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DENMARK

Aalborg Universitet

Enhancing the skills of PhD supervisors facing internationalization

The issue of independence

Bøgelund, Pia

Published in:
Proceedings of Annual Conferences

Publication date:
2013

Document Version
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Bøgelund, P. (2013). Enhancing the skills of PhD supervisors facing internationalization: The issue of independence . In *Proceedings of Annual Conferences* Article 102 European Society for Engineering Education. <http://www.sefi.be/conference-2013/images/102.pdf>

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Enhancing the skills of PhD supervisors facing internationalization The issue of independence

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Conference Key Areas: Engineering education research, Internationalisation, Lifelong learning

Keywords: PhD supervision, international students, independence

INTRODUCTION

This research started out due to some institutional changes at a department at Aalborg University as regards supervision of PhD students. For various reasons the department suddenly got a large intake of PhD students in 2008, many of which came with an international background. After a period of time staff members of the department began to look very frustrated. Not only did they feel burdened with the large intake, they also struggled with the task of facilitating the transition of international students to become independent scholars. The situation led to the creation of a more general interview study within the faculty, and an inquiry into the field of cross-cultural supervision with the purpose of enhancing the skills of PhD supervisors. As is often the case with cross-cultural exchange and inquiry, the study ended up by being just as informative on the supervision cultures and settings of the faculty as on the cultures and needs of international students.

1 BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH QUESTION

1.1 Situating the research area within the field

When it comes to research education, independence of the PhD student is a much appreciated ability, and often expected at the outset of supervision [1]. This holds true especially for research environments in a Western setting. At the same time, however, international PhD students from a non-western background are often used to learning approaches, which emphasize much more a community based and collaborative approach to learning [2], [3]. When coming to a Western country these students often face difficulties, as they try to adjust to a more individualized and self-directed learning environment [3], [4]. How international students currently deal with these issues – and what supervisors can learn from that - is the focus of this paper.

1.2 The research questions of the paper

On this background the guiding questions of the paper are:

In a northern European context, what can we currently learn about the challenges of international PhD students as they go through the transition to independent scholars? On the basis of that knowledge - what are the current implications for supervision?

The term 'international PhD student' is a rough concept. *"International students are no more a homogeneous group than any other group of people or students"* [5] - be it within, or across nations. In this case the concept refers to a diverse group of PhD students coming to Aalborg from southern and eastern parts of Europe, South America, the Middle East, India and various countries in Asia.

The paper investigates the research questions empirically by the means of an interview study. Theoretically the paper will start out by qualifying what is meant by an independent scholar and by independent learning with a special eye to international students.

2 THE CONCEPT OF INDEPENDENCE

2.1 A definition of the independent scholar

The transition to independent scholar is part and parcel of the doctoral education process [6]. The PhD degree requires the independent scholar to become *"creators of knowledge"* through original research rather than *"consumers of knowledge"* [7]. In order to become 'creators of knowledge' the PhD student needs to find their passion and identity as scholars amidst other scholars and acquire the necessary academic skills characteristic of the field in question [7]. The basic question in the context of this paper is how do we facilitate this transition as supervisors?

2.2 Independent learning – with or without the legitimate help of others?

Within the field of adult learning Knowles identified that self-directing their own learning appealed to adults, because they valued personal autonomy [8]. Self-directed learning has been defined by Knowles as a *"process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes"* [9].

In the literature there are many words for the same – e.g. self-regulated learning, lifelong learning, autonomous learning and independent learning [9], [4]. In this paper the concept of independent learning is adopted. Independent learning is a much debated concept, in particular as concerns to which extent support from others is legitimate and important during adult learning. Leathwood [10] and Goode [11] argue that the dominant constructions of the concept see independent learning as a white, middleclass, male and solitary activity, which underestimates the interdependent nature of learning and serves managerial agendas of efficiency. It is as such, a construction that pathologizes those, who require support, and label them as deficient and dependent. Thus, dependence is denigrated, individualized and becomes an individual failing. Goode [11] states: *"I want to suggest that in a climate where a discourse of independence, autonomy and personal responsibility in learning are privileged (whether for pedagogical or managerialist reasons), all students who do not 'fit' this profile are seen as in deficit... Further, this individualization of learning undervalues the inherent interdependence of learning and teaching, the collaborative nature of learning as social practice and the shared responsibilities of students and academic staff (Cobb & Bowers, 1999)."*

In such a dominating construction of adult learning “*the turbo student*” is a very independent person requiring a minimum of support and completing in the shortest possible time [10]. Quite opposite this dominating understanding students from collectivist cultures tend to emphasize the interdependent aspects of their selves (Somech 2000, quoted in [10]), and as such recognize their behavior as “*determined, contingent on, and, to a large extent organized by ... the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship*” [12, p.227, emphasis in original). They consider self-restraint, subduing of autonomy and flexible adjustment to be “*an important sign of the moral maturity of the person*”, and regard “*promoting the goals of others*” as one of their primary tasks [12, p.242 and 229). Thus, there is potentially a considerable gap between a dominating western discourse on independent learning, and the traditional collectivist and opposing critical understanding of facilitating adult learning within higher education.

Modern workplace psychology supports the arguments put forward by Leathwood [10], Goode [11] and others (see e.g. [1]) to the extent that it is debatable whether you as an adult eventually reach a point, where you will be able to act as independently as the dominating discourse implies [13]. Especially Kahn, in [13, pp. 289], underlines the need for continuous support in workplaces of today, where the working person is responsible for managing their own carriers in a workplace setting like the university.

2.3 A transitional model to independence – the role of the supervisor

A model for the transition from student to ‘legitimate’ researcher, often referred to in the literature, is the ‘Staircase to legitimacy’ developed by Sven Hesse in 1987 [14]. Through 4 stages the PhD student transforms from an ‘irresolute amateur’, runs through the phases of the ‘ignorant besserwisser’ and the ‘inner crisis’ to the phase of ‘being legitimate’¹. The point of the model is that the supervisor has to adopt his or her role to support the transitions. In the first phase the supervisor needs to strike a balance between taking over too much and leaving too much to the student. In the second phase the balancing is more a question of juggling between encouraging and setting limits, whereas the third phase is crucial in terms of supporting the capability and the confidence of the emerging researcher. The supervisor role in the fourth phase is that of scrutinizing the work done by the emerging researcher [14, pp.73]. In terms of independence the staircase to legitimacy points out the importance of striking a balance between “*too much and too little support*” [7]. It also underlines the crucial role of support, as the contour of an independent scholar starts to emerge in the third phase.

Although in an American setting Gardner [7] investigates to which extent this balance of ‘too much and too little’ support is reached, and underlines the “*tenuous nature of independence*” [ibid. p. 347]. She found in her study on 40 homeland PhDs that adequate support was generally lacking. On this background she points to the significance of contact with peers, and more guidance and scaffolding in the earlier phases. She also points out that being a member of a research team makes a huge difference in terms of becoming an independent scholar. Let’s look into the situation in a Scandinavian setting, and with international students.

¹ There is also a fifth phase – that of the professional adviser, in which you are able to supervise PhDs yourself.

3 PHD SUPERVISION AT AALBORG UNIVERSITY

3.1 The interview study

Empirically speaking the paper is based on an interview study with 12 PhD supervisors from 2 different research programs at the Faculty of Engineering and Science at Aalborg University in Denmark, and one or two of their international PhD students – altogether 14 PhDs coming from southern and eastern parts of Europe, South America, the Middle East, India and various countries in Asia. The paper reports results from the interviews with the 14 PhD students. The PhD students vary in sex (6 male, 8 women), prior experience with a western educational system, age, family back ground, how far into study and kind of employment. They are chosen as a consequence of their supervisor, and even if some variety is sort out, they are not intentionally representative. Interviews have been based on a semi-structured interview guide, and each interview has taken around 1½ hour. For a more detailed description of selection, interview guide and analysis – see [15]².

3.2 Acquiring academic skills: Socialising into being critical and reflexive

The study shows that the general challenges for the group of international PhD students are primarily related to speaking or writing English, being critical and reflexive about the subject in question or being assertive in relation to the supervisor or other collaborators. Working with a problem based and project oriented approach is also an issue, but to a lesser degree. In this paper we will look into the challenges of being critical, reflective and capable of asserting one's own needs and agenda vice versa others.

Although they all imply there is a difference to the Danish PhD students, it varies how much emphasis the international PhD students put on the importance of their cultural background in terms of being critical and reflective. They point out that individual factors like prior experience with other cultures, age and family background and ability to adapt makes a difference. Many of them also point out that PhD students from the Middle East and Asia seem to be more challenged than other international PhD students. One Asian PhD student, who finds it rather challenging, explains:

“We are used to do spoon feeding ... when I attend PhD courses here I sometimes feel I have a complex, because it is very difficult to open my mind ... Here students don't care whether it is right or wrong, or whether it will hurt the teacher what they say. In [my country] we have this culture that we respect the elderly, and even if he or she does not know we should not criticise.” PhD 1

He likes *“the open conversation”*, it is *“a good approach”*, and he would like to implement it at home, but *“somehow [the culture of not criticising] is not removing completely from my mind”*. Irrespective of the emphasis on the cultural background all PhD students agree that the challenges can be accommodated through the support of supervisors and colleagues, with some students needing more support than others. Another PhD student explains:

“The first step is the most difficult. I get a lot of help from my colleagues – it is also a very important factor to help beginners go through this process... I am not as critical as the Danish, I try to learn. I really admire some of the Danish students... I encourage myself to ask questions to the speaker and so on. I can learn very fast. ...

² In order to protect the identity of the PhD students all supervisors are referred to as males, even if one of them is a woman.

The whole system in [my home country] is not designed for this thinking style... I think the most important thing is that you need to accept reality, and you need to change yourself and learn from others.” PhD 2

Thus, the PhD students tell they learn about being critical and reflective from their fellow PhD students, from watching colleagues, from immersion into discussions – and from their supervisors. One student tells that she didn't learn it in her home country due to a “copy past” approach, neither during her masters in Aalborg, cause “we just divided the tasks, we never [discussed]”. It only happened during her PhD project, and in particular as a consequence of her collaboration with one specific supervisor:

“Then I got to work with [my supervisor]. I am coming from an engineering background, where you think in boxes ... He wants to open up things. It was so shocking and stressful to work with him. ... Mentally I couldn't understand what he was trying to tell me. He had this flowery way of talking... He was frustrated with me, because I didn't get it. ... Then my boyfriend told me to ask him in the end of the meeting – is this, what you meant? Then he would say no! Out of that I finally got the point - don't take things for granted, be critical, be reflective.” PhD 3

As illustrated in the cases there are learning challenges for international students, which have to do with their learning backgrounds. This is, however, not the whole story. Individual factors make a difference. Different traditions within the field of both student and supervisor also make an impact, as shown above with the “boxes”. The two last cases further illustrate that becoming critical and reflective is a matter of socialization. Being supportive and demanding as a supervisor is both of importance. Many PhD students even point out that the approval and encouragement of the supervisor to be critical and reflective is of crucial importance.

3.3 The relationship with the supervisor: Socialising into being assertive or not

How capable the international PhD students are of asserting their own needs and agenda vice versa others varies. One PhD student had no difficulty at all: “If I get a problem... I'd run after [my supervisor] in the car... I am very persistent.” (PhD 4). The majority of the international students interviewed, though, need some kind of guidance. PhD 5 got it along the way by the help of the supervisor:

“Initially my supervisor was helping me to take the decisions and most of the time he would give me inputs... Then later on when I settled down, I came to know what was good for me, and now it is a self-doing process. His role is now to comment on my work, not to guide my work. It was a good process ... it gave me some confidence. “

Some of the PhD students did not have the good fortune of a supportive supervisor in this respect:

“In the start I was not asking so much, I was more hesitant, expecting my supervisor to take action. ...And maybe I listened to this kind of talk that ‘it is your PhD, you have to decide, it is 90% the students' responsibility’ ... He had expectations as to what he wanted me to produce, but how I was going to produce it - this is the question and my responsibility. ...I am not as fast as he wants me to be. ... He is expecting a certain kind of level, and most of the students here are struggling to get to that level by themselves.” PhD 6

This last PhD student touches upon a relevant issue. The expectation of the supervisors as regards the ability to be assertive or have “*self-motivation*” (PhD 7) varies across the two programs and the individual sections within. In some sections it goes without saying that you are expected to have self-motivation from the start: “*I don’t think it was very explicit ... I got it in the tacit way*” (PhD 7) as one PhD student puts it. In other sections it is more customary that the supervisors facilitate the process from the start (see the quote from PhD 5). This tacit expectation has consequences for those international PhD students that are “*concerned with the way [the supervisor] will react*” (PhD 6). They need an explicit permission and encouragement to speak up and assert their own needs – especially in cases of disagreement.

3.4 The institutional set up: Socialising interdependence into dependence

Even in other ways the institutional set up affects the making of an independent scholar. Within some fields the academic culture is much influenced by the demands of the market logic – “*taking the game of the market inside the university*”, as one PhD puts it (PhD 8). He likes the tight connection between industry and academia, but finds it “*annoying*” that he cannot do whatever he wants, and he also wonders whether or not “*the things I am doing will earn me my PhD diploma.*” This institutional set up is of course the same for all PhD students within the field whether international or not. Becoming legitimate within this field entails acquiring the skills of balancing different agendas, and following not only your own agenda. However, due to issues with asserting oneself vice versa supervisors and other collaborators this institutional set up places an extra challenge on some international students – especially if the supervisor is not paying attention to this challenge. PhD 9 explains:

“I ha[d] too many masters ... [I was] doing work related tasks that w[ere] not academic [for the company] - ½ year that did not benefit my thesis. ... I thought that if my [supervisor] didn’t object at meetings, then he approved. ... For one month I said in my office steering out in the air ... We finally had a talk, he didn’t get what he wanted, and so he switched me to another leader. ... I don’t remember my reaction, but my culture tells me not to be happy, [when someone is excluded], so I never expressed this, but inside I thanked him. I still feel shy that I performed the way I did.”

Not only does this PhD student experience difficulty in asserting her own needs vice versa others, it is also detrimental to her self-respect that she cannot fulfil the goals of others. In the study there are several examples of international PhD students, who end up in a challenging situation, because they put more emphasis on the goals of others or the “*drive to contribute to own country*” (PhD 1) in an environment, where “*it is needed*” to “*make your voice heard*” and “*learn to complain*” (PhD 9).

4 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

4.1 Co-creating independence or dependence in a specific context

This is an interview study investigating the challenges of 14 international PhD students in a specific time and setting. As such the results bear legitimacy within this and similar situations. All the same, it resonates some of the other research within the area. What is evident from the study is that the transition to independent scholar is a co-creation between the international PhD student, the supervisor and the practices and institutional set up of the working environment. International PhD students do have specific challenges, when coming to a western research institution – especially students from the middle East and Asia – they are not as trained as

many westerners usually are in being critical, reflexive and assertive vice a visa others. There are several interesting additions to this fact, however.

First and foremost, there is an institutional ignorance of the need to support and guide the international PhD student and an equivalent expectation of initial self-motivation in several corners of the faculty – much like Goode [11], Leathwood [10] and others point out. An ignorance that is also evident in the undertow of the words of some of the international PhD students, when they position themselves as less competent - using words like “*spoon feeding*”, pointing out that they did not yet succeed in “*removing completely*” from their minds the culture of not criticising, or that they “*are not as fast*” as the supervisor would want them to be.

Secondly, the challenges can be accommodated through the support of supervisors and other colleagues. Supervisors are able to make a difference – co-creating independence or dependence by either acknowledging or not the collaborative nature of learning, and the need for creating encouraging and trustful relationships that gives permission to be critical and assert oneself vice a visa others – especially the supervisor.

Thirdly, international students are not that different from home land students. Gardner [7] shows that home land students also need guidance in order to become independent scholars. From this perspective, international students may be considered as the ‘canaries in a mine’ indicating that other students – having to balance the needs of both industry and academia e.g. – might also need some relevant guidance.

Finally, it seems relevant to point out that lack of supervisor support is not ‘evil doing’ - even supervisors have their limits considering the many tasks they have altogether. As shown in Bøgelund and Kolmos [15] and pointed out by Goode [11, p. 601] “*supervisors need ‘empowering’ too*”.

4.2 How to enhance the independence of international students?

It is evident from this study that what is needed in terms of enhancing the independence of international students is the trustful and guiding relationship of a supervisor – within an effective institutional setting. There is a need for collaborative scaffolding efforts, and there is a need for *granting permission* in the start – aiming somewhere along the line for “*respectful interactions*” [16]. What is given in return is an awareness of the work place ethos, seen through the eyes of a new comer, often bringing in the values and experience of co-creating *interdependent relationships*.

5 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study has been made possible by grants given from The Centre for Development of Human Resources in Denmark.

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