

Intercultural aspects in PhD supervision

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the primary task of a PhD supervisor was to uphold the academic standard. The doctor's degree signifies that the candidate has demonstrated the ability to independently conduct original research. The supervisor would give feedback on draft text requesting revisions until the desired scientific level was attained. This process would take as long as needed, which sometimes meant ten years or more.

Over the past decades PhD supervision at the European Universities changed dramatically. As a consequence of budgetary constraints productivity becomes more of an issue and many universities choose to organise the PhD studies in the form of a doctoral school (1). Within the context of the Bologna process of harmonization of higher education in Europe PhD studies are identified as the third phase of education. The role of PhD supervisor has become more demanding and more complex and includes tasks like time management and coaching of the young researcher to become a legitimate researcher.

At the same time we observe an increase of international PhD students. International PhD students have to make an extra effort to adapt to the academic culture. In addition, international PhD students from a non-western background often face difficulties as they try to adjust to a more individualized and self-directed learning environment (2). How the transition process for these international PhD students proceeds is a result of their challenges when they arrive, the influence of the supervisor and the influence of the institutional set up (3). International students generally need a trustful and guiding relationship with a supervisor, who supports among other things critical thinking and reflexivity, at the same time structuring the initial process and setting goals together with the PhD student.

Building on earlier studies (1, 3) this paper proposes to come up with a systematic approach to the supervision of international PhD students.

1 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

1.1 International PhD students

Social changes and globalisation dramatically changed the higher education landscape over the past twenty years (4). The total number of students continued to increase as more and more students gained access to higher education. The variety of study programs has grown abundantly.

The prevailing neo-liberal economic trend pushes for a self-sustaining system of higher education (5). Governments prefer to specify conditions rather than providing funds. As a consequence universities are competing to attract students on the international market and the number of international students has increased significantly.

The transition into an independent researcher is a major challenge for all PhD students (6). On top of this, International PhD students from a non-western background face the extra challenge of adjusting to a different culture. They are used to different learning approaches and they have different expectations of their supervisors and colleagues (7). In particular it is hard for these students to adjust to a more individualized and self-directed learning environment (8).

1.2 Intercultural dimensions

The Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede spent nearly four decades researching cultural differences (9). The concept culture reflects the sets of beliefs and values shared by a group of people within a certain timeframe. Hofstede defines culture as follows: *'The integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behaviour that depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations'* (10). Based on his research Hofstede developed a model identifying first five, later six cultural dimensions, which can be used to explain differences in interaction patterns of people in general. The six cultural dimensions defined by Hofstede are: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism/Collectivism, Masculinity/Femininity, Long/Short Term Orientation, and Indulgence/Restraint. Hofstede collected data from subjects around the world, arranging them into national profiles.

On his website Hofstede presents data from this research collected during many years allowing you to compare the cultural dimensions of up to five countries (11). Table 1 (see below) is constructed based on the data from this website in January 2015. The aggregate scores are normalized, transformed to a scale of 1 to 100. This provides a good opportunity for comparing relative differences. However, it should be kept in mind that the data stem from different studies and in a statistical sense the reliability is uncertain. While recognizing that the national scores are a rough generalization, these national profiles prove to be very useful in discussing the impact of cultural differences on teaching.

Table 1.: National scores on the six Hofstede dimensions for 21 selected countries

	Power distance	Individualism and collectivism	Masculinity and femininity	Uncertainty avoidance	Long term vs short term	Indulgence versus restraint
Belgium	65	75	54	94	82	57
Denmark	18	74	16	23	35	70
France	68	71	43	86	63	48
Germany	35	67	66	65	83	40
Italy	50	76	70	75	61	30
Netherlands	38	80	14	53	67	68
Spain	57	51	42	86	48	44
UK	35	89	66	35	51	69
Brazil	69	38	49	76	44	59
Chile	63	23	28	86	31	68
Colombia	67	13	64	80	13	83
China	80	20	66	30	87	24
India	77	48	56	40	51	26
Malaysia	100	26	50	36	41	57
Japan	54	46	95	92	88	42
Singapore	74	20	48	8	72	46
Canada	39	80	52	48	36	68
USA	40	91	62	46	26	68
Australia	36	90	61	51	21	36
Egypt	70	25	45	80	7	4
South Africa	49	65	63	49	34	63

2 DEALING WITH INTERCULTURAL ISSUES IN PHD SUPERVISION

2.1 Awareness

An essential part of a systematic approach to the supervision of international PhD students is awareness of differences. As shown above Denmark is the country with the lowest power distance, often leading to a very independent, equal, critical and reflective dialogue between academics *regardless* of seniority. This is quite challenging for most international PhD students in terms of having a professional relationship with a supervisor. Especially if the supervisor or the student does not acknowledge this:

“Then I got to work with my supervisor. He wants to open up things. It was so shocking and stressful to work with him. Mentally I couldn’t understand what he was trying to tell me. He was frustrated with me, because I didn’t get it. Then my boyfriend told me to ask him in the end of the meeting – was it this you meant? Then he would say: No! Out of that I finally got the point – don’t take things for granted, be critical, be reflective.”

International PhD student no 1

This international student tried all the time to ‘read’ the supervisor in order to understand what was asked for – as was common in her home country Brazil – and

the supervisor kept expecting that she would take her own stance and speak up her own mind – as was common for him being from a western-European country himself, and having spent at least 10 years in Denmark. Only when someone intervened and got them to communicate, the different perspectives came out into the open and the frustration was resolved.

If the supervisor takes great effort to discuss what he or she wants in terms of academic behaviour right from the start, and places the international student in an environment that frequently exhibits examples of the required behaviour; chances are that the transition will be much smoother than the cases cited above.

Checking out the differences goes for all the dimensions above; whether it has to do with communication styles (directness vs. indirectness), cultural differences in rule following, conflict styles, time management or whatever difference may rise from the above mentioned categories.

2.2 Respect

If awareness is the basic part of the systematic approach genuine and mutual respect is the next stepping-stone. It may sound very strait forward and obvious, but due to different understandings of what respectful behaviour implies, it is usually something that has to be worked on and it carries certain dilemmas. The following sequence from an international PhD student illustrates the point:

“The Danish students – they are quite confident and direct. They can discuss with their supervisors. In my country it is very bad to say ‘I want it this or that way’. We listen to our supervisor. In that way we are not very frank with our supervisor. We think that our supervisor needs to take the initiative, and I am more concerned with how he reacts. If I will break some respectable barrier.” International student no 2

Thus, for the international PhD student to ‘respect’ the wishes of the supervisor to ‘discuss’ she will have to violate a marker of respect from her home country. She is from a country, India, where restraint, masculinity, collectivism and the power distance point in the direction of not speaking against a supervisor. It will take some awareness, will and skill on the part of the supervisor to get the desired behaviour started. In general you might also have to give the PhD students ample time to adjust and sometimes you may even have to accept that the student will not get there. E.g. for some international PhD students coming from a very power distant and collective culture it is too much of a violation starting to call their professors by name. There could be more difficult dilemmas and situations to cope with of course; e.g. questions of how direct one should be with each other or to which extent religion can be a part of daily academic life.

Even if respect has to work both ways the supervisor must take the lead to ensure a respectful relationship. Basically he or she is much more familiar with the rules of conduct in the academic environment and what is more the supervisor has the ‘upper hand’ relation wise as it shows from this quote about conflicts:

“Conflicts? I have no conflicts with my main supervisor. Or my co-supervisor. I am a PhD student. I do not have conflicts.” International PhD student no. 3

The PhD student who said this was an international PhD student who actually had severe issues with the supervisor. He got very little if any supervision; worked 15 hours a day and reported issues of disrespectful behaviour on the part of the supervisor. In general, international PhD students are more likely to hold back in terms of saying how they appreciate things than speaking out their mind openly. They have to be invited and encouraged.

2.3 Aligning expectations

As also becomes clear from discussions in relation to the first two aspects of a systematic approach to the supervision of international PhD students, becoming aware of and aligning expectations is a must. It is always an important part of good collaboration to align expectations, but in the case of international PhD students it becomes vital for a good collaboration. At the very least it will make the transformation to a new working environment and code of conduct easier:

“There is a lot of self-motivation here. I don’t think it was very explicit from the start. Just, when you go to a meeting, you quickly find out that others expect you to say something. I got it in the tacit way and adapted. I learned it also by observing and hearing what others said. When I teach today I say to internationals, you need to have self-determination.”

International PhD student no. 4

This is an example of an international PhD student, who was able to adapt implicitly without explicitly aligning expectations up front. It did constitute a challenge from the start, but she adapted. However, based on her own experience she makes sure to tell other internationals about it; realising this will make life easier for them. The lack of alignment does not always turn out that well. The international PhD student quoted above is from France, a country with a power distance very far from Denmark, but similar in individualism, so she was able to make the change on her own. Next quote is from a Chinese student. In China the power distance is even more outspoken than in both Denmark and France. Restraint is a much more dominant feature and collectivism has the upper hand:

“It took a long time [to tell my supervisor about the issue with an external leader]. I was shy and always criticizing myself for wanting to complain too much ... I thought if [my supervisor] didn’t object at meetings he approved... I spend time on useless things, and for one month I only sat in my office staring out into space. ... It was not me, but [my supervisor] who figured things out [in the end]. We finally had a talk; he didn’t get what he wanted.... I [gradually] learned, [mainly also from other PhD students] ...how to complain and make my voice heard – it is needed here.”

International PhD no. 5

Here we have an international PhD student, who spends a lot of wasted resources and experiences a severe period of agony – which could have been avoided, had the supervisor addressed the issue of coming forward with distresses and used time on clarifying and discussing what the purpose of the PhD project was basically.

Based on the statements of the international PhD students, both the ones quoted and the other international PhD students in the study (3), relevant issues to communicate about, taking into consideration the Danish working culture at Aalborg University, would be:

1. What are we trying to aim for here; what are our knowledge production values?
2. What does it mean to be reflective and critical and why is it important?
3. What does problem-based learning imply in terms of frustration when there are no guarantees and no authority to tell you whether you are on the right track or not?
4. What does it mean to promote your own goals and make your voice heard?
5. What do you risk if you adapt too much in this working context?

These are all questions on a meta-level. Meta-level discussions are especially important when collaboration takes place between people with highly different tacit assumptions about how to interact and work together (12). Thus, the poorer the fit between the supervisor and the student, the greater the need to make explicit their tacit assumptions. Meta level communication "*provides other[s] with the opportunity to reject [or accept] the pattern [of collaboration] that is tentatively introduced ... Thereby the negotiations have started about which preconditions should apply*" (12, p.173 – brackets added). It may take some time, but if the preconditions are not aligned, the collaboration could be impaired or even collapse.

3 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Expectations are part of the cultural baggage that every international PhD student brings along. Quite often the implicit expectations of the mentor-role of PhD supervisor are not met. Awareness of differences, in the form of Hofstede's perspectives or other cultural mapping tools, can aid us in our efforts to provide the best supervision possible. Not from a deterministic worldview assigning labels to individual PhD students, but rather as a reflective tool identifying topics requiring attention.

We have proposed three cornerstones of a systematic approach to improve the supervision of international PhD student. We are aware that this approach is based on our own western values, for instance assuming that it is a good thing to bring uncertainties out in the open. Basically we impose our own cultural values over the PhD student's own culture. However, we feel this is justified simply because the international students come to visit our culture aiming to participate in our academic setting. In that sense our approach is but very contextual..

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