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Voices from the edge.

Elizabeth Reid, Judi Homewood, Theresa Winchester-Seeto and Anna Reid

Macquarie University, Sydney
Faculty readiness for international research students: Voices from the edge.

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Abstract
Universities are including an ever-increasing number of higher-degree by research (HDR) candidates who come from a range of national, ethnic and educational backgrounds. Yet, sometimes the expansion has not allowed for the types of support that are needed by these candidates, particularly those from international backgrounds. In this paper, we will explore ways that faculties could support international HDR candidates throughout their candidature. We use evidence drawn from interviews with candidates and supervisors to draw a picture of their cross-cultural experiences.

From interviews with over 30 candidates and 20 supervisors, we have observed recurring themes and examined these themes against literature in the area. These participants represent a ‘view from the edge’ as they were typically not in a position to make policy change or suggest systematic developmental change. Using the language of Wenger (1998), these participants were on the periphery of the university policy community. We used material from the transcripts to develop a checklist for departments preparing to accept new international HDR candidates. The suggestions we present are relevant to the progressive stages of candidature, ranging from the department’s initial preparation and training prior to candidature, right through to the assistance the department might provide in the early stages of the newly-graduated researcher’s career.

Comments about a faculty’s preparation prior to accepting international candidates focused predominantly on supervisor training, specifically related to cross-cultural communication, and the motives behind supervisor and candidate selection. At the outset of candidature, the primary concerns voiced were for a clear and welcoming induction, provision of a focused workspace which was integrated into a department, funding and housing assistance. Candidates frequently suggested that, as they all came from different cultural and educational backgrounds, it was important to have courses available early in the candidature that introduced them to writing academic English, developed research skills, and encouraged participation in seminars. A wide range of issues was identified as relevant throughout candidature, including receiving networking opportunities at a number of levels (within the department, interdisciplinary and internationally), language assistance (either in classes or individually), communication and communication technologies. The attitude of the department toward candidates as early researchers and its responsibilities to assist in the candidate’s research career during and immediately after their candidature was also mentioned.

Views from field
Complex interactions between researchers, departments, administration, the university and the external research environment are normal fare for higher-degree by research (HDR) students. On enrolment, they enter a world that is bound by long traditions and yet paradoxically praises innovation. This is an example of the contradictory cultures (Wallerstein, 1990) that are apparent in the life of HDR students. Increasingly research students are becoming globally mobile and seek international research experiences to complement their first areas of study. To do this they seek the globe for senior researchers who have common research interests and uproot themselves to gain a broader, different experience of research from home. In that sense, all HDR students experience cross-cultural interactions as part of their candidacy. Some are positioned as ‘international’ students which suggests certain sorts of interactions within the academy. As Singh and Schrestha (2008) put it, they often have to ‘repent’ of their previous experience to make it in a Western-
oriented university. Our interviews with students and researchers experiencing this form of cross-cultural interaction show that they often find themselves on the edge of university life as conditions and practices seem alien. We include research supervisors in this concept of peripheral engagement, because they too are often crossing national boundaries to undertake their research work. We are particularly concerned with these views from the edge, exploring candidate and supervisors’ views of the systems involved in HDR practices.

Traditionally research development activities are aimed at the individual research candidate’s development. These activities rely on a particular form of relationship with the supervisor which is dependent on mutual appreciation of the research pair’s expectations, activities, relationships and outcomes. Recent research in the area emphasises this sort of individual development and suggests the use of critically reflective practice (Douglas, 2003) to change behaviours and activities. Institutions usually commit to the improvement of individual supervisors’ capacity to supervise through the provision of developmental workshops. These workshops tend to focus on the behavioural aspects of supervision. Bills (2004) indicated that written expositions of supervisory practice provided a means for supervisors to consider their whole-of-enterprise role and the way in which their research, research practice and research environment provide the basis for the development of their identity as researchers. In the project that is the focus of this paper, we used interviews with HDR students and supervisors who were working in cross-cultural situations. During the interviews the participants reflected on aspects of research and research practice that impacted on the quality of the research outcome. It became apparent that a large part of the environment that made a critical impact on the quality of supervision was the systemic faculty and departmental context. This complex environment is considered a ‘plexus’ by Murphy et al. (2007, pp.211–212), who identified that the student-supervisor relationship can be considered as ‘controlling’, ‘guiding’, ‘task-focused’ or ‘person focused’. We would add to this identification the external faculty environment as either facilitative or inhibiting. Bills (2004) and Brew (2001) have explored the impact of supervisors’ awareness of conceptions of research and Murphy et al. (2007) on supervisors’ orientations to supervision. However, these orientations do not extend themselves to the broader context of HDR candidates experience, that is, what sorts of supports are available at a systems level. Despite the growing body of research in this area, research supervision is still largely untheorised, with the exception of the work of Manathunga and Goozee (2007) and Brew and Peseta (2004) who are moving towards a theory of research supervision that includes broader social and cultural orientations.

Increasingly research students are becoming aware that their colleagues and future co-researchers will have a wide variety of different educational, cultural and world experiences, all of which contribute to students’ identity as learners and future researchers. Literature shows a range of views of internationalisation which highlight the importance of either educational or economic development (Ball, 1998), changing behaviours to preserve the world’s resources, the development of empathy towards other peoples and cultures, and the reconsideration of one’s own need to keep learning about the world. Cultural imperialism and the decline of local cultures is a by-product of internationalisation, where the knowledge of smaller ethnic groups may be swallowed by larger groups. In the case of HDR students, cultural imperialism extends to the very forms or academic writing that they must adopt and the ways in which they seek legitimacy as researchers. For instance, polite researcher-to-researcher interactions vary hugely in different countries. A typical example of this in Australia is found when an HDR students insists on called the supervisor ‘professor’ in preference to the first name that would be more usual in the Australian context. This has an important implication for developing researchers, as students from Majority-world nations seek Western (or Minority-world) qualifications. In this sense, the beliefs about knowledge shift as taken-for-granted ideas and practices are challenged in different world locations. Knowledge can suffer a form of homogenisation as student mobility focuses attention on the management of the recruitment of students from one nation to another, and the delivery of courses in countries other
than the one in which they were developed (Fallshaw, 2003). Rizvi (2000) points out that internationalisation must consider the ‘global-local relationship’ (that is, the situation of knowledge). A challenge, then, for institutions is to foster the strengths brought into the university through the mobility of the research workforce through a focus on the development of research communities of practice. So, how can conditions be set up so that students feel themselves as part of an internationally oriented research community that support cross-cultural interactions?

The idea of a community of practice has influenced the way that we understand learning in universities. The concept of a community of practice was first established by Wenger (1998) in business contexts. Wenger says that “communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour.” In the context of HDR students, despite being the focus of a ‘shared domain’, they often don’t feel part of the collective. For many, the research situation is quite different from previous learning contexts. Further, as new researchers, they are rather at the edges of full participation. As Billett (2001, p.209) suggests “it seems learners afforded the richest opportunities for participation report(ed) the strongest development, and that workplace readiness was central to the quality of experiences. Readiness is more than the preparedness for guided learning to proceed. It also includes the norms and work practices that constitute the invitational qualities for individuals to participate in and learn through work.” Therefore, in this paper we explore the experiences of HDR students and supervisors who are at the margin of full involvement in the research practice of a department. Using their voices we highlight major areas of concern for students and supervisors who are involved in cross-cultural research situations.

Voices from the edge

In 2009, a number focus groups and interviews were held with HDR candidates and supervisors about their cross-cultural experiences and the support they expect to receive from their departments throughout their research projects. The majority of HDR participants were international students and the minority Australian domestic students. The supervisor participants had all had experience of researching in cross-cultural contexts and most of them had had international learning experiences themselves. The purpose of the interviews was to develop materials (scenarios and videos) that could be used for developmental purposes. Participants chose their own pseudonyms so that they could track their own comments throughout media production and subsequent publications. Candidates and supervisors were asked for suggestions in the way that universities could help the transition into research and support throughout candidacy. In essence, they were commenting on the social and intellectual aspects of engagement with their research studies.

Using a modified constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) which focuses on the distillation of main themes, and which included a phenomenographic approach (Marton and Booth, 1997) to examine variation within those themes, we were able to discern the issues of departmental support that were of most importance to the participants. In addition, we were able to judge the impact of those areas on their overall experience. We then looked at research outcomes found in similar studies to develop a checklist for departments preparing to accept new international HDR candidates.

The following paragraphs outline the main thematic ideas which are supported empirically with quotes from the transcripts. They are written with a particular ‘voice’ in that they have the feel of the participants ‘telling’ institutions what they would prefer to have happen. This form of composite narrative built from participants real words, with the inclusion of some specific quotations, enables readers to ‘hear’ the stories of the participants. The sections are also presented in order of their importance to the participants (stemming from the constant comparison method).
Candidate/Supervisor selection

It is important for academic departments to recognise the different research expectations and needs of supervisor and potential candidate during the process of candidate selection. The department should present itself in a clear and welcoming manner, as candidates will often make their final decision about where to study based on how positive a reception they have received from the staff. Part of creating a welcoming reception is to be efficient and to respond to the candidate’s application as soon as possible rather than remaining silent over a number of months, thereby generating unnecessary stress. One of the primary concerns in terms of the research partnership is that the supervisor is interested and has experience in the candidate’s research topic. There have been a few suggestions as to how to make this ideal situation more frequent. One supervisor suggested that the candidate’s CV be shown to all members of the department to see who shows the most interest in being involved. A number of candidates and supervisors suggested it would be better to begin with some sort of panel supervision so the candidate is introduced to and starts working with various staff members before making a selection. At the core of that suggestion is the assertion (regularly made throughout the interviews) that the potential candidate and potential supervisor must have some form of dialogue (be it through e-mail, skype or a face-to-face meeting) before agreeing on the pairing. A discussion would give them the opportunity to see that their approach to the topic and to research in general is roughly aligned and allow them to better determine the level of each other’s communication skills.

It is not a good idea to allocate a candidate to a supervisor before the supervisor has had an opportunity to talk to them to be sure that they have a similar idea of the work that will follow over the next three years. For example, candidates might expect a greater or lesser degree of independence in their research topic, and supervisors want to know that their candidate is motivated from the start lest “it becomes my project and then I have to keep them motivated to fulfil my ideas” (Supervisor: Hilda). Talking beforehand also has particular importance for supervisors potentially taking on ESL candidates as there may be discrepancies between the polished CV sent to the university and their more general command of the language. The supervisor should have a chance to identify where candidates will need to provide extra support. If the supervisor has doubts about taking on a particular candidate, it is rarely a good thing for either partner if the supervisor is finally pressured into accepting them by the university, because they would not be starting from a position of trust or confidence.

Induction

Once candidates arrive on campus orientation sessions should clearly communicate everything they need to know to get started confidently, from how to draw up a research plan, organise the budget and borrow from the library, to where to find and how to use the printer. Candidates have found that it took them a long time to settle into their research because, despite having attended their orientation day “no one kind of showed you where the photocopier was and how to use it, all that kind of purely basic kind of administrative kind of stuff…when that wasn’t shown to me and I didn’t know anyone so I couldn’t ask someone to show me …so I think that kind of hindered the research process” (Candidate: Federico). One candidate, who really enjoyed the orientation provided, suggested that it would be really helpful if another international candidate (hopefully from the same department) who was already a year or so into their PhD could meet up with them on a one-on-one basis to show them around the campus and answer any questions. This more personalised introduction would allow candidates to ask questions that might be intimidating to ask in a larger group. Having a senior candidate mentor would help candidates adapt to the new setting and give them a familiar face in the department aside from their supervisor.

As well as using the orientation day to outline academic protocols, plagiarism, authorship, ethics processes, etc., it could be used as a time to discuss the cultural diversity one can expect in an Australian university and the implications this might have on the research. This could even be done
within the department, encouraging candidates to “really look at their expectations of their role as a student and the role of the supervisor, ok because I think if they realised that there’s some kind of mismatch then that’s going to help in the adjustment, that they make to this really new kind of relationship” (Supervisor: Amira).

**Workspace**
Candidates generally expect a space of their own in which to work where they can get on with their research comfortably while still being integrated into the wider sphere of the department. Candidates who arrived in a department which didn’t have enough space to accommodate them felt, for the most part, very lost and disconnected. This is particularly true for newly-arrived international candidates who, in many cases, don’t know anyone in the country and rely on the connections they can forge in the department. It is important that the office space candidates receive is not segregated from the rest of the department but integrated with the department giving them more impetus to become involved and to feel themselves on a more equal footing with other researchers. Alternatively, a personal desk in a focused postgraduate room would also encourage candidates to engage with one another. This should help them both socially and, as one supervisor particularly argued “the interactions between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous students were creating a learning community that was disseminating all kinds of cultural knowledges” (supervisor: Carmen). The next step could be in the provision of comfortable cultural spaces such as a prayer room for Muslim candidates.

**Funding**
Having enough funding for both research and living expenses is a very important concern for international candidates. Research students can find it hard surviving on their scholarship money and would benefit from being given jobs within their department. Jobs that a department might offer, such as research assistantships or tutoring, would save them losing time in menial jobs (in shops, etc.), helping them to be more financially secure as well as gaining experience and being treated as a colleague. Candidates should be helped in the initial stage of the PhD to draw up a realistic budget with the money they have for the project. The way the department allocates money should be transparent and equitable, allowing sufficient funds for the kinds of materials and travel that candidates’ research requires.

**Housing**
Finding accommodation can be a very time consuming and stressful issue for international candidates. As the department, and especially the supervisor, is predominantly the candidate’s only contact in Australia, it is important that sensitive strategies are put in place to assist them. Supervisors should be prepared for international candidates asking them for advice about accommodation and living in Australia. A simple strategy for the university overall would be to give preference to international candidates when allotting university accommodation. The more dedicated or welcoming supervisor might go further by having a list of affordable nearby suburbs with good transport systems prepared for the candidate on arrival or even earlier. If the candidature starts off on this warm and considerate footing, it will make it easier for the candidates to adjust and to communicate when there are problems in their personal living situation which will hinder their academic process for a time.

**Networking**
The opportunity to network is important to candidates. Opportunities on a number of levels including social networking with other candidates within the department, interdisciplinary networking through seminars and international networking would help candidates engage with a broader research context. To that end, the department could provide some semi-formal opportunities for the postgraduates to meet and to talk to decrease candidate isolation. It is important for international candidates to meet other candidates so that they can get feedback at the peer level.
about their research and about their candidate/supervisor experience so that they can develop a better understanding of what they can expect in an Australian university context. “I think it’s helpful in case that, ok we know that I have many problems with my research; I know people have problems as well” (Candidate: Samson). Attending seminars regularly may help them to begin to feel that they can operate successfully within their academic sphere.

Fostering interdisciplinary communication will ultimately help the goal of increasing interdisciplinary research output. International candidates will often choose to come to a big Australian university expecting that they will be introduced to a wider academic community, not working within a single department, and so they will be expecting that the department will make opportunities for cross-disciplinary research accessible. This can also be an ongoing advantage for the university as post-doc positions are seeded through inter-disciplinary and international contacts. Departments must be aware that in many cultures, such as Australian Indigenous cultures, cross-disciplinary research is very important because it is inappropriate to have a single supervisor per candidate. The department has to be prepared therefore, to open up the supervisory relationship by involving other people with knowledge of specific aspects of the candidate’s research at certain points throughout the process.

Looking further afield it is generally considered an advantage for the candidate if their supervisor and department has international ties. This is would help the candidates to expand their own network. International candidates may also gain confidence from the fact that their supervisor has worked in a different country themselves and may have a more sympathetic approach to academic differences and the potential sense of diaspora that candidates may be experiencing.

**Language**
The department should be prepared to provide assistance in how to appropriately use academic language as academic writing style varies from culture to culture. Candidates may choose to study in Australia to learn a more globally-accepted writing style and supervisors should therefore be made aware of differences in academic writing and how to discuss the Australian approach to academic writing with their candidates. Candidates need to be given time to improve their language skills. The department can help by being patient, providing courses, and by having an English advisor on hand. It would be helpful for candidates to have a discipline-specific “workshop on this writing of academic research so building up arguments and it’s not so much as basic English the English is fine but the building up argument and trying to make your point” (Candidate: Lucien). Supervisors also have to learn to recognise the difference between poor English expression and poor ideas. It would be helpful therefore if the department could be careful about the level of English skills before accepting candidates and then be prepared to hire an editor or have information about editors available for candidates as there are nearing the end of their candidature.

**Timing/Deadlines**
Each academic has a different way of working and organising their time. When two academics are working together to a certain deadline (as with a supervisor and candidate) a negotiation has to take place to find an approach which best suits their needs. Candidates may find the transition to postgraduate research quite difficult. The department could ease this transition by offering a template of a more structured timeline for candidates to follow if it makes them feel more comfortable: “I feel with no formal due dates or like tests per se I'm not being really challenged and so I can see myself getting you know distracted by other things” (Candidate: Olivia). There are also problems that candidates are not aware of existing deadlines, particularly at the beginning of the candidature. Introducing a very detailed timeline is good strategy for helping a candidate who is struggling to get their thesis written toward the end of the candidature. However, departments should be careful in their approach of actively enforcing timelines as this can be read as hierarchical and can go against some cultural expectations: “Indigenous students will have their timelines too
and so I think there’s a negotiation between those two timelines” (supervisor: Sebastian). The department should see that all existing time limits relevant to HDR candidates are clearly stated in a single, easily-accessible source. Having this information clearly collated at the beginning of the candidature would place candidates in a better position to plan their research timetable.

Communication: Advertising Events in Time
There should be an active mode of communication between the department and the candidates to keep everyone informed and involved. Candidates have to feel they’re being listened to, and so if they, as a group, request to have a workshop there should be clear avenues for them to follow to avoid situations such as this one: “the supervisor said they will put up the request for us but then on the other side there wasn’t any mechanism to accept this request … and at the same time you are doing other things so … because they don’t send it back when you e-mail them again and you have to deal with this along with everything else you’ve got to get, at some point you just say ‘alright never mind’” (Candidate: Lucien). Candidates frequently commented on their need for a mailing list which would inform them (more than a week in advance) of seminars taking place in the department, around the university or even at other universities. It was all too common that candidates were disappointed by not hearing about an event they would have liked to attend until too late: “maybe an e-mail list or something you know where you can sign up and say what topics or what areas of research you’re interested in and if there’s any public workshops or presentations or things going on that you could just go to because sometimes you find out really late like maybe a day before or something … it hasn’t been advertised anywhere on campus or like you don’t really know about… I requested to become a member of the e-mail list … but I mean you can’t do that with everyone I mean I don’t know maybe you could just sign up with every single department” (Candidate: Nicole). When workshops for which candidates need to sign up are announced, they should be accompanied by a clear overview of the workshop’s content so that candidates know that the workshop will answer their questions.

Using Communication Technology
Having a good command of communication technologies is increasingly important, particularly when working with candidates and other colleagues who may not always be in the same country and when more and more seminars are being conducted on-line. Some of the key aspects for the department to be aware of concerning technology are that the technology available in the department works in conjunction with the technology in the rest of the university and that all the members of the department have an understanding of different modes of communication which take place with different technologies. Candidates sometimes find it difficult to communicate with their supervisor via the phone due to different background accents. This could be supported by having all the department’s computers fitted with a camera and skype (for instance) so that candidates can see the person they’re talking to. There can be difficulties in finding a time to talk using computer-mediated communications when trying to meet with someone on the other side of the world, but once this problem is addressed candidates often find it a much more efficient approach than e-mails because they can ask questions and receive immediate responses.

Supervisors should be made aware that there are different cultural protocols associated with different technologies so that they don’t misread a situation. An example given by one supervisor was “I think it’s probably a cross-cultural thing that… I was slightly offended or felt put down a bit by them not responding to e-mails I would send for some time, I came to realise that their perception was, they wouldn’t waste my time responding until they had a good answer” (Supervisor: James). A more common example of miscommunication through e-mail protocols is not being aware of the way people express themselves in an e-mail. Misreading of seemingly abrupt e-mails is a common source of misunderstandings for candidates, who are looking for support from their supervisors and can be quite sensitive to their comments: “you interpret a lot when you get an e-mail and you read it the way you think that person might have said it so of course if he says it to
Attitude: PhD as a Job or as Training
While there is a general consensus that candidates would like to be treated as colleagues there are two essential ways that candidates look at their PhD, as a job or as training. Both of these approaches require some assistance from the department in terms of the respect shown to candidates as early researchers and the preparations made for the candidate’s career to follow. A simple but effective way of showing your candidates a respectful and collegial attitude is to use inclusive language, referring to them directly as colleagues, scholars, early researchers or candidates rather than ‘students’. Encouraging candidates to do their PhD by publication tends to have very positive effects for the candidate in both regards, because it gives them a more practical foundation in academic practices (attending conferences, organising papers for selected journals, reviewing, etc.) and gives them a list of publications to springboard from after their PhD. This approach also lessens their sense of being a student per se as they are becoming involved in a research culture and doing the work of an active researcher. A key advantage to presenting early is for the candidates to be supported by academics coming to listen to their ideas and treating them seriously.

Cultural approaches to postgraduate candidates vary around the world. Some are treated almost as fully-fledged staff members and others are still considered as students in a more hierarchical sense. “If you do a PhD in that system you are very often given a full-time position from that university as part of that full-time university position you write your PhD; not everybody’s in that position but very many people, so yes students would very much be seen as colleagues” (Supervisor: Jill). Consequently candidates’ expectations will differ and so their supervisors should be clear about their expectations while being sensitive to the adjustments the candidates have to make.

Conclusions
The main themes presented in this article are not surprising and have been expressed in other media (eg Higher Education Series, 2001). What is surprising is that candidates and faculty still speak strongly on those issues. Institutions often forget that for the candidates it is the first time they have experienced doing HDR work in a university context. The voices and views of our participants regarding the forms of support that faculties and departments can provide show that, on the whole, institutions still have a long way to go in the provision of welcoming and inclusive research environments. In one sense, the results from our group are not particularly unexpected, but unlike most common assertions, they are based on empirical evidence and suggest a complacency of provision. Each year a large amount of money is spent in the recruitment of international research candidates and then on scholarships to support them through candidacy. However, it appears that once in the academy, the traditional doctoral environments still pervade. The traditional model supports students who (mostly) share Australian research culture which includes an emphasis on the supervisor/candidate relationship. Our participants tell a different story. They suggest that the cultural components of research practice are supported by departmental initiatives as much as by the particular research supervision situation.

Early in this paper we focused on Wenger’s notion of community of practice. The comments made by both our supervisor and candidate groups suggest that networking and discussion within a research community is desired by them, but not necessarily enacted upon. The language used by students, and the suggestions they make for their inclusion into departmental research cultures, indicate that they feel somewhat on the edge. It would seem sensible, then, to integrate research candidates through better provision of working spaces and collaborative research opportunities. A systems approach to the provision of research support could go a long way to helping students in cross-cultural research environments make an easy transition into research work in Australia.
References


