Cold Micro-Climates and Cultural Mishaps: The Perils of PhD Life for Overseas Students

Elaine Walsh, Graduate Schools, Imperial College London

Summary
Researchers from outside the European Union represent an increasing proportion of the doctoral student body in the UK. However, relatively little research has been done on their experience from their own perspective. This research, based on interviews with students from a range of countries and from various scientific and engineering disciplines, seeks to address that deficit. It looks in particular at the difficulties the new overseas PhD students have with respect to integration with home students, cultural adjustment problems and ongoing language difficulties. Two important findings emerged from the study: firstly, that research groups appear to exhibit a "micro-climate" of linked factors relating to the style of the supervisor and the norms of social and work-related interaction in the research group. Groups with a more cohesive micro-climate presented a more supportive environment for international students, partly by encouraging greater integration between researchers of different nationalities. Secondly, some evidence emerged of a widespread deficit in understanding of cultural issues. This, when combined with language difficulties, aggravated the problems experienced by the overseas students in the study.

Reasons for the study
Local
- Overseas students represent 29% of the postgraduate research student body at Imperial (2007 figures).
- Their four year PhD submission rates are slightly lower than those of home students (56% vs. 61%).
- Informal evidence of problems including isolation and lack of support.

Global
- Increasingly competitive marketplace and concerns for future recruitment.
- Lack of integration of overseas students identified as a concern in the literature (e.g. Otten, 2003; Major, 2005).
- Little research from the perspective of overseas PhD students in the UK.

The research questions
What do overseas PhD students at Imperial perceive as the major difficulties they encounter? What, if anything, could or should be done to address these difficulties?

Method
After obtaining ethical clearance, this small-scale qualitative study was carried out in two phases.
Phase 1: A call for letters to be written as if to relatives or friends about to begin doctoral study. Letters should describe difficulties and problems experienced and give advice to newcomers.
Phase 2: Analysis of phase 1 issues, then semi-structured interviews with 9 participants from the following countries: Australia, China, Colombia, Iran, Pakistan, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand.

Results
Participants identified many difficulties including accommodation, transport and weather. However, this analysis focused on those related to their immediate working environment.

Finding 1: The research group "microclimate" (see central table) has a major impact on the individual's experience of Imperial.
A synthesis of the perceptions of the participants led to the development of a continuum model of research group micro-climate. The supervisor appeared to be the greatest influence. The "coldest" climate. Here the development of supportive relationships had been frustrated or broken in some way. Overseas students experienced isolation.

Finding 2: Problems caused by cultural misunderstandings combine with language difficulties to frustrate the development of interpersonal relationships with fellow researchers.
New overseas PhD students have strong motivation for integration with home students. However, early examples of "cultural mishaps" (see Box 1) say this initial energy. Inadvertent cultural errors by the hosts may cause them to feel excluded from key activities. Language difficulties are a complicating factor. Verbal misunderstandings can be easily resolved, but a deficit in pragmatic competence (see Box 2) is a more serious issue.

Why is this important?
Learning can be considered to be a social process within a "community of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Meaningful interactions with peers must be more crucial for PhD students than for others, where the lack of a formal curriculum can increase the risks of marginalisation. For those from overseas, relationships within the PhD environment may be even more important. A "cold" research group microclimate and a series of cultural mishaps may prevent full participation in the life of the research group. They go on to achieve their PhD, but their experiences is not what they had hoped for, and they may be poor ambassadors for Imperial upon their return.

"It's just because, before I came, I saw a lot of pictures with the international students mixing together and smiling and talking. So it gave me the impression that all the students are mixed together, but, mm, I think it's not quite like that."

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References

Box 1: Cultural mishaps
Humour, levels of formality and alcohol are problematic.
- E.g. overseas students do not attend social events without an explicit invitation. However, these are not issued as hosts assume everyone knows they are invited. A departmental quiz is organised but only a European could score points in most categories.

Box 2: Definition of pragmatic competence
This is a part of communicative competence that involves being able to use language in interpersonal relationships, taking into account such complexities as social distance and indirectness. As an example of indirectness, consider the conversation:

A: How was the movie?
B: Well, the sound track was ok. A second language learner may take that face value, but the essential pragmatic knowledge that B is avoiding a question is that the wrong answer because the direct answer is that the movie wasn't good.

(http://blogarwadi.com/quizessay/ pragmatic_competence.htm)

Conclusion
As other parts of the world advance technologically, it may not be the technical advances of UK universities that attract, but, increasingly, the social capital they contain. As one participant stated:

"The most important thing that attracted me to the culture, in terms of the life culture and you know the - research atmosphere and the different style of life."

Overseas students themselves are not shy of taking their responsibility, asserting often the need to be proactive. However, this research has demonstrated that supervisors have an important part to play, since they exert a major influence upon the microclimate of their group. However, universities should also respond at a higher level to support supervisors and encourage a more integrated, internationalised experience for all. It has been said that overseas students represent the "canary in the coal mine" (Carroll and Ryan, 2005) - they are the first to reveal the presence of dangerous conditions. Arguably, steps taken to improve their experience would benefit all students.