A model of research group microclimate: factors affecting the experiences of overseas doctoral researchers in the UK

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Why this study?

- Increasing proportion of overseas students in UK pg student populations\(^1\)
- Local informal evidence of difficulties, e.g. isolation, lack of support
- Increasingly competitive ‘marketplace’
- Lack of integration identified as an issue in the literature\(^2,3\)
- Relatively little research in the UK from perspective of overseas PhD students
Research Question

• What do overseas PhD students perceive as the major difficulties they encounter?
  – Whilst pursuing full time research degrees in science and engineering fields
Method

- Phase 1 - letters to show the range of issues
- Initial analysis
- Phase 2 – Nine follow up interviews, all with STEM, full-time students.
Two main findings:

• Research groups vary widely – the group ‘micro-climate’ has a major impact on the experience of overseas students

• Cultural misunderstandings combine with language difficulties to frustrate the development of satisfactory relationships with fellow researchers.
Development of the model

- Wide variation in quality of experience as perceived by the students
- Variation could not be explained by factors such as gender, nationality, stage of PhD, language ability, discipline
- Two extreme positions were observed with a continuum between
  - Some very well integrated
  - Some very poorly integrated
Four linked factors in the model

• Supervisor style
  – ‘Main’ supervisor
  – Is there a social or pastoral element?
  – Is the supervisor available?

• Work-related interactions
  – Frequency and type of meeting
  – Norms around helping others
Four linked factors in the model

- Social interactions
  - Frequency and type
  - Culturally inclusive?

- Number of other researchers encountered
  - Not necessarily group size
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervisor style</th>
<th>More isolated</th>
<th>Granular</th>
<th>Structured</th>
<th>More cohesive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Norms for social interactions within group</td>
<td>Very little help is offered and occasional obstruction occurs. No whole group meetings occur.</td>
<td>Help is offered sometimes. Regular, strictly formal group meetings occur. No social aspect.</td>
<td>Help is offered fairly routinely. Few if any group meetings occur.</td>
<td>Help is offered often and willingly. Regular whole group meetings are the norm, with a social aspect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numbers in workplace</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>6-30</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Microclimates

- The supervisor style is the key factor
- But, the group can bear some of the burden, if it is more cohesive
- Data suggest that social interaction is a prerequisite for desirable work related interactions
The model

• Offers a point of reference for considering the condition of any given group
• Large variation in group microclimates (even within departments) may result in mis-matched expectations and unnecessary difficulties for students
Cultural difficulties

- The perceived reserve of the British (making them hard to get to know)
- The role of alcohol in social events

“It’s a good idea to enjoy and be part of the local culture and lifestyle, and to grow friendships with your local and overseas colleagues. For example, I never used to think beer and chips qualified as dinner, but if that meant I could spend time bonding with colleagues and talking about things that would never come up when they were sober, then a proper meal at home seemed a small sacrifice.”
• Not knowing the local cultural references (e.g. television programme plots, British history) e.g. a departmental quiz

“Yeah, because there are like four sections and then the first three sections are all about the American or English history and European history and I don’t know anything, and then the last session is about the techniques in the department, like the equipment like, the material.”
• Differing preferences for levels of formality

  – Some overseas students did not attend social events without an explicit invitation. However, these were not issued as hosts assumed everyone knew they were invited.

• A different sense of humour.
Language Difficulties

• Accent & vocabulary but..
• The key competency lacking is “Pragmatic Competence”
  – ‘The study of language from the point of view of the users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication’. (Crystal)
Language training

• English language support focuses on formal aspects of the language
• Early language mishaps discourage further efforts and contribute to isolation of students
Combination of cultural and language difficulties

• Frustrates the development of fruitful relationships with other researchers
• This has an impact upon both the social life and the research effectiveness of students
• In a “community of practice”\textsuperscript{4}, overseas students risk being permanently marginalised.
As we all know..

- “Cultural diversity and internationalisation do not automatically lead to … intercultural learning experiences”\(^2\)
- Need for development of greater cultural awareness, even in universities with a long history of large numbers of international students and staff
However …

… Students in more cohesive groups felt better able to overcome language difficulties and meet cultural challenges
Does this matter?

• “The most important thing that attracted me is the culture, in terms of the life culture, … the research atmosphere and the different style of life.”

• “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 that impression that all the students are mixed together, but, mmm, I think it’s not quite like that.”
Conclusion

- This four factor model of research group microclimate offers a useful insight when considering how to better support overseas pgr students
- More cohesive microclimates can help students to overcome both cultural and language difficulties
References


