Enhancing Inter-Cultural Awareness Among International Postgraduate Researchers and Their Research Supervisors at Warwick: A reflection from the project team

Maryam Masood[1], Gabriella Crawford-Koltai[2], Shi Ha[3], Asima Iqbal[4]

[1,3,4]WMG, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK, [2]Global Sustainable Development, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK
Correspondence: [1]m.masood.4@warwick.ac.uk; [2]gabriella.crawford-koltai.1@warwick.ac.uk ; [3]hashi.10@hotmail.com; [4]asima.iqbal@warwick.ac.uk
LinkedIn[1]@maryammasood, [4]@asima-iqbal
ORCID: [1]0000-0002-4073-2105, [4]0009-0007-4471-0564

Abstract

The increasing internationalisation of postgraduate research (PGR) education in the UK has highlighted the unique challenges faced by international students, who now make up around 40% of the postgraduate population. These students face a range of issues, including financial pressures, difficulties with cultural integration, language barriers, workload management, mental well-being, and mismatches in supervision expectations. There is often inadequate support and mentorship tailored to international PGRs, and supervisors may not be fully aware of the hidden barriers these students encounter. Intercultural dynamics is a significant challenge in fostering effective interactions between PGR students and their supervisors. Building intercultural awareness—knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for positive communication in a multicultural environment—is vital for creating strong relationships in this context.

This project, therefore, examined the role of intercultural awareness in shaping the relationships between PGR students and their supervisors at the University of Warwick. Using semi-structured interviews with PhD students and supervisors, we explored how intercultural competence affects communication, aligns expectations, and enhances the research experience. This reflection shares the research outcomes, along with insights from the project team on the challenges encountered during the study. Future work will be to expand this research on a larger scale within Warwick and across multiple UK institutions to deepen understanding and inform supportive frameworks for international PGRs.

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Keywords: intercultural awareness; postgraduate researchers; research culture; international education; supervisor-student relationship

Introduction

The increasing internationalisation of postgraduate research (PGR) education in the UK has highlighted the unique challenges faced by international students, who now make up around 40% of the postgraduate population (**HESA, 2023**). These students face a range of issues, including financial pressures, difficulties with cultural integration, language barriers, workload management, mental well-being, and mismatches in supervision expectations (**Briscoe & Mattocks, 2016, Riches-Suman & Delderfield, 2021**). One of the most critical relationships in a PGR's research journey is the one they develop with their supervisor (**Manathunga, 2017**). In an increasingly globalised academic landscape, it may mean that the PGRs and their supervisors have diverse cultural contexts, which may mean different learning approaches, varied communication styles and a difference in expectations from each other.

Intercultural awareness plays an important role in creating inclusive and effective research environments (**Zheng et al., 2019**). The relevance of intercultural awareness in research culture cannot be overstated as in many cases international PGRs often encounter difficulties related to access, retention, and integration into research communities. These challenges may stem from linguistic barriers, differing academic expectations, and cultural nuances in communication and collaboration. Supervisors, in turn, may face difficulties in understanding and adapting to the diverse needs of their international students, impacting the quality of the research experience. Bridging this gap is essential for creating a more inclusive research culture that values diversity as an asset rather than a barrier (**Manathunga, 2017**).

This paper reflects on the experiences and insights gained by a project team who examined the role of intercultural awareness in shaping the relationship between PGRs and PGR research supervisors at a Russel group University. It is understood that student-supervisor relationship is not the only factor in defining the student journey, however, many studies have highlighted that this relationship does take a centre stage in shaping a PGR's journey (**Khuram et al., 2023**). The role of culture in this supervisory relationship is explored from multiple aspects such as language, non-verbal communication, understanding of culture and expectations as highlighted in the literature as key factors in ensuring an inclusive student – supervisor relationship. This reflection also draws on the experiences of the project team in conducting this work. The team is a combination of

academics and PhD students who work as graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) where GTAs bring a unique perspective both as learners and facilitators within this cultural exchange. By reflecting on their experiences, the project team sheds light on the practical strategies and challenges of fostering intercultural awareness.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design and a phenomenological approach to explore the intercultural challenges faced by international PGRs and their supervisors. Qualitative research is well-suited for capturing socially constructed realities and complex interpersonal dynamics, making it particularly relevant for examining supervisory relationships (**Creswell, 2007**). The phenomenological approach was chosen to gain deeper insights into participants' lived experiences, focusing on how cultural differences shape supervisory interactions. Qualitative research typically involves collecting substantial amounts of data, which are systematically analysed and condensed (**Miles & Huberman, 1994**). In this study, data was gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with international PGRs and their supervisors across faculties at a Russel group University. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility, enabling the interviewer to explore topics in depth while ensuring that key areas of interest were consistently addressed (**Braun & Clarke, 2021; Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Kidman et al., 2017**).

Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling strategy to ensure the recruitment of participants with relevant experiences (**Ritchie & Lewis, 2003**). Two distinct participant groups were targeted, i.e., PhD supervisors with experience supervising international PGRs and international PGRs at different stages of their doctoral journey. The recruitment process was conducted via university-wide newsletters, departmental emails, and online institutional platforms, ensuring representation across all faculties. A heterogeneous sampling approach was adopted, including participants of diverse cultural backgrounds without restrictions on age, gender, or ethnicity (**Ibid**).

Data collection and analysis

Interviews were conducted between July and August 2024. Nine semi-structured interviews were carried out with international PGRs and PhD supervisors via Microsoft Teams, with each session lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. To explore the experiences and perspectives of both international PGRs and supervisors, a pre-designed interview guide was used to structure the conversations, focusing on topics such as cultural challenges, communication strategies, and institutional support

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mechanisms. The key themes for interview are listed in Appendix. The interviewer employed verbal and non-verbal cues to establish rapport, as recommended by Lindlof and Taylor (**2002**). Follow-up questions were used to elicit detailed and contextually grounded responses, ensuring participants' accounts were thoroughly understood.

Interviews were recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify and explore key themes within the data. The analysis process involved selecting illustrative excerpts from transcripts to substantiate findings and provide evidence for interpretive claims (**Braun & Clarke, 2021; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002**).

Limitations

This study provides valuable insights into the intercultural dynamics between international PGRs and their supervisors, however, there were some limitations to data collection and analysis. Firstly, the relatively small sample size and the focus on a single institution limit the generalizability of the findings to broader contexts (**Creswell, 2007**). Additionally, the voluntary nature of participation may have introduced self-selection bias, as those with a greater interest in intercultural issues were more likely to engage, potentially skewing the data (**Miles & Huberman, 1994**). Moreover, the use of remote interviews via Microsoft Teams, while practical, posed technological and environmental challenges that may have constrained the depth of engagement and limited access to non-verbal communication cues (**Lindlof & Taylor, 2002**). Finally, while the study focused on intercultural awareness, it did not address other potentially significant variables, such as institutional structures or disciplinary differences, that may influence supervisory relationships.

Findings and Discussion

It is widely recognised that intercultural awareness can significantly influence the relationship between PGRs and their supervisors, often presenting challenges. An analysis of the findings revealed that one of the most frequently identified challenges was the understanding of roles and expectations in supervision. A major challenge between PGRs) and their supervisors arises from a lack of clear understanding of roles and expectations in supervision. Supervisors often assume that PGRs possess significant experience in literature searching, critical analysis, and research skills, which can lead to mismatched expectations and difficulties (**Ryan, 2005**). For example, one PhD supervisor noted that PGRs:

> *Don't have a clear understanding or expectation for what they need or supposed to deliver during seminars, workshops, and supervising meetings.* (**PhD Supervisor 1 comment**)

While on a similar theme, the experience of the students was much different as they identified:

They won't tell me their expectation like something I need to do it. So I think at my PhD journey in my first year, I have wasted some time on it because I only could suggest what I needed it to do. (**PGR A comment**)

Most PGRs and supervisors have noted that language barriers can significantly hinder communication. These barriers can lead to misunderstandings, confusion, and challenges in interacting with native speakers, understanding feedback, participating in class, and completing tasks which is in line with what has been identified in literature (**Alebaikan et al., 2020; Gao, 2021**). As one supervisor highlighted:

Sometimes the challenge is basically just the language barrier, the student come here (university in the UK), they pass IELTS or whatever exam test. Passing that test doesn't mean that they are necessarily good enough for communication, when they first come to this country, sometimes they don't understand the way that you speak. So, if there is one challenge, in my opinion, there could be a language barrier (**PhD Supervisor 2 comment**)

And a PGR also indicated:

Generally, the language barrier and been understanding and tolerant, sometimes within the language barrier and difficulties related to that. (**PGR B comment**)

More attention on active communication skills and opportunities for PGRs to practice their skills is essential and can prove to be beneficial.

Feedback came up as another concern that may potentially be a cause of misunderstanding between international PGRs and their supervisors. As Alebaikan et al., (**2020**) highlighted that students may have varying interpretations of feedback that they receive from their supervisors. An ideal solution is to agree on a format of feedback that is workable for both. Establishing clear and mutually agreed upon expectations for feedback is crucial for effectively supporting students (**Ibid**). From the interviews, it also appears that the lack of knowledge about the cultural backgrounds and experiences of international doctoral students can lead to assumptions and misunderstandings about their perspectives and needs (**Humphreys et al., 2021**). PGRs students also noted:

Different cultures we have different boundaries between the supervisees and the supervisors. So that is one thing at the early stage we should like have more direct and transparent discussion between each other. (**PGR C comment**).

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> *Stress or anxiety, and then I maybe realise that it's because the relationship between me and my supervisor or the research team. To realise there is a culture difference and communication, it's talking with the other team.* (**PGR A comment**)

The need for clear communication, mutual understanding, and flexibility in communication is essential to overcome in these challenges. A positive outcome of this research is the willingness of both international PGRs and the supervisors to engage in more meaningful institutional support and training focused on enhancing intercultural awareness. There already exist intercultural awareness workshops at the University, however, it appears that most of the participants find these to be more generic and not suitable in their context. This shows a need for updating the training resources and possibly try solutions where there is more opportunity for people to apply and test their skills rather than only receive theoretical information. Some of the suggested solution as highlighted by participants:

> *Workshops for international PGRs to share their experiences, I know PhD is not only about supervision, but there are a lot of other things that come in. So, if they can have workshops to share experiences, and maybe trying to share possible solutions it would be beneficial.* (**PGR D comment**)

> *There needs to be other supporting structures in the university to come in and support.* (**PhD Supervisor 2 comment**)

Research findings indicate to address all of these issues it is essential for both international doctoral students and their supervisors to develop cultural and intercultural awareness. Cultural awareness involves understanding the role of culture and cultural norms in language learning and communication (**Baker, 2011; Bryam, 1997**). It also requires recognising and adapting to cultural differences and developing essential skills and communication styles to interact with a diverse culture (**Baker, 2011, Manathunga, 2017**). Such active participation in these activities will improve research culture at the University.

Reflections from the Team

As the team that came together to contribute to this project, constituted of academics and PhD students (who also work as GTAs) graduate teaching assistants it is quite important to understand their motivations for contributing to this project and how this project improved their learning and practice in staff-student relationship.

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Project lead

My decision to initiate this research project stemmed from my own experiences as an international PhD student in the UK many years ago and also from my experience of working with PhD students supporting on my teaching module as GTAs. Navigating a new academic and cultural environment presented both challenges and opportunities for personal and professional growth. I often found that while academic expectations were clear, cultural nuances in communication, supervision styles, and expectations were less understood. This gap in awareness sometimes led to misunderstandings and inefficiencies in the supervisory relationship.

Now as an academic, I also recognise the increasing diversity in higher education and the critical role of intercultural competence in fostering a supportive learning environment. My expectation from the projects was to evidence the importance of intercultural awareness which may not be a visible barrier but as research also indicates it does impact the relationship consequently impacting the research culture overall. Through this project findings, we as a team gained insight into common challenges, such as differences in communication styles, feedback expectations, and academic autonomy. Equally, I also consider it as an opportunity where I discovered best practices where supervisors and students successfully navigated cultural differences through openness, adaptability, and active engagement.

One key lesson from this project was the importance of structured intercultural training for both students and supervisors. While many institutions acknowledge diversity, formal mechanisms to equip individuals with intercultural skills are often lacking. Additionally, fostering an open dialogue about cultural expectations can significantly enhance the PhD experience for international students and create a more inclusive academic environment.

This project reinforced my belief that intercultural awareness is not just an added skill but an essential component of academic collaboration. Moving forward, I hope to advocate for more structured support systems that promote cultural understanding, ensuring that PhD students and supervisors alike can thrive in an increasingly globalised academic world.

PhD student/GTA

When Postgraduate International students decide to study in a different country, it is crucial for their PhD supervisors to understand their cultural and sociocultural norms. This understanding can help in building a better relationship between the students and their supervisors, which mainly influenced my decision to participate in this research project and develop a knowledge of how to build a better relationship with my PhD supervisors.

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Understanding a different culture can be challenging, and a lack of knowledge about the backgrounds and experiences of international doctoral students can lead to assumptions and misunderstandings regarding their perspectives and needs (**Humphreys et al., 2021**). I often feel that this is one of the biggest challenges between me and my PhD supervisors. Conversations with other international PGRs and their supervisors have also highlighted this point.

Another significant challenge that I have observed between PGRs and their supervisors arise from a lack of clear understanding of roles and expectations in supervision. Supervisors often assume that PGRs have substantial experience in literature searching, critical analysis, and research skills, which can lead to mismatched expectations and difficulties (**Ryan, 2005**). When I started my PhD, I was not fully aware of how to prepare for my monthly supervision sessions or what areas I needed support from my supervisors. This lack of preparation led to struggles in progressing with my PhD. Also, as a part-time PhD student, balancing my studies with other commitments made it even harder to meet my supervisor's expectations and progress with my research. Discussions with fellow PhD students confirm that we all face similar issues, which is a significant concern for all of us.

To address these challenges, it would be beneficial to organise workshops where international PGRs and PhD supervisors can openly share their experiences and collaboratively develop solutions. It would also be beneficial for PhD students to have the opportunity to work on different research projects. This experience would allow them to gain real-life skills in collaborating on research, collecting data, and analysing results.

Recent PhD graduate

Gee (**2001**) posited that identity formation is shaped both by self-perception and by how others ascribe it. As a recent PhD graduate, my doctoral journey was shaped by my supervisor's professional beliefs and expectations, requiring me to navigate diverse professional and personal perspectives. The cultural, academic, and interpersonal challenges I encountered deepened my understanding of the complexities faced by international students. I recognised that regardless how well a doctoral student gets along with a supervisor, there are certain goals, standards and perspectives inherent to the doctoral process are not always shared. This realisation motivated me to contribute to this project, which aims to enhance intercultural awareness among supervisors. The project underscored the importance of understanding and addressing the unique experiences of international students, while highlighting the critical role of culturally sensitive supervisory practices. It provided an opportunity to reflect on my own nuanced challenges as a doctoral student while

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supporting the creation of more inclusive and supportive environments for international PGRs in the UK. Engaging with this study not only refined my research and reflective skills but also deepened my commitment to fostering an equitable and empathetic research culture.

Conclusion and Future Work

This project underscores the crucial role of intercultural awareness in fostering effective and inclusive PhD supervision. By addressing communication barriers, mismatched expectations, and cultural differences, both students and supervisors can build stronger, more supportive relationships that enhance the overall research experience. While this study highlights key challenges and best practices, future work should focus on improving the current provision of intercultural awareness programmes, creating peer-support networks, and implementing workshops where international students and supervisors can openly discuss expectations and strategies for collaboration. Expanding this research within the University and across multiple institutions will further refine best practices and contribute to a more inclusive and globally aware academic environment.

Acknowledgements

Maryam Masood is a teaching focussed Assistant Professor at WMG, University of Warwick leading a postgraduate research methods module. Maryam is an ESD champion for WMG and is also a member of the EDI committee at WMG. In her teaching role, she works closely with Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). Maryam is a WIHEA Fellow. Her research interest is in sustainability, waste management, education for sustainable development and intercultural awareness in HE setting.

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Gabriella Crawford Koltai is a PhD research student specialising in culture and sustainable development. Her research explores the role of European Capitals of Culture in sustainable urban regeneration, with a comparative focus on case studies from the UK and Hungary. She is particularly interested in how participatory culture can contribute to urban planning to foster long-term sustainable developments.

Shi Ha is an enthusiastic and committed researcher with a PhD in Entrepreneurship from Brunel University London. Her work focuses on business growth, entrepreneurial behaviour and mindsets, underpinned by a strong record in academic writing and scholarly communication. She is proficient in a range of qualitative and quantitative data analysis methods and techniques, and has experience designing and delivering empirical studies.

Dr Asima Iqbal is working as Assistant Professor at WMG, University of Warwick, delivering an interdisciplinary skills and research methods module to over 1,000 students both at UG and PG level. She is a Senior Fellow of Higher Education Academy (SFHEA) and as an academic and a practitioner, she organises and carries out capacity building programmes/workshops for students and fellow colleagues. She has a longstanding experience in enabling students and early career researchers to develop study and transferable skills to support their academic and professional development. Her role encompasses scholarly research work and outreach activities underpinned by the value of collaboration, teamwork, support and networking within and across teams in and outside University of Warwick.

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Appendix

Table 1: Interview Themes and Guiding Questions for Supervisors.

Background Information:
What is your area of research?
How much experience do you have in terms of supervising students from different cultural backgrounds?
Intercultural Awareness
As you know, this project aims to enhance intercultural awareness among international students and their supervisors.
How would you define intercultural awareness in the context of your own supervision experience?
What is important to know about different cultural backgrounds when supervising international students?
Tell us about your strengths are as a supervisor?
How might enhanced intercultural awareness impact your communication with your supervisees?
Improvement and Opportunities
Please provide an example of a situation where you used your intercultural awareness to enhance your supervision of international PGRs
How has your intercultural awareness affected the student-supervisor relationship?
What are some common challenges that arise when interacting with international students from diverse cultural backgrounds?
What challenges do you think still exist in supervising international PGRs due to differences in culture?
Are you aware of any training programs at Warwick or other higher education institutions (HEIs) that focus on intercultural awareness?
How have your experiences with these training programs impacted your role as a supervisor?
Do you have any additional comments or suggestions related to enhancing the supervision of international PGRs at Warwick?

Table 2: Interview themes and guiding questions for International PhD students.

Background Information:
Can you tell me a bit about your research area and how you chose this field of study?
What is your overall experience as an international (minority) postgraduate researcher at Warwick?
Intercultural Awareness:
As you know, this project aims to enhance intercultural awareness among international students and their supervisors. From your experience, how do you define intercultural awareness?
In your opinion as an international student, what key aspects of different cultural backgrounds should supervisors and the university be aware of?

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Improvement and Opportunities:
Please provide an example of a situation where intercultural awareness proved beneficial to your PhD Please describe the situation and explain how intercultural awareness made a difference.
How do you think cultural backgrounds affect the frequency and ease of communication between postgraduate researchers (PGRs) and their supervisors? OR In some situations, differing cultural backgrounds may make communication difficult/less frequent between PGRs and their supervisors, are you aware of any such scenarios?
Based on your experience, what specific support do you think the university should provide for international PhD students?
Do you have any additional comments or suggestions related to enhancing the relationship between supervisors and international PGRs at Warwick?

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