

## **Research supervision and internationalisation: belonging to the global academy<sup>1</sup>**

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This study has developed out of our general interest in trying to understand, in the context of increasing international academic mobility (and the push to greater ‘internationalisation’), what kind of cultural accommodations are made as academics from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds come together as disciplinary colleagues and co-workers. And we have a particular concern in seeing how these issues play out in the processes of research degree supervision, and how we, as researcher educators, might respond with appropriate programs.

The local context for this study is our university – the University of Adelaide, South Australia – identified by all standard measures as a successful ‘research-intensive’ university, with around 1200 academic staff, and a cohort of 1800 research degree students. We know that some 17% of our research students are ‘international’. Indeed, international education was the fourth largest export for South Australia in 2008/09 (IEAA 2009). While extensive information is collected on international students, there is comparatively little interest in reporting data on ‘international’ staff (i.e., foreign nationals, or people recruited from overseas, or people originating overseas but recruited from other Australian universities) – in fact, no data seems to be either published or held on this. This gap in statistics mirrors the gap in the research literature – compared to the extensive focus on the international

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student perspective, relatively little research has been undertaken on the experiences of transnational academic staff.

### Previous study

In our initial study of this topic (Guerin & Green, 2009a) we have commented on our surprise at the lack of cultural conflict reported by 'international' supervisors (i.e., from non-English speaking backgrounds) when interviewed about their experiences of landing in, and acculturating to, the University of Adelaide environment. As a result, in that study of the 'transcultural academic', we found ourselves putting forward the argument that academics in western universities appear to see themselves as members of a globalised, 'imagined community' of their discipline.

The concept of the 'imagined community' is of course borrowed from Benedict Anderson, who originally developed it to characterize the rise of nation states. We are applying it to the *erasure* of national borders in terms of our subjects' apparent sense that they belong to a global<sup>2</sup> discipline that transcends national/cultural/ethnic differences. We were drawn to Anderson's concept of the imagined community because it seemed to be a useful metaphor for understanding the somewhat bland stories of comfortable, unproblematic multiculturalism we encountered in interview after interview with international supervisors – the central conceit being that belonging to the disciplinary community lends to academics a sense of shared global cultural values that override local ones. That is, linked to this sense of global disciplines is the idea that the western university is a somehow 'culturally neutral' space, that because there is agreement in terms of disciplinary knowledge and methodologies, all academics therefore share more or less the same interpersonal values and behavioural conventions. This concept of the imagined community, then, seemed to offer one way to account for what our subjects were reporting. It also offered us a way of badging our concerns about this phenomenon, which is otherwise often treated in the literature under the heading of 'cosmopolitanism' (e.g., Sanderson 2008).

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<sup>2</sup> We choose to follow Tian and Lowe (2009) – and employ 'globalisation' to suggest that it erases national boundaries/differences, imposing a single 'cultural norm' over the top of those differences, a kind of flattening out of differences.

We were concerned that ‘cosmopolitanism’ might be too sanguine a notion in this context, putting us in danger of valorizing the very issue that we are suggesting should be problematized. That is, we seem to characterise ourselves as tolerant and open-mindedly cosmopolitan (Sanderson 2008) in our ability to move comfortably and competently (Bennett 1993) across cultures and national boundaries, and we seem to expect our disciplines to be peopled by cosmopolitan, transcultural academics ‘just like ourselves’ (whoever that self may happen to be), but we wonder if that cosmopolitanism is achieved by a repudiation of the possibility of fundamental cultural difference rather than any real ability to accommodate diversity.

Obviously, we recognise that there’s a whole debate to be had about the terms we could use here. And, of course, there are well-rehearsed arguments about the value or otherwise of this as an ethical or even tenable project of what many would see as western dominance. However, what is under the microscope in this study is not so much western dominance *per se*, as the self-reported role and agency of transnational academics in proactively acculturating to western academic norms, as we discuss further below.

### Empirical Study

We interviewed fourteen academics, from a wide range of disciplines, and from a wide range of international backgrounds (see chart below), conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals (approximately one hour) and small groups (average of three participants) (approximately two hours).

14 research degree supervisors from:	<b>Faculties/Schools</b> health sciences, social sciences, engineering, business, plant science, economics, education, humanities
	<b>Country of Origin</b> Germany, France, China, Malaysia, Japan, Brazil, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Iran, South Africa, Nigeria

No notes were taken during the interviews, which were intended to be conversational in nature, but audio recordings were made, and an interpretive analysis applied to the transcripts.

Our questions invited participants to discuss their memories of settling into the University and their insights into their acculturation or acclimatisation to the new environment. What differences did they notice? What difficulties did they encounter? In order to deflect attention from what might be interpreted as individuals' shortcomings/inadequacies and to focus instead on cultural differences, we also asked what key advice they'd give to academics from their own countries of origin preparing to work at our University? The context for these questions was the changes to institutional policy they would recommend to smooth the path of such transcultural academics. It was expected that international staff would be more inclined to share their insights if we used this approach to the narratives.

When reviewing the transcripts we were particularly searching for problems, difficulties, challenges; however, we didn't find much on this and looked instead for narrative/recount strategies that might be smoothing out any problems encountered. We recognise that the artificiality of the interview setting was highly likely to induce a particular kind of performance from the subjects: it was conducive to presenting the face of successfully integrated, global, cosmopolitan academics unfettered by awkward, culturally inflected behaviours drawing attention to their 'difference'. Nevertheless, as Martyn Hammersley points out in his review of critiques of interview studies, 'the fact that interviews are a distinctive type of situation does not necessarily mean that what happens in them carries no reliable implications about people's attitudes, perspectives, etc., and thereby about people's behaviour in other situation' (124). Clearly, something unexpected was going on here.

### **Results/implications**

One of the anticipated themes that came out of this series of interviews was the differences in workplace behaviours and practices experienced by international academics on arrival at our university. The issues ranged from irritations about Australian lack of punctuality and the confusingly misleading informality which pretends to egalitarianism (don't be fooled

into thinking that the fact that you can address your supervisor by his or her given name means that you are on an equal footing when it comes to making organizational or policy decisions), to palpable relief at the flexibility in office hours, the freedom to choose one's own research projects and the opportunities to build one's own research profile through convening conferences, etc. Although the Asian academics found the degree of difference to be greater than did the Europeans,<sup>3</sup> all were able to comment on the cultural differences they found in the Australian workplace. What we did notice, nevertheless, was that these differences were largely unproblematic; these staff members from all over the world seemed very capable of not only adapting to these requirements, but also indicated that they readily embraced most of them. They seemed to experience very little internal conflict in these matters.

However, it soon transpired that none of our interviewees were actually recent arrivals direct from their home countries. In fact, it is apparently very rare for experienced, fully qualified academic staff to be employed directly from non-English speaking and/or non-western countries; rather, we discovered that all had made the transition by undertaking their PhD or at least postdoctoral fellowships in an English-speaking country. This timing of migration, whether temporary or long term, is in keeping with the findings of Bridges and Bartlett (quoting Brennan et al., 2007) when reporting on global academic mobility and the UK situation: 'the vast majority of movement takes place among junior postdoctoral staff'. As one supervisor explained: *'When you have trained your PhD student in your system, you expect that person has understood the culture of the place, therefore the transition phase to the institutional norm is less dramatic'*. Thus, the new appointee is job-ready, having already *'absorbed the culture shock'*. This was highlighted when we asked about useful advice for international academics coming directly to Australia from their home countries, and received responses that indicated that this was a situation fraught with difficulties. The differences were so great, particularly for non-Europeans, that it was regarded as too challenging to begin an academic position without that acculturation already in place. One very significant difference was the importance placed on teaching ability in Australian

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<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the categories of 'Asian' and 'European' are complex. We are using them as shorthand here to gesture towards the very broad regions that represent the countries of origin of the majority of internationals working at the university.

universities, particularly student evaluations of teaching. In other environments, where there is no difficulty attracting enough students, *'The teaching philosophy is totally different ... here the student is the centre of learning, in [my country] they don't care about their students, just lecture'*. On top of this, 'critical thinking' was frequently raised as a concept that was often misunderstood or not valued in the same way by those arriving fresh from Asian universities in particular. Being 'work-ready' also includes familiarity with the tenure system, the expected balance between research, teaching and administration, the arrangements for hiring and firing staff, the university's financial systems and research grant structures. It seems that our transcultural academics had already internalised this information before taking up their academic positions.

Linked to the necessity of understanding new work practices was the importance of also understanding the social practices associated with university schools and disciplines. The conversations focussed on the need to fit into the new environment and become part of the group. This seemed to be presented as a display of cultural competency on the part of these supervisors who had managed to establish a place for themselves in the multicultural milieu of the university. To our surprise, however, there was no mention about how valuable it was to work with people from all over the world who brought a diversity of new ideas and cultural norms to the workplace. Rather, success was represented more in terms of adoption of local norms, bearing in mind that 'local' is densely populated by international staff and students, and the notion of 'Australian' is in itself ethnically diverse (it barely seems to register that this means not only British, but also German, Italian, Greek, Eastern European, etc.).

One mechanism employed by the interviewees for integrating cultural difference into the work team was the use of family metaphors. Supervisors frequently represented themselves as parental figures, often referring to the 'supervisor as father' model; others reported: *'I'm too maternal'* or *'[Some students] treat me as if I'm just a mother ... or sister'* and were deeply appreciative of the *'nurture'* they'd received from their own PhD supervisors. The significance of drawing research students and new staff into being *'part of the family'* was mentioned repeatedly, promoting a sense of belonging and obscuring difference.

This in turn was linked to the tremendous value of inclusive social activities for research students and academic staff, where both local and international members of the group could form more personal bonds. This could occur in the workplace itself, in public spaces or in colleagues' homes: afternoon tea following the weekly/monthly research seminar, 'Friday night drinks', barbecues, and playing team sports were all recommended. Learning what to expect when invited to the ubiquitous barbecue was regarded as a common source of confusion: Is it a big meal in the middle of the day? Should you arrive at exactly the time stated? Is it appropriate to bring food, or just drinks, or are flowers a better gift for the host? The supervisors also pointed out that invitations to 'drinks', especially if occurring in a pub, must be accompanied by the explanation that it was not necessary to drink alcohol if the occasion is to be inclusive of the whole research group. Joining in with such social activities and finding a place in the local social network was generally regarded as a positive way of learning to be at home as a researcher in the Australian environment.

On top of participating in social events, these apparently successful transcultural academics emphasized the value of actively seeking information about the local culture through newspapers and television to facilitate interactions with workmates. One interviewee recounted that he couldn't understand the nickname he was assigned until he started watching the popular drama it was taken from (and yes, fortunately, it was a witty and flattering play on his name that indicated his workmates liked him). The concept of a '*cultural mentor*' or buddy was raised in this context as one way of facilitating this social grounding in the workplace (indeed, a surprising number of those interviewed were married to Australians – providing very helpful cultural mediation!). Another participant advised newcomers to '*try to get into their [i.e. local people's] hearts ... find out what's important to them, learn about what they like to do, that's the way to get "warmer" with them*'. But this doesn't come easily in a foreign culture in a foreign tongue, and it was acknowledged that '*You have to put in effort, it requires effort, it requires work*' to make such social connections. So while it appeared to be quite straightforward to adapt to work practices, this more personal, social element of acculturation was regarded as significantly more challenging for many.

While much of this was presented in terms of fitting into the local scene and becoming connected largely for reasons of general well-being, the side benefits for working life were also recognized: networking for collaborations, up-to-date knowledge of the latest trends and policies, information regarding funding opportunities could all arise from being 'part of the family'. The social element of the workplace was overwhelmingly reported as crucial for the successful integration of staff and students into the community of an effective multicultural workplace. We wonder how much of what makes this possible is that they already have a concept of the 'imagined community' of the global discipline that overrides individual cultural variations. We noticed a strong tendency to minimise cultural differences in the workplace.

Underpinning all of this, of course, is language, and English proficiency was emphasized by all interviewees as the key to success in this setting. For both staff and research students with good English levels, *'It seems to go fine. They understand the rules, they know their way around, they make connections'*. The ability to communicate effectively in English on a social level was presented repeatedly as the single most important element in negotiating the new culture and establishing teaching and research careers. To this end, then, supervisors claim that it is *'important to teach them [international PhD students] how to make a conversation so that they can engage'*. International students were at a great disadvantage without this capacity to engage in social conversations with their peers and colleagues.<sup>4</sup>

Yet even for supervisors who were obviously negotiating the multicultural academy successfully, language remains a challenge. Several supervisors reported their continuing uncertainty when writing emails and letters. The main issue was tone rather than grammar:

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<sup>4</sup> Supervisors were drawing on their own experiences of acculturation at an earlier stage of their careers, but even so, we noticed a constant slippage between asking about international staff issues and receiving replies about difficulties confronting international students. We wonder if this is related in some way to the concept (as mentioned below) that the doctoral identity is produced simultaneously as the dissertation itself is produced, that is, that the timing of this transition from international undergraduate to cosmopolitan transcultural academic coincides with writing the doctorate.

*'I'm always anxious ... is it the correct level of politeness, you know? It's very difficult to judge that -- too plain, too cold, too warm...'* One estimated that reading and writing in English take her 20 to 30 times longer than in her own language. Several also spoke of their urgent need for editing help in academic writing as well. Professional editors must be used, adding time and expense to the publishing process, but there is no institutional recognition of this factor. Native-speaker colleagues helped by checking formal correspondence for appropriate wording, but: *'It takes a lot of energy, to try not to offend people'*.

Questions arose around the preferred language of supervision for students from one's own language background. One supervisor preferred to avoid this, explaining that it would be awkward to converse in English with a student instead of their shared first language, but at the same time she felt she couldn't revert to her first language whilst supervising at an Australian university. In contrast, another supervisor declared that all academic work had to be done in English because *'We do need to take care to train her to be suitable [for lecturing and supervising] in English'*. Clearly, proficiency in academic English was perceived as part of the supervisor's responsibility in research training.

These discussions about the importance of international academics becoming part of the social life of their local discipline, about fitting into the community and having the necessary language and communication skills to do so, strengthened our sense that 'transcultural' was being performed as a kind of cosmopolitan absorption of cultural difference. Here, researchers from all over the world were finding their place in the discipline apparently unproblematically. Rather than a celebration of the richness that diversity might bring, or even a tolerance of cultural difference, we saw a smooth, unified presentation of multicultural success. Could this be explained by our idea of the 'imagined community', in that the shared values of the global discipline seem to override individual cultural variations?

What are the implications of all this for transcultural supervision? Supervisors are responsible for guiding the transformation from undergraduate student to research scholar. This includes an expectation that the researcher, in becoming a member of the discipline, will 'learn to think like a [molecular biologist/anthropologist/mechanical engineer, etc.]'

(Schon 1987). In order to enter into dialogue with their disciplinary community, trainee researchers need not only to think like their peers, but also to perform the behaviours required by membership of that community. And one of the behaviours of that community in the present internationalised academy would seem to include a public demonstration of the cosmopolitan, culturally neutral, transcultural academic.

That scholarly self would appear to be produced in tandem with the written dissertation. As Kamler and Thomson (2008, p508) argue: 'The practices of doctoral writing simultaneously produce not only a dissertation but also a doctoral scholar'. It is generally supervisors who are instrumental in facilitating this process of 'becoming and belonging' (Kamler and Thomson, 2008: 507) at the disciplinary level. Added to this development of the fully fledged researcher, our interviews suggest that supervision is also the site of production of cosmopolitan members of the imagined academic community.

## Conclusion

So when Margaret Kiley (2009) asks of the current Australian doctoral process: 'What is it that we want the graduate to know, to be able to do, and to "be"?', our response must include something that at least gestures towards membership of the cosmopolitan, global disciplinary community. Our interviews with those for whom transcultural supervision is a daily reality produced very consistent performances of academic selves that display a cultural competence that would appear to be shaped by the values of their global disciplinary community, and that they clearly perceive this as a necessary quality for international staff and students if they are to succeed in multicultural institutions.

However, internationalisation does not appear to be leading to a conscious celebration of the cultural mix in the workplace. Rather, what we're seeing is minimisation or obscuring of cultural difference licensed by a notion that we're all fundamentally the same as human beings because we all belong to the same global academy. The global academy overrides the cultural differences that can only be perceived in terms of behaviours of daily life; underneath our disciplinary sameness links us together in much more important ways.

Although our interviewees reported very positive stories of cultural accommodation, we would still ask what is lost in this process of minimising cultural difference and diversity. This capacity to create an imagined, unified community is a valuable strategy for a multicultural academy in this age of internationalisation of higher education. Nevertheless, we still need to determine how research degree supervisory practices can be enriched by cultural diversity and how we can maximise the new knowledges made possible by internationalisation.

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