

Article

Supporting international PhD students – are pastoral duties part of the package?

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine the experiences of international PhD students, highlight problems specific to these students, and outline potential solutions. The paper is based on my experience of teaching, observation and informal conversations with such students (Arabic, East-Asian, and, to a lesser degree, European) over a six-year period of teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP). First, I argue that doctoral students constitute a distinct group of learners for academic, language, social, and psychological reasons. I base this conclusion on my own experience of teaching PhD students, but this view is also supported by literature. In this article I discuss problems specific to this group, often connected with the change of their social role from lecturer to student, cultural differences in academic relationships, language insecurities, separation from the family and loneliness.

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Introduction

PhD students often have quite significant experience of academic work in their home countries, and sometimes in the UK or another European country. Some students may have published articles, taught in universities, and given talks at conferences. This experience can be positive in that students with previous experience of academic work may be aware of an academic writing style. Academic experience gained in a different academic culture can, however, be counterproductive if a different approach to reasoning has been fostered in that culture. From past academic experience students may have formed ideas of what is or is not acceptable in academic reasoning and writing, and, as a result, may be trapped in a particular style of writing, finding it difficult to re-learn. Students sometimes struggle to understand supervisors' comments to "be more critical", "engage with literature", "have own voice", and are not sure how to improve their writing. An additional – psychological – difficulty involves loss of face for an accomplished academic who becomes a student and whose academic writing skills are challenged. This is, in my experience, one of the main causes of distress among doctoral students.

Furthermore, as international students generally represent the best educated segments of their home societies (Thomas and Althen, 1989), unrealistic hopes and expectations may be placed on them by families, friends, sponsors, university colleagues and bosses (Pedersen, 1991). These expectations give rise to pressures and anxieties about academic failure (Borg et al., 2009; Mori, 2000). Anxiety about meeting academic standards leads some students to need constant reassurance and encouragement, which is not always available from supervisors. I often encounter enquiries that would be better aimed at supervisors:

Sociology student: *Could you look at my plan of work for this year and tell me whether it's OK?*

Business student: *My supervisor tells me to use primary sources but I think I need to use secondary data – what do you think?*

Business student: *What is biasing in cash flow forecasting?*

Connected with the anxiety about meeting academic standards are concerns about language proficiency. Irizarry and Marlowe (2010) reported that international students on Masters programmes lacked confidence both academically and socially because of language difficulties.

Language proficiency

The language proficiency of international PhD students I teach is generally higher than other students. They must obtain a minimum IELTS score between 6.0 and 7.0, depending on the discipline, with 6.5 being the average. Higher language competence makes PhD students generally a more confident group., but mature students with past academic experience are more susceptible to loss of confidence. Fear of losing face can sometimes render students virtually speechless:

When people ask me to repeat I freeze and think that I cannot speak at all.

I cannot communicate at the research group sessions and with my supervisor – I always have what to say; I just cannot bring myself to saying it.

Our conversation was virtually an hour's counselling session: the student just needed his confidence building up.

Personal issues

PhD students often live away from their families and miss them. Students who come from countries with ongoing unrest, such as Libya and Syria, are pre-occupied with worry for their loved ones.

Syrian student: I cannot work, I am so worried about my husband.

Libyan student: I cannot concentrate, I haven't seen my family for so long, I keep thinking about them.

These problems can have serious repercussions for students' academic progress.

Social and psychological problems

Socially, PhD students constitute a very distinct group. They can be quite lonely because of the nature of PhD research work which is done mostly in isolation and with limited student-peer interaction, with much less student-peer interaction than in the case of undergraduates. They also have little student-lecturer interaction – only with supervisors and occasionally EAP teachers. This is counter to their cultural expectations. For example, the Chinese “teacher and student relationship in schools is similar to parents and children relationship at home... the teachers and the schools actually have the nanny function.” (Zhu, 2011). The status and role of

a teacher in Islamic countries are similar. Loneliness and isolation may cause distress, anxiety and, ultimately, depression:

I am lonely, and many of the international students are like me. We are not noticed by English research students.

My supervisor is very good professionally but he does not talk to me, do you think he dislikes me for something?

International students often come just to say hello or goodbye before returning to their home countries. One student came to introduce his visiting family. A student told me she spent several months barely able to leave her room through worry for her family in the midst of the Libyan conflict. Another Libyan student came to a drop-in session to show the picture of his 10-year-old cousin killed by militia.

These non-academic encounters show how international PhD students often lack simple human contact. They are lonely. The intensity and number of non-academic conversations is in my experience much higher amongst mature adult EAP learners than undergraduates. It made me think that there is a possible gap in PhD student support.

Existing support

Huddersfield University is an example of good provision of support services. The Student Wellbeing webpages (<https://www.hud.ac.uk/wellbeing-disability-services/wellbeing/>) provide a wealth of information: what counselling is, what the service can offer, what issues are commonly discussed, what confidentiality means, and how to refer a person to a counsellor. There is a special service for students who are depressed, suffering from mental problems, and for students falling behind with their work, including an offer to liaise with personal tutors, course or academic skills tutors, or outside agencies. Yet, it does not seem to reach many international researchers; although the need may be high, they are often reluctant to seek help through counselling. My experience of communicating with PhD students about counselling is supported in the literature (Mori, 2000; Boon et al.2011). Research suggests that international students are less likely to use counselling services than domestic students (Carr, Koyama and Thiagarajan, 2003; Hyun et al., 2007; Tung, 2011).

Underused services

Three main reasons can be identified for underuse of such services by international students.

Lack of awareness. International students are very often unaware of services to help students with counselling and psychological support. They may have no experience of such services in their own countries (Kilinc and Granello, 2003). If similar services do not exist at home, students are unlikely to look out for them when they need help in the UK.

Unwillingness to use the services. The attitudes of international students towards counselling are often negative. Such attitudes are grounded primarily in students' cultural backgrounds. Disclosure of personal problems to counsellors in some cultures may be regarded as shameful (Nina, 2009). Stigma associated with mental disorders like depression is a major barrier for many in seeking timely help (Boghosian, 2011).

Language factors. Language is a major barrier to students seeking help. Students are unsure that they will be able to communicate productively with a counsellor or understand the advice given. This was noticed among Middle Eastern students (Boghosian, 2011), Chinese and Malaysian students (Jenkins et al., 1991) and international students in general (Yeh and Inose, 2003). I have also encountered it in my practice. Several students have said that they felt uneasy and embarrassed when they could not completely follow the counsellor.

Possible solutions

There could be several possible solutions to help international postgraduate students deal with these difficulties. For successful acculturation, students need intensive support, and one of the channels of support, I would argue, should be EAP teachers.

Stronger pastoral role.

EAP teachers need to accept a stronger pastoral role because international students are particularly vulnerable and need non-academic help to avoid the risks of ineffective research or even an inability to function in the community. Universities may not be in loco parentis, but they still have an important duty of care. EAP teachers should adopt a stronger pastoral role as students' first port of call for help. EAP teachers are in regular contact with students. They are seen by students as being outside the formal environment of the faculty or department. Jenkins et al. (1991) concluded that support offered by the tutor and academic staff is perceived as much more important than other campus services. EAP teachers working with adult researchers are bridging the gap in the provision of a comprehensive learning environment. A stronger pastoral role could take different forms: making students aware of what mental health support there is and what it aims to do; explaining difficult issues such as confidentiality; liaising with mental health professionals and referring students to them when necessary; and just being available, not only for language sessions, but also for a chat.

Stronger cultural element in curriculum

Including strong cultural element into everyday classroom teaching is supported by many scholars. Holm, for example, developed principles rationalising using cultural elements in language curriculum. He argues that "knowledge of culture presupposes a competence which is essential to the grasp of language's true meaning". (2003, p. 20). EAP teachers can integrate social and academic conventions, attitudes, values and cultural priorities in language programmes to facilitate the acculturation processes and develop cultural awareness courses.

Awareness of mental disorders.

My experience with international researchers has left me with an acute feeling of not being qualified to deal with many of these problems. My concern has been to make it easier for international students to make the difficult first contact with specialists. Because international students are reluctant to seek services on their own, it is crucial for counsellors to act proactively by increasing the visibility and accessibility of counselling facilities. I have invited our mental health counsellor to participate in PhD students Induction Days with a talk about the service, emphasising the positive experiences of international student service users and confidentiality. Now at Huddersfield University we are in the process of organising a PhD support group with participation of EAP teachers and mental health professionals.

Awareness of international students' distresses, anxieties and disorders appears not to be covered in TESOL or PgCert Teaching English for Academic Purposes courses. An indication of these issues in courses for EAP teachers would be helpful.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I would emphasise that international PhD students are different from other pre-sessional or in-sessional students. Lack of self-confidence, language insecurity, risk of "losing face", high expectations from others, family problems, and loneliness make them vulnerable to anxieties and even depression. However, they may not access standard well-being and mental health services. The reasons are often cultural, but sometimes students are simply unaware of the available support. Alongside supervisors, EAP teachers are often the first port of call for a distressed student and should get involved in the process of non-academic support by:

- developing a strong pastoral element in student interactions;
- introducing a strong cultural element into curricula;
- liaising with mental health specialists on campus.

This approach can flag problems before they become critical. It may also improve students' cultural awareness, enhance their psychological resilience, and generally make their research experience more secure and more fulfilling.

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