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Cold Micro-Climates and Cultural Mishaps: The Perils of PhD Life for Overseas Students (0030)  
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Researchers from outside the European Union represent an increasing proportion of the UK doctoral student body. However, relatively little research exists on their experience from their own perspective. This research, based on interviews with students from a range of countries and scientific and engineering disciplines, seeks to address that deficit. It looks in particular at the difficulties the researchers identified whilst undertaking doctoral study, which included isolation, a lack of integration with home students, cultural adjustment problems and ongoing language difficulties. Two important findings emerged: firstly, that research groups appear to exhibit a ‘microclimate’ which is determined by factors including the style of the supervisor and the norms of social and work-related interaction. Groups with a more cohesive microclimate presented a more supportive environment. Secondly, 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.

Background to the study

Local
- Overseas students represent 29% of the postgraduate research student body at this institution (06/07 figures).
- Their four year PhD submission rates are slightly lower than those of home students (58% 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 our overseas PhD students 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 (2), Colombia, Iran, Pakistan, S. Korea, Taiwan and Thailand.

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

Finding 1: the research group “microclimate” has a major impact on the individual’s experience. (Poster will show a table to explain this)
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 inclusive microclimate represented the “warmest”, most favourable environment for the overseas students. Here they were fully included in the activities of the group, which had a “family” feel. The fragmented microclimate represented 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 satisfactory relationships with fellow researchers.
New overseas PhD students have strong motivation for integration with home students. However, early experiences of cultural difficulties sap this initial energy. Inadvertent cultural errors by the hosts may cause them to feel excluded from key activities. Language difficulties are a complicating factor. Vocabulary problems could be solved fairly readily but a deficit in pragmatic competence 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 risk of marginalisation. For those from overseas, relationships within the research environment may be even more important. A “cold” research group microclimate and/or 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 experience is not what they had hoped for, and they may be poor ambassadors for the institution upon their return.

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 is 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.

References