issues that need to be considered to support the student in settling in to a professionally organised but friendly relationship. According to Cahill (1997 p6), these considerations should include:

- depth of previous academic preparation
- formal assessment of previous studies (through the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (NOOSR))
- relevance of previous professional experience
- student's educational and occupational expectations and aspirations
- student's learning styles
- required preliminary studies
- membership of supervisory team
- English language competency and ESL needs
- general personal and financial situation

Establish clear expectations in regular meetings

- Explain and clarify academic expectations and standards regarding written work
- Check that your research students understand the Australian university context and what is expected of them
- Teach appropriate citing, referencing and how to avoid plagiarism in papers
- Provide relevant information and resource sessions if necessary eg <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/library/tutorials/infoskills/index.html>
- Establish how often you and the student will meet to discuss the thesis
- At the outset of each student's research program, devote specific attention to negotiating the respective roles of the supervisor and the student and your mutual expectations
- Appreciate the challenges and adjustment processes
- When people begin to live and/or work in an unfamiliar culture, they may experience culture shock. This is characterised by a series of phases influencing how people perceive and respond to others and events around them. See http://www.worldwide.edu/planning_guide/CultureRe-entry_Shock/index.html
- Use a respectful tone of verbal and non-verbal communication. Be aware that there may be an unconscious inclination to talk down or to talk simplistically to students for whom English is a second or subsequent language

- Show an interest in the welfare of your culturally diverse research students. Find out about appropriate additional support services and networks so that you can refer to them should that become necessary (refer to the following sites)

<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/study/studentsupport/index.html>

<http://www.international.newcastle.edu.au/index.html>

<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/school/aboriginal-studies/supportforindigenoustralianstudents/index.html>

<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/equity/students/aboriginalandtorresstraitislanderstudents.html>

- Appreciate that the students may not only have language challenges but also alternate beliefs and value systems about the nature of knowledge and learning

Establish appropriate modes of address

- In your one-on-one interactions with your research students, establish early in the relationship what form of address they prefer
- Students from very formal educational cultures, where status differences related to age or educational qualifications are important, may be uncomfortable in addressing their research supervisor by their given names. A compromise can be for students to use your title and given name eg Professor Marie, Dr Ivan
- If in doubt, ask

Create a safe place for your research students

- Establish an environment in which the supervisor and the student demonstrate mutual respect. Establishing guidelines for respectful communication at the outset of the student/supervisor relationship may assist with creating a safe environment
- Be aware of varying cultural issues and of how they can lead to misunderstandings between supervisors and students. Open, sensitive communication can be the key to handling such misunderstandings as they arise
- Use experienced students from similar countries/communities to establish informal support relationships so that they will be available to provide culturally appropriate advice if difficulties occur



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Treat diversity positively

- Avoid over-generalising behaviour (expecting particular culturally based behaviour from an individual because that person comes from a certain cultural group) or having stereotypical expectations of people, either positive or negative
- Avoid making any student a cultural representative, but do give them the opportunity to speak about their own experiences
- Utilise diverse experiences and perspectives as a resource
- Orientate yourself to absorb information about a diverse range of cultures
- Understand the individual (recognise diversity among all students)
- Be culturally sensitive with regard to student's learning styles and also to the possibility of eliciting negative responses through the adoption of preferred supervision strategies
- Recognise English language usage as a challenge for many international and Indigenous Australian postgraduate students
- What resources do you know of (eg language and learning support) that can help the student? See for example, <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/equity/students/nonenglishspeakingbackgrounds.html>
- Recognise that people for whom English is a second or subsequent language can experience frustration and isolation from not being able to express themselves fully in English, especially when they are used to being highly successful in their own language and culture

It is important to acknowledge that English language usage, particularly in the academic context, is a significant challenge for many students. In relation to the supervision process, it is expected that students will engage in debate and critique of ideas. Academic debate can be difficult because it may produce conflicts of ideas or values between the student and the supervisor. To express ideas in such ways in a second language is a considerable challenge for many students. Variable cultural attitudes towards knowledge also shape student's understanding of and willingness to engage in questioning of ideas.

Overall, the process of supervision of international students is succinctly summarised in the following quote:

The causes of the problems which supervisors raise most frequently in connection with supervising international students, lie in the huge

range of adjustments that international students have to make upon being uprooted from their home country to a Western higher education system. The causes do not lie in the characters or abilities of the international students. So international students need help and support. This is best given by more experienced members of the culture, professional counsellors, supervisors, heads of school and senior managers who can all help to make the transition easier. (Cryer and Okorochoa 1999 p116)

In the same way, Indigenous and culturally diverse postgraduate students need to be supported by those people in the university community who have the capacity and skills to assist. This is particularly the case for students whose research work entails a coming and going between on-campus and off-campus arrangements at various junctures in the PhD process. Such ongoing adjustments can often cause anxiety for the student, and can seriously affect the supervisory relationship.

References and further reading

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- University of Newcastle Guidelines for Inclusive Research Practice <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/policylibrary/000774.html>
- University of Newcastle Inclusive Language Guidelines <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/policylibrary/000797.html>



Reviewing your approach to postgraduate research supervision

Use this exercise to help get a picture of your own individual approach to postgraduate research supervision.

To what extent do I? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 Highly evident <input type="checkbox"/> 3 Somewhat evident <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Hardly evident <input type="checkbox"/> 0 Not evident	What evidence do I have that my approach is effective?
Utilise diverse experiences and perspectives as a resource? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Recognise diversity among all students? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Acknowledge my own biases? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Recognise that many students experience language difficulties? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Establish a mutually respectful environment and atmosphere with my postgraduate research students? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Acknowledge cultural issues and how they can lead to misunderstandings? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	
Ensure that postgraduate students I supervise understand the Australian university context? <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 0	