

The international PhD student journey: what works?

An examination of the PhD process from an international student's perspective

### **Abstract**

Realising the growing diversity of post graduate researchers in the UK, this article aims at shedding light on the complexities of the research journey for international students by analysing and interpreting the cultural assumptions embedded in the PhD process. This study uses the researcher as the phenomenon under investigation which is the essence of auto-ethnographical research. Auto ethnography is a reflexive genre of writing that could help us understand a larger cultural pattern. It is used in this study to reflect on some of the researcher's challenges throughout her PhD process focusing on the supervisory role in providing academic and non academic support. It was apparent that, cultural assumptions shape students' expectations and pose challenges on the student-supervisor relationship. Except for supervisors' initiatives, nothing was done by universities in order to prepare supervisors to cope with these culture-related challenges.

### **Introduction**

Universities in the UK have witnessed an increase in post graduate student enrolment in the past few years. According to HESA reports postgraduate enrollment has increased by 11% from 482,335 in 2004/05 to 536,815 in 2008/09 with non-UK students accounting for a 27% increase from 144,655 in 2004/05 to 183,385 in 2008/09. Research doctorates have grown by 30% with more masters students proceeding to doctoral studies. The growing diversity of the post graduate student market calls for a change to the nature and dynamics of the relationship between postgraduate students and their supervisors. The cultural make up of international students poses challenges for supervisors in the UK and calls for a need to better understand the post graduate market and their expectations. Furthermore, managing those expectations may be instrumental to a successful PhD study. In addition, income from international students as argued by Brown (2009) contributes not only to universities and HEI worldwide, but also to the welfare of local communities. This study discusses motives for doing a PhD degree as experienced by the researcher, the role non academic support played in shaping her expectations and experience, the role of the supervisor and relating it to various models in the literature in particular Vilkina's and Cartans' 2006 model , and how supervisors see PhD students.

### **Methodology**

In this research, as in any qualitative research, generalisation is not the aim. However, my experience as an Arab female studying in the UK offers insights into the cultural implications which can very well lend some commonality of experiences. Key issues in the literature informed this research included supervisory role in education, international students, cultural differences, culture shock, PhD students' experiences and autoethnography. Over the past 20 years there has been a considerable growth in research that has been labelled as 'auto-anthropology, autobiographical ethnography or sociology, personal or self-narrative research and writing, and perhaps most commonly, autoethnography' (Anderson, 2006:373). Auto ethnography allows the

researcher to be the subject under phenomenon and to use self reflexivity to make sense of large cultural patterns. As I consider myself a full member of the Arab culture, I used my experiences as an Arab female PhD student in UK universities to analyse how the unspoken cultural assumptions shape the PhD process and affect the role of the supervisor. I reflected back to the years of my study and read into the meanings of my actions and tried to interpret the relevant consequences. I also explored the self motives and drivers that influenced or pushed me through the process. It was interesting to investigate the various roles of my supervisors and how these roles were perceived in my own culture and how this influenced the outcome of my study.

### **Motives for doing a PhD**

A number of motives for undertaking a PhD study were identified by Gatrell, 2000; Crawford, 2003; and UK GRAD, 2004 as vehicles for enhanced career and credibility, affirmation and transformation, pursuing powerful subjects and intellectual achievement. Furthermore, Young (2009) added personal insecurities to the list of influential motives for doing a doctorate degree. In my case, doing a PhD was an inevitable process in following my career path as an academic by gaining specialisation in a relevant topic of my interest. Having graduated with distinction I was appointed as a research demonstrator by my university and eventually received a PhD scholarship to study in a UK university. This has been the natural path for academics in my country.

Receiving a PhD scholarship comes with many conditions. Some of these have to do with governmental expectations and others with familial expectations. The scholarship recipient starts their journey with the understanding that there is no room for failure. After 4 years they must return home with the award. They have to sign a contract to this effect taking full responsibility of returning the money in case of failing to achieve the desired outcome. My mother who acted as my guarantor signed the documents along with me taking part of the responsibility. It becomes a family affair and turns into a cloud hanging over our heads for a number of years. This is and not to mention the shame and disgrace that I would cause my family had I not got my PhD. The whole process becomes inspired by fear of not achieving the desired outcome. Taking all this into consideration, I went into the process feeling that it was less about academic achievement and more about surviving the coming years and returning home with the award. So it became a real life or death situation. This is how many international students with government funded scholarship start their journey.

In preparation for my move to the UK and the start of a PhD programme, it was apparent to me that the quality of education and resources that were available to me in my home country were not equivalent to those available to a UK home student. For example, the lack of a proper library, the lack of a good research method course, etc. put me at a disadvantage. This is to say that the process of doing a PhD in the UK was different from what we had back home and I did not receive any relevant preparation for it. These factors have added to my personal anxieties and doubled my fear of the unknown. In addition, I was not assigned a supervisor to contact and discuss ideas for my proposal prior to my arrival. However, I was hungry for knowledge and determined to learn about life as well as education in the UK.

For an international PhD student especially, from a less developed part of the world, being

accepted in a UK university is an exciting matter. It is a chance to discover the Western world and live by its rules. It is also a pursuit of freedom and independence. All these factors can prove to be significant distractions to the international PhD student. The emotional change the student goes through as a result can not be underestimated. This change, particularly in the early months, where the student is expected to sort out their university life as well as personal life, can be demanding and can lead to disorientation. This is where non academic support, offered particularly to international students, could be vital.

### **Non academic support**

Overcoming the initial shock of walking around in snow, I was faced with the fact that there were no more available rooms to rent in the university's halls of residence. As an alternative, I was offered a list of host families and private landlords by the university accommodation centre. They offered no advice about the proximity or safety of areas. I felt lost for a while and the fact that I had no one to turn to contributed to my anxiety and filled me with doubt about the whole PhD process. I ended up renting a room with a family which turned out to be a disaster and left in the first week, losing my deposit and a week's rent. I felt disappointed at how passive the university's role was in the much needed help at the start of the process. In my experience I found that the initial non academic support such as help with finding accommodation, help in city orientating and offering financial and other living advice was instrumental in the successful transition to a foreign country and the start of a post graduate program.

Furthermore, the university was undetermined on assigning me a supervisor prior to my arrival which added to my anxiety. Even though I realised that a supervisor at that time was not expected to provide non academic support, having a supervisor to talk to about my academic plans or the lack of them would have been assuring and would have definitely eased my anxiety. The international student is faced with common problems that are discussed in the literature (Chursh 1982; Sandhu and Asrabadi 1994; Mori 2002; Lee et al. 2004; Evans 2006; Russel et al. 2009). These relate to home sickness and loneliness, disconnection with host nationals due to differences in cultures and perceived discrimination, detachment of home support systems, dealing with a foreign language on a full time basis, unfamiliar understanding and strategies of the academic procedures as well as unrealistic family expectations. Furthermore, Brown (2009) found that the initial stage of the academic sojourn is a highly stressful period for international students due to the previously mentioned factors. It's evident that non academic related problems contribute largely to the international students' stress and anxiety especially in the early days of their PhD journey. It's important that supervisors of international students are some how familiar with the challenges faced by the students at this early stage and try to get involved with providing some useful links or contacts or listen, appreciate and empathise to say the least.

### **The role of the supervisor**

Institutions in the UK now have eligibility criteria for PhD supervision. A Post Graduate Certificate is offered in universities to help existing and potential supervisors develop a systematic approach to supervision and gain insight into the supervisory role. However, little is offered in the way of preparing supervisors to deal with challenges posed by differences in culture which may affect the effectiveness of supervision. Furthermore, 'few institutions seem to have any explicit list of the knowledge and skills which define effectiveness in supervision' (Taylor, 2006:2).

The role of the supervisor in a PhD study is crucial to its success and instrumental in achieving the desired outcome for both the student and the institution. Hence it is of great concern to decision makers in universities (Vilkinas, 2008). Beasley (1999) and Vilkinas (2005,2008) stated that among the elements that influence the supervisor's performance lie their research knowledge and their ability to manage the relationship with their post graduate students using good interpersonal and mentoring skills. Similarly, Taylor (2006) sees the supervisor as someone who is qualified in their research area as well as knowledgeable of their institutions governing rules and regulations for research degrees. Furthermore, supervisor roles extend to encouraging supportive relationships among the postgraduate students themselves (Latona and Browne 2001). Reflecting back on my own personal experience, I was negatively affected by not having a supervisor assigned to me in my early weeks of my PhD program. The fact that I went back and forth between two different potential supervisors with two different areas of research rendered me confused and undetermined. As a result, I did not find developing relationships with my colleagues a priority. No effort was extended by my yet unknown supervisor to encourage such endeavour. However, I was simply introduced to my fellow students by the director of research at the university as part of showing me to my new desk.

The role of the supervisor as discussed by Vilkinas (2002, 2005) comprise a number of skills related to knowledge and process management, however, the lack of conceptual framework of the supervision process, specific to research students, results in lack of understanding of what the role of the supervisor entails (Pearson et al. 2004). Models of supervision existed in the area of medical and clinical supervision. Examples of these include Hogan (1964), Ellis & Dell (1986), and Stoltenberg (1981). Those models were characterised by complexity and some of them contained specialised terms that required definitions. Further more, as argued by Gurr (2001) these models 'strived to achieve a complete description of the supervisory relationship rather than any attempt at elegant, or even utilitarian , simplicity' (p.83).

A 'continuum model' developed by Anderson (1988) allowed for the examination of philosophies of both the supervisor and the student about supervision, discuss their behaviour and propose appropriate changes. While this model embraces an interactive approach where both parties are encouraged to identify their roles and expectations and modify them accordingly, it was designed to be used for practical clinical sittings hence the practice of a supervisor may be adapted by students which is not necessarily applicable in other disciplines. More critique of the 'continuum model' can be found in Gurr (2001).

Vilkinas (2005) suggest a two dimension management model that was developed by Vilkinas and Cartan (2001) proposing a people-task focus and an external-internal focus. The ICVF (integrated

competing values framework) model also categorises the role of the leader as being Developer, Deliverer, Monitor, Broker, and Innovator with a central role that of an Integrator. Vilkinas and Cartan (2001, 2006) emphasised that the five operational roles contained in the model are paradoxical in nature. For example, a supervisor needs to care for the students while fulfilling their demanding role of them. Integrating those paradoxical roles and not being disabled by the role's of contradicting demands is an effective way of supervising (Robertson, 2005). While the model offers a good range of qualities essential in a supervisory role. It is not clear how the dimensions or qualities mentioned relate to one another. It can be argued that, from a practicality perspective some of these roles can be integrated or overlapped in the process. There is a danger of looking at this model from an abstract point of view and trying to apply only one or even all of these dimensions/qualities combined without considering the individual case of supervision. Furthermore, the model is borrowed from a management context that focuses on the leadership role. It is debatable whether this role could be best suited to the supervisor or the student themselves. Phillips (1992) argued that supervision aims at teaching the students to be their own supervisors. In my case I had to take the role of both the developer and innovator. Developing my knowledge and developing my self by achieving a degree of autonomy as quickly as possible was a survival technique. Creating a research idea that has not been done before and being innovative is an expected endeavour by any PhD student. When I was finally assigned a supervisor my role extended to include a deliverer.

My supervisor whom I greatly admired for his extensive knowledge of the subject as well as the industry was not given enough resources i.e. time to closely monitor my progress. He only met me when I requested a meeting. Having offered no or very little guidance in the early months, I was not encouraged to request meetings. I spent the first year and half of my PhD program reading around a couple of areas of interest and not being able to decide on the topic. According to (Manathunga 2005) I expressed early signs of warning which were identified in her study as four key areas of behaviour associated with early warning signs. Theses related to the frequent change of the research topic, avoiding communication with supervisors, avoiding others and not submitting work for review. On the personal side, I was very lonely and depressed. As Russell et al (2009) asserts, psychological correlates such as depression, helplessness, anxiety, paranoid feelings and irritability are often resulted from the stress faced by international students. Furthermore, Mori (2000) and Thomas and Althen (1989) claim that international students suffer from more severe adjustment problems than their domestic counterparts. My fellow students, who were all international students, were at various stages of progress with only one student in his first year. This made it difficult to form a community and share our experiences as each one was keen felt distant from the others. However, we occasionally talked about our frustration with the program and the lack of guidance and directions. We often felt that we were not valued by the department and that the research culture was a 'culture of disinterest' as coined in Manathunga's study ( 2005:231). Approaching the half way mark in my PhD funding time, I realised that I was not getting appropriate support neither academic nor non academic so I decided to change universities.

## **A new beginning**

In my new university I encountered a whole different experience in my PhD program. My two new supervisors, who interviewed me before I was invited to join the program, set their expectations at an early stage. They took the role of the monitor and developer according to Vilkina and Cartan (2006) previously mentioned model. They scheduled weekly appointments for the first three months to monitor my initial effort in developing my knowledge of the subject. Furthermore, they have participated in our long discussions critically analysing and critiquing the material I brought to our weekly meetings. I suddenly found myself in a mutually productive environment which was rewarding. As developers, they developed an understanding of my research capability and involved me in consumer research projects conducted by hospitality companies. They also assigned me a part-time teaching role in the Masters' program. In addition, my supervisors also took the role of a broker as they have built and maintained networks with hospitality companies and later with external supervisor and examiners.

Even though, my supervisory team did not adopt all the roles developed in Vilkina's and Cartan's 2006 model, they worked very well together and managed the relationship with me and all the other stakeholders in a harmonious way. They succeeded at devising their own system that proved effective in my case. However, as an international student, a great deal of my time and energy was spent on learning about the new research and life culture in my new environment. I had to fully adapt to it through trial and error. My culture was not integrated at any level and my supervisors had limited or no idea about my background as it relates to work ethics, learning procedures, processing information, religious observance, perception of time and all the other culture related elements. Ward et al. (2001) sees that the cultural distance or degree of difference between the student's culture of origin and that of the host culture as an important element challenging adaptation.

### **How supervisors look at PhD students**

There is a view that a PhD student is considered to be a colleague to her/his supervisor (Vilkinas, 2008). This view results from the fact that many PhD students are given part-time teaching jobs by UK universities. They are also expected to publish in their chosen area of research with their supervisors. This can lead to a more empowering and a less authoritative role of supervision which in turn affects the experience of international students. Looking at a PhD student as a colleague, although opens up a door of opportunities, poses more responsibilities for the international student that they may not be ready for due to cultural differences. Assigning teaching roles could be intimidating for an international student in a foreign environment, a brief training to explain what is involved along with familiarising them with the teaching culture may ease up the process. Furthermore, as an International student from the Middle East, I was taught to listen, obey and follow closely instructions from my supervisor. Furthermore, having been brought up in a male dominated Arab culture, I was always instructed not to argue. This has affected my ability to think independently and critically. Independent thinking and critical judgement are without a doubt two crucial prerequisite for an academic degree. This experience finds echo in many international female students' situations. According to a report by the Higher Education Policy Institute and The British Library (2010), females represented 55% of first year postgraduate students in 2007/08 in the UK compared to 59% at undergraduate level. 44% were amongst the international student cohort. The fact that women outnumber men in taught doctorate

programs (75 female/ 25 male) accompanied by the significant number of international postgraduate students calls for the need for a better understanding of these students' expectations and approaches to study. Letting the increasing gender differential go unnoticed may result in problems with completions. Gender was among a number of factors examined by researchers to improve completion rates (Vilkinas, 2008; Bourke et al. 2004; Gasson and Reyes 2004; Seagram et al. 1998; Wright and Cochrane 2002) and a link was found between gender and successful completion. Managing the cultural differences and giving more time and support at the early stages of an international PhD students' journey as well as providing proper orientation to the new research culture, could eliminate a lot of problems later on in the process.

### **The relationship between a supervisor and a PhD student**

The relationship between a supervisor and a research student is a complex one. It was described by Grant (1999) as 'walking on a rickety bridge'. This metaphor assumes the instability of the process and prepares both parties to be ready as well as flexible to any sudden alteration of course. Studies on student experience found that 25% of students were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their experiences, with third of the group relating their dissatisfaction to the relationship with their supervisors (Powles, 1989). Even though this is an old Australia-based study, it found its echo in later work by Phillips and Pugh (1994) who related this phenomenon to communication breakdown. The PhD process is a lonely and hard journey to take and it is easy for students to fall into the potential cycle of non communication coined by the phrase 'culture of avoidance' by Manathuga (2005: 223).

One of the positive experiences I have encountered with my PhD study was working with my principle supervisor. My principal supervisor had a people's focus according to Vilkina and Cartan 2006 model. He dedicated some time every week to play badminton with his PhD students. His personal qualities were highly appreciated among international students. Being approachable, my supervisor helped me gain confidence in my studies and my approach to learning. Our working relationship was informal but effective. Knowing my supervisor on a personal level during a lunch or a game of badminton impacted positively on our communication and the flow of the whole process.

The role taken by my supervisor was instrumental in achieving my PhD result. His personal approach made it possible for him to detect any warning signs or difficulties with our PhD student group. He paid attention to our professional as well as personal development. As an experienced supervisor, he had the ability to offer varying levels of supervision and guidance at different stages depending on the students' individual needs. This helped build our confidence and kept us motivated. This approach resembled the experienced supervision strategies discussed by Manathunga (2005). Manathunga (2005) reported the findings from a focus group study aimed to investigate supervisors' strategies at detecting and dealing with warning signs. The study collected data from focus group interview with award winning supervisors and 32 students in addition to some students union's postgraduate organiser and three personnel from student support services. Supervisors chosen represented a cross-section of discipline including, humanities, social science, engineering, etc. and an equal representation of gender. The study identified areas for early warning signs and reasons for students not discussing difficulties with supervisors. It

also proposed explicit pedagogical strategies to be adopted by supervisors to support students' learning. Building students' confidence proved to be a fundamental teaching and learning strategy.

## Conclusions

The first year or the early stages of the PhD program particularly for international students represents a critical transitional period during which students need individualised support from universities and supervisors. International students in particular face a number of unique challenges which were identified in the literature. These challenges relate to culture differences, stereotypes and perceived discrimination, lack of tolerance of ambiguity, language, climate, homesickness, accessing the research culture, and differences in work ethics and study approaches. Furthermore, expectations of the international students' governments and families act like a heavy weight on their shoulders to carry through the whole process. Non academic support proved important in the early stages, in particular, and throughout the PhD programme. Universities have systems in place to help structure the supervision programme for post graduate students. These systems include Post Graduate Certificate courses for potential and existing supervisors. However, no consideration has been given to cultural challenges in the PGcert course that could help supervisors understand the influence of cultural background on the international student's journey and prepare them to deal with those challenges. It is apparent that the adjustment of the international student to their new environment is not an easy task. With all the previous issues involved, they are in a dire need for individualised support. This support should be based on a true understanding of the different frames of reference and cultural issues these students bring with them. Looking at these differences as opportunities and not problems will help build their confidence and ease them into the process. Supervisor training courses or certificate programmes need to include a number of sessions or workshops to create awareness of international students' challenges and provide solutions. These sessions should benefit from findings from previous studies conducted on international students such as the one from Nottingham University by Evans (2006) and the ones from Australian universities by Manathuga, (2005) and Russell et al. (2009). Collaborating with senior international post graduate students and allowing them to share their experiences is also another way to create awareness, understanding the 'other' and help tolerate ambiguity.

The role of the supervisor is instrumental to the success and completion of the study. Expert knowledge and ability to manage the relationship with supervisees seemed to be the requisite elements for a PhD supervisor. This is along with knowledge about the institution regulatory system for research degrees and any other required certificates. However, it is apparent from this study that supervisors are left to initiate and devise their own system for dealing with the increasing number of international PhD students. The internationalisation of higher education in the UK calls for a significant change in the way PhD students are supervised. Providing customised support to these students will help supervisors to detect difficulties along the way and be ready to offer appropriate guidance which will positively impact on completion rates.



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