

# Enhancing the Doctoral Experience

A **Gower** Book

A Guide for Supervisors and their  
International Students



**STEVE HUTCHINSON,  
HELEN LAWRENCE &  
DAVE FILIPOVIĆ-CARTER**

# Enhancing the Doctoral Experience

*To all doctoral supervisors and their students, in the hope that their journey is as satisfying as the destination, even as the landscape changes around them.*

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STEVE HUTCHINSON,  
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# Preface

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Some years ago when I worked for a large university in the north of England an international research student came to see me in a state of some distress. She had an engineering background and had been a participant on one or two of the courses that we ran for researchers. I invited her in to my office and she told me about how her supervisor had recently started to become very critical of her work. She also said that her supervisor had for the first few months of her candidature been very happy with the technical work she had done and she now couldn't understand why their relationship had changed.

I dug a little deeper; it soon transpired that the reason for the fracture in the relationship was criticism by the supervisor of the student's review of appropriate literature. I asked the student if she had that specific document with her. When she took it from her bag I quickly understood what the specific issue might be. The document had, at most, four or five pages.

I inwardly winced and, without even opening the document, I asked her how many references the review contained. 'Twelve,' she replied, and her tonality expressed a complete conviction that that number was plenty.

'And where', I continued, 'did you find these references?'

'Oh,' she said with a continued tone of confidence, 'on Google.'

Since the incident occurred at a time before Google Scholar, I patiently explained why this factor might be the source of the problem and then I quickly marched her to the library and set her up with an appropriately expert literary specialist from her field. She returned later that day in a state of heightened distress. It turned out that her hard work was simply repeating exactly something that a team elsewhere had done ten years before and her (technically excellent) output for the year was not original, or even particularly innovative.

I remember clearly her mixture of confusion, outrage and bewilderment as she asked: 'But why didn't my supervisor tell me all this when I started out?'

This story is not intended to suggest that all international students are naive or fail to understand the expectations placed upon them, but it does raise a number of interesting points about mutual expectations, research quality, shared standards and the supervisory relationship more generally.

This incident, and dozens of others like it, led to the creation of this book.

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# Acknowledgements

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Steve Hutchinson: To Geoff Parker. Thank you.

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Dave Filipović-Carter: I had one that did and one that didn't – but learned much from both. Thank you to M. and D. for tolerating me.

Thank you to the supervisors, students and post-doctoral researchers who contributed their thoughts, experiences and ideas to this book. Without your shared insights this book would have been impossible – or at least fairly boring.

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# Review of *Enhancing the Doctoral Experience*

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*This is a practical yet scholarly treatment in support of a vital but underrated academic relationship – that of doctoral supervisor and student. Although focussed on the needs of international students, its sage advice and helpful suggestions are more generally applicable. I wish I had been able to access such material when starting off as a new academic; I anticipate transformational effects when put into practice.*

*Tom McLeish, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research), Durham University, UK*

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# Notes for the Reader

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First, a confession: none of the three of us are doctoral supervisors. But we all have research backgrounds and PhDs (in zoology, linguistics and law) and, combined, have spent many years in universities in teaching or academic-related positions. All three of us run our own businesses, each of us in our own way helping to facilitate the development of academics and researchers. In this time as freelancers we have each met thousands – if not tens of thousands – of research students, and a majority of those we've met do not come from the UK. Often people who come on courses have specific problems and issues they are hoping to resolve, and it struck us that a vast proportion of these issues are linked to relationships that could be more functional. This book uses the insight and advice we've compiled and given over the years.

In the course of researching and writing this book we've delved into a considerable amount of educational and social science research. Since none of us have an educational research background we've often found the frameworks and terminologies faintly bewildering. I have on my desk at present an article that deals with the pedagogies of transculturation; it's a good academic article, its methodology is sound and conclusions valid. I can, however, find nothing in it that would be of practical value to an electrical engineer (for example) with a Chinese (for another example) doctoral student.

So, despite wishing to produce a book that is academically rigorous, we have at all times been guided by two driving forces. We've attempted firstly to produce a synergy of theoretical frameworks and research findings and to ask the question, 'How could a scholar in any discipline make use of this?', and secondly, we've aimed for the book to be pragmatic and useful for research supervisors (and, by proxy, their research students). After all, we've never met a supervisor who wants to be a bad supervisor, and we constantly meet lots who want to be better. However, as they are faced with myriad other challenges and demands on their time, most of them want to do this quickly and with minimal effort.

With this in mind, the new primary material in this book comes from a number of types of sources: from conversations we've had with supervisors

and researchers in dozens of institutions; from scores of questionnaires that were sent to supervisors, post-doctoral researchers and research students, and from a variety of less academically usual sources (such as asking a roomful of international research students to write a piece of advice on a sticky note for a new doctoral student from their own country). Our intention is not to expound a watertight methodology, but to find interesting stories and say something useful.

We hope that this synthesis of scholarly theory and pragmatic sampling has produced a book that provides a framework for students and supervisors to have conversations about their expectations; to discuss what supervision is; to articulate clearly what both parties need in order for a successful relationship to occur, and to build a mutually beneficial endeavour.

These conversations and frameworks are, of course, useful discussion points for students and supervisors who share a cultural and linguistic background, but essentially we hope it will be useful for a number of groups:

- supervisors who are currently supervising, or considering supervising, research students who have previously studied entirely outside the UK;
- prospective and current research students from outside the UK who are considering studying for a doctorate in the UK or through a UK institution;
- supervisors new to the UK who have previously only worked outside the UK;
- supervisors supervising international students in UK universities outside the UK (so-called 'franchise' institutions).

We are fully aware that there are a number of different forms of the UK doctorate, from the traditional PhD to EdD, MD, EngD and practice-based doctorates. While there are of course some differences between these forms, the end product of supervision (to support and guide a student on a journey towards intellectual independence) is very similar. In addition, the majority of the contributions to this book were from people engaged in studying for or supervising PhDs – a situation that reflects the norm within the UK. As such we will, for convenience's sake, refer to the 'doctorate' to encapsulate all forms, while recognizing that this often refers to the PhD. If it seems that the specific

circumstances of a non-traditional doctorate differ substantively from what is described here, it falls to the supervisor and student to engage in a discussion about the actual nature of their engagement.

The stories and anecdotes that form some of this book's content were told to us in confidence, so we have protected contributors' anonymity throughout. To help the reader identify whether specific concerns or issues are discipline-specific or culturally specific we've provided a discipline or nationality label for quotes wherever possible. While we have tried to avoid homogenizing terminologies and stereotypes (such as 'Western' or 'Asian'), sometimes we've had to stray close to them in order to protect the anonymity of the contributors. One type of anonymity we've had to include is that frequently research students have been reluctant to discuss specifics concerning the identity of their supervisors. So while the student information is given as fully as possible, the academic label is given merely as 'research supervisor'. We are completely aware that a student from one nationality working in a UK institution with a supervisor of a third nationality is increasingly common, but we decided to simplify matters by using boxes herein labelled 'Supervisory Enquiries' (to ascertain a supervisor's attitudes and beliefs), 'Supervisory Ideas' (to provide tasks, actions and thoughts to help the supervisory process) and 'Discussion Points' (to facilitate conversations).

Since some of the quotations herein are taken, with permission, from conversations (as opposed to academically 'proper' interviews), there has been some editorial adaptation in places. Some of the quotations come from written responses, and here we've again adapted and corrected editorially where there have been linguistic issues.

For clarity, throughout this book we use 'Thesis' with an upper-case initial for the formal document submitted, while 'thesis' with a lower-case initial refers to the argument built therein.

This book is a joint venture, and the concepts and philosophies presented herein are shared or collective. As such, we've shamelessly alternated between the use of 'I' and 'we'. So, to help the reader, the use of 'I' is often found in the personal anecdotes and observations, while 'we' binds the more abstract material.

Finally, we believe that enhancing the effectiveness of the doctoral student and the professionalization of research supervision by providing both with an awareness of, and a toolkit to approach, student diversity can only be of benefit

to all concerned. We hope that our efforts provide a source of inspiration and stimulation and a resource that both supervisors and students can use to help build more productive and fruitful relationships.

Steve Hutchinson, Helen Lawrence and Dave Filipović-Carter

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# Chapter I

## Introducing the UK Doctorate in a Global Context

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*'When I think of globalism I always think of that internet factoid. You know, the one that says India has more top A-grade students than we have students in total.'*

*Research supervisor – Mechanical Engineering*

Over the past decade, in universities and research institutes in many countries, each of us has met hundreds of research supervisors and thousands of research students of varying nationalities. Before we embark on our stories and content let's first consider the context for this publication.

### Rise of the Postgraduate

The idea of students moving from one country or culture to study in another is not a new one. The universities of medieval Europe or ancient Islam were 'far more transnational communities of scholars than the modern national universities founded in the twentieth century' (Kim 2009).

Recently however, scholarly migration has increased in scale. Significant proportions of research students in the UK<sup>1</sup> are from outside the UK. Also the absolute number of doctoral candidates in the UK is growing. Depending on which figures are used, this may show a doubling, tripling or quadrupling in less than 15 years. The absolute number of PhDs enrolled is often confusing, as many institutions have in the past registered candidates for an MPhil qualification and then upgraded or transferred a candidate's status to full doctoral registration after a year or more. However, Table 1.1 shows the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data for numbers of doctorates *obtained* in the UK in 2011/12.

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<sup>1</sup> Powell and Green (2007) present a figure of 45 per cent, compared to 20 per cent in Australia and 14 per cent in the USA.

**Table 1.1** Number of doctorates obtained in the UK in 2011/12

	Full-time	Part-time	Total
<b>UK-domiciled students</b>	8,235	2,770	11,005
<b>EU-domiciled students</b>	2,360	480	2,840
<b>Non-EU-domiciled students</b>	6,055	535	6,590

Source: Data from Higher Education Statistics Agency (2011/12): <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/stats> (accessed 19 June 2014).

This means that the total number of doctorates obtained in the UK in the most recent data set is just over 20,000, with EU and non-EU candidates obtaining over 45 per cent of them.

The growth in the number of doctoral students is part of a far larger increase in postgraduates generally. This is far more than a strategic student reaction to the recently sluggish hiring economy, showing clear trends regardless of how the economy waxes and wanes. A sensible estimate (taken from Stefan Collini's 2012 book *What are Universities For?*) says that 'in the last three decades the number of postgraduates has gone from about 60,000 to over 530,000'. And while from year to year there is some fluctuation in the absolute numbers of postgraduates (2011/12 saw a small decrease compared to the previous year), there is no denying that the trend is generally an upward one. The HESA 2011/12 data indicate that non-UK-domiciled students accounted for over a third all of postgraduate students in the UK.<sup>2</sup>

An interesting facet of the HESA data is the recent sharp decline in postgraduate numbers from India, which is almost certainly linked to the change of policy at national level towards post-study grace periods applied to visas. One of the post-doctoral researchers we interviewed told us:

*'One of the key reasons for studying here [the UK] was that I wanted to stay and seek work as an academic here. I was very lucky to get a visa that allowed this. This is now not the case. Some of my friends from home are looking now to study in Canada and Scandinavia*

2 See <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/stats> (accessed 19 June 2014).

*as the situation is better. If you want to study here, look into this carefully.'*

*Post-doctoral researcher, India*

## The Draw of the UK Doctorate

An increase in doctoral students is, it could be argued, inevitably linked to the growth of MA and especially MSc numbers, but there are many other reasons for this growth in the UK as a destination for international postgraduates.

The UK doctorate is still a massive draw for international students, for a host of reasons on top of the natural recruitment that can come from a linked masters degree. Firstly, the UK doctorate itself is still widely and highly regarded internationally, and so are UK institutions (the 'Oxbridge Effect') and their research facilities.

Add to this the relatively brief period of expected candidacy, which is shorter and therefore cheaper than in the USA and much of Europe, the globally recognized academic standards and the potential employability of UK-educated students. As one international student we spoke to said:

*'I want to be a lecturer in my country. It is easiest with a PhD from [the UK].'*

*Research student – Sciences, Middle East*

On top of these cost, intellectual and career benefits, and of prime importance for many international students, is the intellectual freedom study in the UK brings. Within reason, candidates are largely free to study whatever subjects are interesting and academically valid. This is not the case elsewhere in the world. Travelling to the UK can allow a student to critically examine a facet of their own nation or culture which they would not be allowed to do from within that country.

Moreover, the UK doctoral system is hugely influential in terms of the quality of the support, training and development opportunities (see Hinchcliffe et al. 2007) and all-round activity that sits between the purely intellectual and the purely pastoral. These aspects of the doctorate hold increasing value in the minds of students who are demanding more for the substantial fees they are paying:

*'It's expensive. It's a big risk for me. I want to make sure I get the most from my time here. [Such as?] Such as training, networking and opportunities to develop and learn. I'm not going to just sit in my lab.'*

*Research Student – Biological Sciences, Eastern Europe*

Finally, of course, there is the self-perpetuation of the academic system. In essence this is the role-model attractant of academic tutors at bachelors and masters level ('This lecturer is a "good" academic. I want to study with them'). We will deal with this specific element of the recruitment draw later in the book.

Overall, the UK is an outstanding place to study for a doctorate. It is easy to forget this in the day-to-day grind of academic and bureaucratic pressures, *National Student Survey* league tables and student appeals – but one of the refreshing things about hearing the stories of students was the positivity from so many of them. For instance:

*'This is a great country. There are so many opportunities here. My friends who are at US and Canadian universities, moan to me [about their experiences] and tell me how lucky I am. It is great here .... I'd tell anyone to come and study here. And I will be qualified, hopefully, in three years. You have so many opportunities to learn. I did not expect so much.'*

*Research student – Medical Sciences, Saudi Arabia*

Combine this set of favourable conditions with the underlying internationalization and globalization agendas and the exponential growth of our knowledge and research-based economy, and these conditions can only serve to make UK (and UK-franchised) doctorates and related postgraduate qualifications more attractive to the international market.

In 2004 the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) published a policy paper entitled *Putting the World into World-class Education*.<sup>3</sup> This influential document outlined three key strategic goals:

1. the establishment of global contexts of all forms of education;
2. the creation of international partnerships;

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<sup>3</sup> DfES, *Putting the World into World-class Education: An International Strategy for Education, Skills and Children's Services* (2004): <http://escalate.ac.uk/downloads/4837.pdf> (accessed 18 June 2014).

3. the identification of links to be made between universities and trade and industry.

In some ways this policy manifesto was pushing at an open door since for some time the universities and colleges of the UK had been aiming at exactly these goals – partly through a desire to widen the experiences of their students and faculty, but also because of cold, hard financial realities. Links between the educational sector and the private sector can lead to financial gain for the institutions as well as placements for students and very real benefits to international partners in terms of top-calibre graduate and postgraduate recruits and cutting-edge intellectual property. There are also benefits for researchers themselves in terms of growing a rich and diverse network to facilitate potential collaborations for future projects. The internationalization agenda, at myriad levels, has led to an overall increase in students from global markets, and this has naturally extended to postgraduate and doctoral recruitment.

So the simple upshot is that the number of international doctoral students in the UK is growing. Therefore, in a time when economic concerns are pressing, universities have a growing cash crop – a group of students who are charged higher fees by institutions than the home equivalent. Our experience has taught us that the hand that takes the money is not always the same one concerned about quality. At undergraduate level the sector has started to respond to the challenges of an international curriculum – and has heeded the warnings from both policy makers and educational researchers such as Rees and Porter (1998), who say: ‘Those providers ... who do not take account of the special needs of international students, and who do not fulfil their sales promises are likely to be just as much at risk as exporters in any other market.’ Yet a fundamental tension here concerns the value, in global terms, of the spread of an educational philosophy which is essentially ‘Western’ – over-simplistically, one that requires a Socratic challenge to the teacher – held up to be the gold standard and sold to international students, many of whom come from a background where this educational expectation is not the norm.

This book is not about the socio-economic reasons for the growth of the doctoral industry across the board, and is not about the rights or wrongs of taking greater numbers of international students or the intricacies of our universities’ fiscal juggling; rather, it concerns one important facet of what doctoral programmes must do to mitigate the risks of our practice not meeting the expectations of our students. *This book is about facilitating and ensuring the effective supervision of international doctoral students studying*

*within the UK system.* And by 'effective', we refer to both the student *and* supervisory experience.

The increase in the number of culturally and ethnically diverse students has led to a number of distinct challenges, not just for the supervisors and the students themselves, but also for their departments and faculties. The primary challenge for all concerned, but especially institutions and faculties, is not the fact that there is a difference between home and international students, but the sheer ridiculousness of two suggestions:

1. that all UK home students are a homogeneous group;
2. that international students are a distinct, homogenous group.

Of course, there are differences that can be expressed collectively. But as Geake and Maingard (1999) observe, there are more individual differences within cultures than there are between cultures. Sometimes the very terms 'home' and 'international' can be a source of exclusion and discomfort, and 'grouping people together in such ways may be useful to differentiate fee status but it is indefensible when it is carried over into everyday parlance and policy documents, whether these be at local, national or institutional level' (Trahar 2011). Although there is much documentation of the difficulties caused to international students by cultural frictions (see Cortazzi and Jin 1997), treating international students as a homogenous group is almost certainly counter-productive. Indeed, as Barker (1997) points out, they may have little more in common than the fact they are labelled 'international students'. As we mentioned in the Notes to the Reader at the beginning of this book, we've focused on the area of international students, and in doing so we've taken the stance that all students are individuals and need to be treated as such – particularly research students, for whom the key engagement with the academy, via the supervisor, is an individual one. We've also flagged areas where differences in language or culture may present specific challenges or exacerbate existing ones.

## International Challenge – Local Response

Many institutions serve their international students very well; the research for this book shows an array of good practices from across the sector. But many students report failings from their institutions, some resulting from a mismatch between expectation and reality and some resulting from genuinely poor service to a student who is paying a substantial amount of money.

To meet the challenge of the increase in students from outside the UK, the UK Council for International Student Affairs<sup>4</sup> (UKCISA, formerly known as UKCOSA) recommended that colleges should ‘ensure that there are appropriate opportunities for staff development for all those in contact with international students’, and often these are manifold when concerned with undergraduate or taught student teaching. However at doctoral level this support for supervisors is not as common. One supervisor we spoke to told us:

*‘I need help with them [his two Chinese research students]. Communication is difficult – not just the language barrier, but at all levels. They’re both fantastic students, but it’s so hard to supervise them properly. I wasn’t prepared for this, at all.’*

*Research supervisor – Engineering*

This common lack of effective support for research supervisors is partly because a doctorate is unlike any other form of qualification. There are no set recipes, no ways to standardize the experience, no ‘right’ ways to do things and no real ways to compare the experiences of students in a cohort or year group, since these classifications do not exist for the individualistic doctorate.

Research and data from the past decade confirm again and again the long-accepted belief across the sector that the key predictor of a student’s satisfaction with the research degree experience is the quality of the relationship they had with their doctoral supervisor. But again, there is no ‘right’ way to build this relationship. John Hockey (1995) noted accurately that ‘there is no set format for effective research supervision’. This means that supervisors often have little to base their supervisory tactics on other than the experience they themselves had as a doctoral student. In addition, the relationship between student and supervisor has traditionally been a private and closed affair – the so-called ‘secret garden’ model ‘in which student and supervisor engaged together as consenting adults, behind closed doors, away from the public, and with little accountability to others’ (Park 2008).

The supervisory process has long been known to be a complex one, and pivotal in determining whether a research student is successful (Delamont et al. 1997). However, research supervision is, in itself, traditionally a lightly

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4 The UK Council for International Student Affairs (formerly known as UKCOSA) is the UK’s national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them. The UKCISA website ([www.ukcisa.org.uk](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk)) is a hugely useful starting point for help, support and consideration of the issues faced by both international students and academic faculty in the UK.

researched area (Brockbank and McGill 1998). Moreover, the notion of supervision as a discipline in itself which requires formal training, reflective practice and accreditation is a relatively recent one (see Clegg 1997), and is still only sporadically embraced by the academic community beyond educational developers. Therefore, even between experienced academics there is often little or no consensus about what constitutes ‘good supervision’, and no agreed frameworks, or what Clegg refers to as ‘no discursively secure anchorage for a language of expertise which would be acceptable’. *The challenge of supervising an individual who does not share one’s own cultural and educational norms is simply another new layer on top of the myriad complexities of ‘traditional’ doctoral supervision.*

However, recently the role of the supervisor has been subject to scrutiny (as has the doctorate itself) in an attempt to assure consistency of standards. This standardization has in part arisen alongside the nebulous concept of ‘student satisfaction’, so the two things are often linked causally – whereas this may not be at all true. However, within the literature there *are* firmer correlations, such as the quality of research supervision being the ‘strongest predictor of doctoral completion on schedule’ (Leonard et al. 2006). With this in mind, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Code of Practice for higher education research degrees<sup>5</sup> includes devices that aim to regulate research supervision and accentuates the basic role of the supervisor in maintaining quality and consistency across doctoral programmes. It also encourages the use of supervisory teams to provide a framework in which newer supervisors can gain experience alongside those with a successful track record of supervision. While there have been changes in practice brought about by the QAA’s expectations of an institution complying with the Code of Practice in terms of supervisory practices, there is still, absolutely appropriately, a huge amount of flexibility in the system to allow for disciplinary differences or individual style.

Sitting alongside the policy drivers and the research data are the findings of the annual Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES),<sup>6</sup> a national survey conducted by the Higher Education Academy. A kernel of an idea for this book came a few years back when we saw the PRES data which showed that one fifth of respondents to the survey felt the supervision they had received did not meet their expectations.

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5 Chapter B11, ‘Research Degrees’, *UK Quality Code for Higher Education*: [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/quality-code-B11.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/quality-code-B11.aspx) (accessed 18 June 2014).

6 ‘Student Experience Surveys’: [www.heacademy.ac.uk/student-experience-surveys](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/student-experience-surveys) (accessed 18 June 2014).

The conversations and data collection in this book were conducted to find out why there was a mismatch in expectations and, further, what students and their supervisors could do about it, especially when a growing number of research students were coming to the UK with expectations (whether cultural, intellectual, academic, linguistic or pastoral) that might be inherently different to those students (and supervisors) who have been an undergraduate or taught masters students in the UK. At the beginning of the last decade, in a paper written for the Learning and Teaching Support Network, Beattie et al. (2001) found that the major differences in expectations and assumptions about the research supervisory process were not between staff and students per se, but between the different types of students – international and part-time being two of the most noticeable examples.

Furthermore, information from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator<sup>7</sup> (OIA) suggests that pro rata, the quantity of appeals and complaints involving international research students vastly outnumbered those from UK students. Furthermore, postgraduates and international students from outside the European Union are proportionately more likely to make a complaint than undergraduates and home students.

So, in short, the key challenges are as follows:

- an increase in the number of international doctoral students (perhaps related to pressure on supervisors to supervise more students, or at least continue to provide quality supervision within a timetable that is increasingly pressured by other scholarly and non-scholarly demands);
- a potential difference in expectations (and hence potential dissatisfaction) between the parties (often exacerbated by the large fees attached to international study);
- an institutional response that is hamstrung by the individualistic nature of the doctorate and doctoral supervision.

The first step, then, is to consider what the existing resources are for doctoral students and supervisors at an individual level.

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<sup>7</sup> OIA Annual Report 2012: [www.oiahe.org.uk/media/88650/oia-annual-report-2012.pdf](http://www.oiahe.org.uk/media/88650/oia-annual-report-2012.pdf) (accessed 18 June 2014).

## International Challenge – Individual Resources

Starting at the student end of the equation, there are many general and excellent books about navigating postgraduate life, such as *The Essential Guide to Postgraduate Study* (Wilkinson 2005) and *The Postgraduate's Companion* (Hall and Longman 2008). This type of book is often aimed exclusively at postgraduate international students – such as *Postgraduate Study in the UK: The International Student's Guide* (Foskett and Foskett 2006). At a general postgraduate level these can be supplemented by a number of books about life as an international student in the UK, such as *The International Student's Survival Guide* (Davey 2008) and *Getting Ahead as an International Student* (Burnapp 2009).

There are many helpful books that already aim to help doctoral students succeed, some of the most popular being *The Postgraduate Research Handbook* (Wisker 2001), *How to Get a PhD* (Phillips and Pugh 2010) and *Succeeding with Your Doctorate* (Wellington et al. 2005). They all contain great advice for students, and it's certainly worth a supervisor owning at least one of them simply to know exactly what their students might be being told about what good doctoral practice might be.

Some of these individual resources are more specialized, either by discipline – such as *Working for a Doctorate: A Guide for Humanities and Social Sciences* (Graves and Varma 1997) – or by student type – such as *How I Got My Postgraduate Degree Part Time* (Greenfield 2000). Again, these contain great insights and helpful thoughts and are recommended reading for niche students and supervisors alike.

While some of the resources listed above deal briefly with the unwritten cultural differences inherent in being an international student, such as Jagdish Gundara's chapter 'Intercultural Issues and Doctoral Studies' in Graves and Varma's *Working for a Doctorate* (1997) and Rugg and Petre's work *The Unwritten Rules of PhD Research* (2004), much of the rest of the genre is written from an Anglocentric perspective. This is entirely right and proper since these works accurately reflect the reality of doctoral study. However, there is often little focus on the – perhaps culturally different – *expectations* of the candidate, and this it seems is where much of the supervisory challenge lies.

For supervisors there are a number of useful sources on the pedagogies about doctoral supervision: *A Handbook for Doctoral Supervisors* (Taylor and Beasley 2005), *The Good Supervisor* (Wisker 2004), *The Routledge Doctoral Supervisor's Companion* (Walker and Thompson 2010), *Understanding Supervision and the PhD*

(Peelo 2011), *Effective Postgraduate Supervision* (Eley and Jennings 2005) and *How to Be an Effective Supervisor* (Eley and Murray 2009), to name a few.

We wholeheartedly urge all research supervisors to engage with the theory and discourse of good practice concerning doctoral supervision as they would with the pedagogical theory and research related to other forms of their teaching and lecturing. These texts can, in addition, have beneficial side-effects:

*'I borrowed a book on supervision from my professor. It was very interesting to read her perspective. It changed the way I approached her. It is a good idea for others [to read a supervisory book].'*

*Research student, Sri Lanka*

Many books for supervisors deal lightly with the issue of international students or take the sensible position that students, wherever their origin, are individuals and any relationship needs to be constructed on that basis. While we fully agree all that students are individuals, international students *can* provide a particular set of challenges for the supervisor.

Particularly useful in this regard are the chapters 'Internationalisation of Higher Education: Challenges for the Doctoral Supervisor' by Anna Robinson-Pant and 'International Students and Doctoral Studies in Transnational Spaces' by Fazal Abbas Rizvi in Walker and Thompson (2009) and *Supervising Postgraduates from a Non-English Speaking Backgrounds* by Ryan and Zuber-Skerritt (1999).

Generally speaking, books on research supervision start with an exploration of the doctorate itself. Yet the doctorate is not a fixed entity, and the notion of what constitutes the doctorate process changes in reaction to educational policy, but also as a response to wider societal needs and intellectual drivers. It is with a re-visitation of the UK doctorate from the perspective of an international student and their supervisor that our contribution truly begins.

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## Chapter 2

# Doctoral Descriptors within the UK Framework

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*The rich man thinks of next year, the  
poor man of the present moment.*

*Japanese proverb*

It's now some years since each of us completed our doctorates. Over the course of preparing this book we've had many a long conversation about what our theses were and whether our doctoral experiences had been enhanced by the supervision we had each received. A pivotal moment in the writing process came when one of us asked out loud, 'What would you tell a new student that a doctorate was, and what makes it special?' Despite the fact that we have each built successful careers partly around helping people to answer this question, it still caused us to hesitate and think. And yet, if supervisors and students don't understand the ends of the doctoral process (as opposed to the direction of the research), then how is any action from either party truly effective?

One of the students surveyed for this book, when asked what would have improved the experience for them, simply said:

*'More clear guidance about what a PhD entails by supervisors/  
Department would have been nice.'*

*Research student – Science, Mexico*

So if supervision is to be effective, it would seem sensible to start by engaging with the issue of what the doctorate is. Rather than initially providing a potted history of the qualification, we'd like to pose questions to the reader. The act of supervision requires supervisors to reflect upon and challenge their own perspectives and assumptions; and these questions serve both to stimulate thoughts within the supervisors and to act as potentially helpful discussion points between academics and students.