Pathways to PRACTICE

A PRACTITIONER'S TOOLKIT -

SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL **DOCTORAL STUDENTS**

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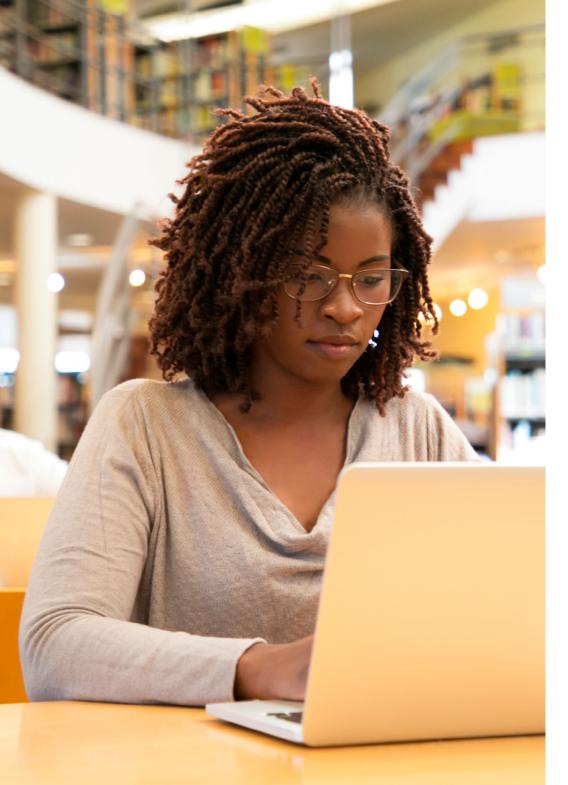
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TOPIC IN CONTEXT

Seeking a doctorate abroad is becoming increasingly commonplace. In 2017, international students reportedly made up 22% of doctoral enrolments across Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. In some European countries, international students make up a larger proportion of the doctoral population: in Luxembourg and Switzerland, for example, international students make up 85% and 55% of doctoral enrolments, respectively.

For universities, international doctoral students (IDSs) represent an opportunity to recruit the best and the brightest, facilitate culture and knowledge exchange, build international networks and generate income. Students, in turn, are motivated to pursue PhDs abroad due to limited opportunities at home, job prospects post-graduation and a desire to obtain a degree from a reputable institution.

Research and practice have frequently demonstrated that this group of students experiences specific challenges in their adjustment to both a new academic environment and host society:

• At the university, IDSs may encounter different approaches to learning, participation, giving and receiving feedback,



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interacting with professors and colleagues and conducting academic research.

- Simultaneously, they may be required to navigate complex financial, legal, and bureaucratic aspects that accompany working and living in a foreign country.
- Students may also need to perform academic tasks and conduct their personal life in one or more foreign languages.
- Socially, IDSs may need to adapt to a new culture and lifestyle and build new support networks.
- For some of these students, limited social contact may put them at risk for social isolation and in some cases mental health issues.

WHAT PROBLEM DOES IT SOLVE?

Research and practice have consistently reported on how international doctoral students may lack 'tacit knowledge' of their host society as well as awareness of the 'hidden curriculum' (norms, values and beliefs conveyed in the classroom and the social environment) embedded in the PhD experience. As a result, these students often carry the double burden of being academic novices and cultural outsiders, a position which heightens their vulnerability to some specific challenges.

Higher education actors play important roles in setting these students up for success, incorporating them into institutional life, and ensuring sustainable and mutually beneficial channels of knowledge and cultural exchange.

SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL STUDENTS WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED? 06



SHOULD BE INVOLVED?

- o improve support for international doctoral students, universities need to involve actors across the institution:
- Doctoral students (international and local)
- Doctoral supervisors
- Other faculty in academic departments hosting IDSs
- Doctoral schools
- (International) student affairs offices
- Administrators who engage with IDSs in departments, faculties, central administration and student support services



TERMINOLOGY

International doctoral students (IDSs)/researchers:

Individuals pursuing doctorates abroad, sometimes called 'students' as they are expected to complete coursework and/or pay tuition, and/or designated as remunerated 'researchers'.

Deficiency discourse:

Negative perception of approaches to learning and/or research differing from one's own.

Multi-directional cultural and knowledge exchange:

Reciprocal and respectful interaction between international and local university members.

Expectation

management:

Communicating requirements and goals between multiple parties in a transparent and clear manner.

Community of practice:

Individuals pursuing similar interests or holding similar positions that regularly interact and support each other.

Power dynamics:

The relative hierarchical positioning of doctoral students and their supervisors, which grants supervisors considerable power over students regarding administrative and academic issues.

KEY STEPS IN THE PROCESS

his publication provides a checklist for higher education institutions, doctoral supervisors and other involved actors to support international doctoral students in their doctoral journeys and transitions into new cultures and academic environments. The outlined steps focus on informing, supporting and empowering key actors, in order to ensure an inclusive and barrier-free IDS experience

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

- 1. Train doctoral supervisors
- 2. Create an inclusive and transparent application process

PROVIDING SUPPORT THROUGHOUT THE PHD

- 3. Welcome IDSs to your institution
- 4. Manage expectations with a partnership agreement
- 5. Build communities of practice
- 6. Identify other support areas
- 7. Set up online supervision and support mechanisms

BUILDING BRIDGES AFTER THE PHD

- 8. Set up an alumni network
- 9. Foster international collaborations/networks
- 10. Support the post-PhD transition

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

1. Train doctoral supervisors

Train doctoral supervisors to be aware of the issues IDSs face and to develop toolkits to support IDSs. The training should ideally focus on:

- Self-reflection: have supervisors reflect on and problematise their supervision practices and the assumptions embedded within them, as well as the cultural dimensions of these practices and assumptions.
- Awareness & appreciation: discuss different approaches to learning and conducting research, in order to move away from deficiency discourse towards multi-directional cultural and knowledge exchange.
- **Supervisor-student relationship:** provide guidance for building a friendly and professional supervisor-student partnership.
- **Constructive feedback:** teach methods for giving feedback that encourages self-confidence and scholarly development.
- Mental health awareness: discuss potential mental health issues, work-life balance and how to direct students in crisis to appropriate resources.
- **Bureaucracy:** keep supervisors informed of the additional bureaucratic issues that IDSs face related to living abroad and how these issues might impact their work and the support they may need.

- 2. Create an inclusive and transparent application process Providing prospective IDSs detailed and accessible information about what it means to do a PhD at your institution will help manage expectations and provide an inclusive first introduction. Information provided should cover the following topics:
 - What prerequisites and paperwork are required to apply for a doctorate?
 - How are doctoral studies set up at your institution (*eg* independent research, project work, doctoral school)?
 - How is doctoral supervision organised?
 - What is the typical length of time needed to complete a PhD?
 - What are the academic expectations (*eg* publications, coursework)?
 - Are doctoral positions funded (*eg* full-time, part-time), and if so, how is funding obtained?
 - What support (including funding) is allotted for conferences and further training?

More general information should also be provided regarding living in the host country, including on topics such as:

- Visa and residence permits
- Healthcare options and insurance
- Spousal/family support
- Housing and housing regulations
- Banking and taxes
- Language support (in the working language and/or host society language)
- Insights into the local culture

This information should be readily accessible online (on the university website) and in the language of the doctoral programme – especially when this language differs from the local language.

For example, the university website could include frequently asked questions for IDSs, as well as video interviews with current IDSs about the rewarding and challenging aspects of their doctoral experience. Additionally, a peer-advising network could be set up in which a more senior IDS acts as a liaison and fields questions related to moving to the host country, the academic system and other inquiries.

PROVIDING SUPPORT THROUGHOUT THE PHD

3. Welcome IDSs to your institution

Design orientation materials and activities for IDSs or make sure existing PhD orientation activities cover topics like understanding the local academic culture and society. Be careful that other institutional 'diversity and inclusion' activities do not ignore or exclude IDSs. Furthermore, include current and incoming IDSs in this process by inquiring about their interests and concerns (via focus groups, interviews and questionnaires), rather than assuming what they are.

Orientation should introduce students to academic support and resources as well as mental health services and other support mechanisms on campus, both online and in-person. Orientation courses could also include 'pre-doctoral training', such as academic writing and presentation skills.

4. Manage expectations with a partnership agreement

Setting up a partnership agreement between a doctoral student and their supervisor(s) allows space to outline and discuss concrete aspects of the PhD and define roles, and may serve as a reference (to be amended and revisited) throughout the PhD. This agreement can prevent supervisors and students from assuming what is expected of them and help clarify – and resolve – potential differences in expectations. Key information to be included in a partnership agreement:

- Length of contract and benefits
- Rights and responsibilities of the doctoral student, supervisor(s) and the institution
- Expected student workload and quality standards
- Milestone plan and timeline (research proposal, data collection, draft chapters *etc*)
- Feedback style and frequency
- Research ethics and integrity
- Intellectual property ownership
- Conference and workshop attendance and funding
- Publication arrangements, co-authoring practices and publication costs
- Options for potential conflict mediation

5. Build communities of practice

Outside the student-supervisor relationship, formal and informal communities of practice for (international) doctoral students should be formed and supported at the university. Formal support mechanisms can include:

• Periodic check-ins/progress reports written by the doctoral student, supervisor(s) and other mentors to identify early challenges and solutions.

- An independent ombudsperson/committee for (international) doctoral students to consult if problems arise with their supervisor, acknowledging the important role that power dynamics can play between students and supervisors.
- Including IDSs in departmental committees and decision-making bodies and providing information about decisions in the language of the doctoral programme.

Informal support mechanisms might include:

- Peer and collegial support communities such as study and discussion groups, workshops, writing retreats, online forums (social media), lunchtime seminars, (international, doctoral) student associations, pairing IDSs with local student mentors.
- Social activities facilitated by the department, faculty and/or university.

6. Identify other support areas

Additional areas of support might include:

 Further training: Pay attention to other areas where IDSs might need support, and discuss and decide with them on further training (*eg* academic writing, reading and/or presenting in the language of the doctoral programme; referencing and finding literature and resources; research ethics).

- Work spaces: Organise spaces for students to work on campus, preferably where they meet other local and international doctoral students as a way to reduce social isolation.
- Different PhD formats: Be aware of different PhD formats for international students and students with non-traditional backgrounds (eg distance learning, mature students, parttime students, joint or double PhDs, students with families) and the different types of support they may need.

7. Set up online supervision and support mechanisms

The digitalisation of higher education has enabled the development of remote PhD programmes, and the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the unique challenges of this format of supervision. In the case of remote programmes, doctoral supervisors and institutions need to translate their offline practices to online environments.

Doctoral supervisors should:

- Initiate and maintain regular online communication with their students, eg through a combination of emails and video calls.
- Take into account possible internet access issues, time zone differences and IDSs' comfort levels with using certain technologies.
- Organise group meetings and encourage peer exchange between doctoral students, *eg* via social media or video calls, to reduce feelings of isolation among students.

• Specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic or similar crisis periods: be aware of additional stressors that may affect students' ability to work on their PhD and pay attention to their well-being.

Institutions should:

 Develop online resources and provide technical support for remote research training and professional development for students and supervisors.

BUILDING BRIDGES AFTER THE PHD

8. Set up an alumni network

Keep in touch with former IDSs to help future students learn about your institution and draw on support and resources of previous graduates.

9. Foster international research collaborations/networks

IDSs may serve as connections for building international research networks, either in their home country or other countries they move to after graduation.

10. Support the post-PhD transition

Provide career support for IDSs wishing to remain in the host country after graduation, be it in academia or other sectors. This could include setting up job fairs with local industries.

SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL STUDENTS



Each IDS has their own story

Avoid generalising and stereotyping: although students may be influenced by their previous education environments, and supervisors may be influenced by their experiences with previous students, IDSs are unique individuals with their own stories

Different students need different levels of support

Depending on their background, students may need different types of support. This is best learned through conversations/consultations with students.

Continuous communication is crucial

Have continued conversations with students about their experiences and the support they need, and be open to making adjustments.

Well-being and mental health

Supervisors should encourage a balanced work environment and respect students' time off. If for any reason such a need should arise, point students to mental health resources on campus.

SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL DOCTORAL STUDENTS TAKE-AWAYS

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TAKE-AWAYS

The globalised and digitalised world has increased opportunities for culture and knowledge exchange across the higher education landscape. One result of this is the presence of international doctoral students on our campuses, which provides rich resources for intercultural learning and international cooperation. Students will likely continue to seek doctorates abroad, both on campuses and from a distance.

With a combination of preparation, reflection and awareness, universities may ensure that these students have a successful doctoral journey. Given the recent increase in and the likely long-term significance of remote doctoral supervision due to the COVID-19 pancemic, it is especially important that universities and supervisors also translate good supervision and support practices to the online environment.



Cross-Cultural Supervision Project

Videos that may be used as a training or reflection tool, conveying IDSs' and their supervisors' perspectives on the doctoral journey abroad and common misunderstandings between them.

رالی DoctoralWriting SIG

A forum focusing on supporting doctoral writing, providing guidance for doctoral supervisors and students, including a few articles on pursuing a PhD in English as a foreign language.

Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators

Education at a glance provides data on education systems across OECD countries, including figures on eg doctoral enrolment and mobility.

PhDs: The tortuous truth

A study from Nature that surveys 6000 graduate students and sheds light on the challenges of the doctoral journey, including mental health issues.

Supervising PhDs: A community blog on research leadership and supervisory practice

A blog providing support and resources for doctoral supervisors based on supervisors' experiences and current research, including guidance on supervising IDSs.

UK Council for Graduate Education

The website's 'Resources' section includes publications discussing the international and local doctoral students' experiences and ways of supporting them. Although it is UK-focused, many aspects are applicable to different contexts.

FURTHER READING

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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