

Cultural Diversity and University Policies Affecting Research Supervision: A Case Study in a Distance and Online Environment

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Abstract

This paper explores diversity management in university settings by focusing on key issues namely cultural awareness; agency and identity and their impact on university policies and supervisory practices. These issues are investigated against the legal and policy framework in a regional Australian university. This university is a leading provider of distance and online education. Focusing more specifically on the doctoral candidate – supervisor relationship, this paper presents examples of university policies and practices aimed at managing diversity within the supervisory relationship. The university has a significant proportion of distance or external students in its doctoral programs, especially in two faculties. Based on these practices and ideas from research in this area, recommendations for best practices for the management of cultural diversity within the supervisory relationship in the context of universities are presented.

Introduction

This paper investigates diversity management in university settings and discusses key issues including cultural awareness, agency and identity and their impact on university policies and supervisory practices. The nature and effect of these key issues are noted in the Australian contexts as it affects doctoral supervisors and external or on campus students from a range of countries. The discussion is followed by examples of how an Australian regional university with a significant proportion of international doctoral students and supervisors, has formulated practical guidelines to develop better research supervision policies and practices. These practices also apply to the current doctoral students studying in distance or external mode.

Diversity in a University Context

Definitions of diversity

Diversity is a broad term that refers to variety and can be applied to a range of topics; but here it is used to refer to differences in culture, age, gender, race, and sexual orientation based on Nankervis, Compton and Baird's (2002) definition. Jones, Pringle and Sheperd (2000) argue that

the American versions of managing diversity cannot be simply applied to organisations in other cultural contexts (see also Kirton & Greene, 2005). These authors note that in New Zealand diversity based on gender, race or cultural assumptions from other countries, could obscure issues in the New Zealand context. They state that diversity should be defined and discussed to focus attention on the local demographics, cultural and political differences that make the difference for specific organisations. Australia and New Zealand interpret diversity broadly, whereas in other Pacific Rim nations such as Japan and Hong Kong, there is a much narrower interpretation as there is a focus on gender or ethnicity (Patrickson & O'Brien, 2001).

In Australia, diversity within employee populations such as universities, includes the issues of age, gender, race, culture of origin, sexual orientation, physical and intellectual disability. Although diversity is an accepted state of affairs in universities, the issue is how they acknowledge the diversity and have policies or practices to harness this diversity (Erwee & Innes, 1998). Furthermore, diversity can be experienced by doctoral students in terms of their study mode such as external or distance, on campus or online study mode. In addition these external or online doctoral students come from many different countries with different academic traditions and exposure to teaching and learning modes. In 2012, the federal government is awarding funding to universities to increase their intake of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds to increase educational levels and workforce participation.

In addition to historical diversity in Australia, its workforce is becoming more diverse regarding gender, nationality, age, religious beliefs and physical ability due to immigration (Skene & Eveline, 2003). Displaced people and refugees from war ravaged Europe became the first new wave of immigrants since the adoption of the 'White Australia Policy' soon after Federation. The second wave, in the post war era was predominantly European peoples and the third wave, beginning in the 1960s to the present, began under the umbrella of what is now known as multiculturalism. Diversification increased with people from Turkey, India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and Cambodia settling in Australia. The 1989 National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia stated that individuals have the right to express their own culture and beliefs and have a reciprocal responsibility to accept the rights of others to express their views and values (Erwee, 2012).

In Australian universities, a significant proportion of staff and students can be from parents born overseas, immigrants or first-in-family doctoral candidates. Australian universities attract a significant proportion of international doctoral students by partnering with overseas universities to enable their staff to study in Australia (e.g. Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam) or via countries funding senior public servants or professionals to study overseas (e.g. Iran or Iraq). In the current case study, a significant proportion of doctoral students in the Faculties of

Business and Education study externally and are from a wide range of cultures. This results in diversity in the unique supervisor- doctoral candidate relationship that is investigated more closely later in this paper.

Diversity and legislation

Due to Australia's ratification of a range of International Labour Organisation treaties, the Federal and State governments of Australia have produced Equal Employment Opportunity in public employment acts, Affirmative Action acts, Anti-discrimination laws and amendments, Age Discrimination and Disability Services Acts covering a variety of areas in an attempt to influence a change to the access, status, power and rewards of people in the workplace (Erwee, 2003, 2012). Queensland's Anti-discrimination legislation is one of the most comprehensive in Australia to promote equality of opportunity; protection from unfair discrimination; prohibition of sexual harassment and other objectionable conduct; and provides a system of redress of former discrimination. Both Federal and State acts identify areas where the Acts can operate. The areas of coverage in Queensland are comprehensive including work and work related areas, education, provision of goods and services, superannuation and insurance. Therefore, these anti-discrimination laws are specifically applicable also to the university context and therefore apply to both academic supervisors as well as their on campus or distance or online doctoral students.

The Australian legislation defines four target groups that are recognised as being traditionally disadvantaged. The target groups are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; people from Non English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB); people with disabilities; and women. These target groups require private and public sector organisations to develop EEO management plans outlining strategies to eliminate discrimination against these groups in the workplace (Erwee 2003, 2012; Steger & Erwee, 2001). Despite Australia's history of effective legislation, certain social groups are sometimes indirectly or overtly treated unequally leading to proportional under-representation in many workplaces. Past practices, prejudices, and even tradition can lead to this disparity. However, change has been slow and many groups in the workplace or society are still considered to be disadvantaged in one form or another. Moreover, arguments abound regarding what equity entails, how it can be achieved and who should benefit from any processes used to achieve it, are still continuing. In the Australian university context, the target groups that are still under-represented are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from Non English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB); people with disabilities whereas women are well represented as students and staff. Many other universities have lower proportions of doctoral students as well as students studying distance or online in these categories than the university in the case study.

Changes in workplace policies

The legal framework in Australia places only limited obligations on organisations to manage cultural diversity (Sayed & Kramar, 2009). As a consequence, while a range of organisational responses have proliferated although an integrated approach towards managing culturally diverse workers is absent. These authors argue that, unless cultural diversity is tackled at multiple levels and in a more integrated way, any attempt to either understand or manage such diversity may prove unrealistic. Diversity management involves a fundamental change in attitude and behaviour that cannot be prescribed by law (Nkomo & Cox, 1996). Valuing diversity is an important part of managing diversity (Nkomo & Cox, 1996; Thomas, 1996).

In this section, a few Australian studies reflecting workplace research are noted to illustrate aspects of diversity. Organisations can be measured regarding their disposition towards diversity (Cox 1993; Erwee & Innes 1998; Paelmke & Erwee, 2008; Steger & Erwee 2001) and can be exhibiting monolithic, plural and eventually multicultural characteristics. The objective of managing diversity is seen as the creation of an organisation in which members of all social backgrounds can contribute and achieve their full potential and *multicultural* refers to those companies that achieve the objective of managing diversity (Strydom & Erwee, 1998; Thomas, 1996). Equal proportions of managers in Australian public sector organisations, which included universities, described such institutions as monocultural, non-discriminatory or multicultural. In contrast, managers in private sector companies are more likely to describe their company as monocultural. The organisations' responses on a subscale 'Openness to change' suggested that diversity management is part of a larger organisational context (Erwee & Innes, 1998). The extent of organisational change is also differentially associated with the phase or stage of diversity. Australian organisations in the multicultural phase and non-discriminatory stages of evolution are more open to change and they value diversity (Erwee & Innes, 1998). Managers believe that their personal attitudes are supportive of managing and valuing diversity. When it comes to practices as expressed in the companies' procedures and policies, they comply mainly with legal imperatives but do not match the perception of respondents that individual managers are more enlightened than the company policies and practices. This suggests that organisational values and norms and management practices are slower to change within companies despite legislation inducing compliance (Erwee & Innes, 1998; Steger & Erwee, 2001).

During the 2000s, Australian university policies have incorporated federal and state legislation, and encourage research, policies and practices on how to manage this diversity. Based on the assumption that current workplaces or access to services are inequitable with many individuals and groups disadvantaged through current processes, the call for equitable work

practices and societal policies in Australia has been influenced by a number of factors (Nankervis, Compton, & Baird, 2002; Strachan, Burgess, & Sullivan, 2004). These factors include social change, education, workplace re-structuring, anti-discrimination and equal employment opportunity and affirmative action legislation. For example, Australian universities provide different experiences for different individuals in terms of access, participation, opportunities and outcomes for immigrants or indigenous peoples. Understanding these differences has influenced social justice policies, improved gender representation, establishment of Indigenous or multicultural centres and disability services in universities. Examples of how these policies and practices are implemented in a regional university are discussed next.

Policy Framework in a Regional University – Case Study in a Distance and Online Environment

Against the backdrop of the above legislation and societal changes, Table 1 contains examples of how an Australian regional university responds to these changes by developing a framework of policies and practices to enhance the work and educational experiences of diverse staff and students. These examples have also been selected to highlight a few diversity management policies and practices that could affect the doctoral student- supervisory relationship. The university is a member of a Regional University Network and reflects the typical approaches to diversity management in Australian university contexts. The university was one of the first Australian universities to develop extensive international partnership networks to enable international students to by distance and online study modes. This university is a leading provider of distance and online education and has a significant proportion of distance or external students in its doctoral programs, especially in two faculties.

Queensland Legislation	University policies	Impact: supervisors or doctoral students
Anti- discrimination Amendments in 2001 and 2005; Disability Services Act 2006 Queensland multicultural policies	Social Justice committee as part of corporate governance: SJC members are from the Staff Equity-, Student Equity-, Disability Advisory-, Multicultural and Transnational Advisory -, and SWEE (Status of Women in Employment and Education) committees Multicultural and Transnational Staff committee; Student societies e.g. Postgraduate students ; Papua New Gunya student	Faculty of Education (FoE); Indigenous woman completed her PhD with a SWEE (Status of Women in Employment and Education) scholarship and was elected as the FoE’s Alumnus of the Year 2011; Supervisors born in diverse countries are members of the Multicultural Staff committee; doctoral students participated in Harmony Day; Outstanding International Alumnus, 2011 was a doctoral student from Libya; Postgraduate doctoral students serve on Graduate Research Committee and USQ (University of Southern Queensland)

	association.	Research committee; academic members are supervisors Postgraduate Equity scholarships for international on campus & female students
Equal Opportunity in Public Employment Act 1992; Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999	Status of Women in Employment and Education (SWEE) committee reports to the Social Justice Committee and incorporates the Women's Network Inc. Human Resources reports on women's advancement in the university to the Equal Opportunity in the Workplace Agency	SWEE has a PhD student representative; some members are supervisors; SWEE obtained scholarship funds to enable women staff members to complete their doctorates; SWEE recognises contributions by university to promoting women's advancement via annual Equal Opportunity in Workplaces Award ; HR instituted Women's Executive Leadership and Future Leaders program for women – some supervisors participated 'Preparing from promotion' workshops for women academics – supervisors participate
Age Discrimination Act 2004	Doctoral selection procedures	Mature age students with coursework Masters degrees can access entry to doctoral studies via 'special entry' provisions

Table 1: *Regional university (distance and online): examples of a few university policies or practices to manage diversity which may impact on supervisory relationships*

In 2012, up to 45 per cent of research students in this regional university are from international or non-English speaking background (NESB) and about 23 per cent of all the academic staff are from a NESB or international background. Many academic staff born overseas or from a non-English speaking background (NESB) join the Multicultural Staff Network or participate in its functions for staff and students. The network developed the first multicultural policy for a university setting and the university subsequently was awarded the Queensland Multicultural Service Award 2000. Their projects aim to enhance the cultural diversity at the university through promotion of understanding and respect for different cultures, to actively assist in and monitor the implementation of equal opportunity and anti-discrimination laws, regulations and policies, to ensure that staff members of non-English speaking background are represented in decision making processes and to liaise with the international students' organisations and provide support for the international students and students of non-English speaking background. These policies and practices apply to both on campus as well as distance or online students.

In addition to the more specific links in Table 1 between specific legislation, university policies, practices and research are derived from the philosophy of non-discrimination and practice of diversity management that affect local and international doctoral students and their supervisors from different cultures. For example, faculties organise research evenings to showcase doctoral students' research, supervisors join research communities of practice or create

small research teams to formulate grant applications. These interventions provide enhanced learning opportunities for staff and students from different cultures.

Cultural Awareness, Agency and Identity - Results of Studies in this in Distance and Online University

As discussed previously, diversity is typical in Australian universities. Australian universities attract a large percentage of international doctoral candidates and many of these candidates relocate to Australia for the duration of their candidature and have to face the challenges of settling temporarily in a foreign country and working closely with a supervisor from a different cultural background (Malan, Erwee, van Rensburg, & Danaher, 2012).

Although many factors impacting on the supervisor- doctoral candidate relationship have been investigated, the influence of the cultural diversity of both doctoral candidates and their supervisors on this relationship has received less attention. A study in a regional university with a significant proportion of international doctoral students (external, online as well as on campus), investigated the influence of cultural dimensions on the doctoral candidate-supervisor relationship. Qualitative data (Malan et al. 2012) obtained through interviews with six cases from various cultural clusters (doctoral students from South Africa, Namibia, Pakistan, Indonesia, China and Libya; Ashkanasy, 2004) were analysed and compared based on four dimensions of national culture values (Hofstede, 2001). This exploratory study did not find a strong influence of cultural diversity on the doctoral candidate-supervisor relationship. Although doctoral candidates from various cultural clusters have different cultural perspectives about dimensions of culture (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), they share similar views about the *university culture*. Cultural diversity seems to impact specifically on the social environment of doctoral candidates, but there is no clear impact on the supervisory relationship due to the acculturation of postgraduate students into the *university culture throughout their previous studies in either local or overseas universities*. The findings of the present study suggest that if cultural diversity affects the social environment of individuals, it may also “have a secondary effect on doctoral candidates’ progress and successful completion, thereby highlighting the potential significance of cultural misunderstandings in the supervisory relationship” (Malan et al. 2012, pp. 11-2).

An analysis of selected current Australian, South African and Venezuelan university academics’ recollections of their doctoral journeys and in particular their interactions with their supervisors in education, engineering and humanities were investigated (van Rensburg, Danaher, Malan, Erwee & Anteliz, 2012). The academics’ responses about their experiences of agency

and identity through their relationships with their supervisors, demonstrate the “contextualised character of agency, as well as the multiple forms taken by identities within and across disciplinary and national boundaries” (van Rensburg et al. 2012, p 43). During their doctoral studies these academics from diverse countries demonstrated their agency by understanding how to analyse the effectiveness of their relationship with their supervisors, how to sensibly manage their relationships with supervisors over time and to “place their doctoral studies in a broader context of interactions and interpersonal relationships, while retaining a shrewd understanding of how those interactions and relationships impacted, whether positively or negatively, on those studies” (van Rensburg et al. 2012, p 55). However, one finding alluded to very little evidence of collective agency implying that groups of doctoral students in previous times did not support each other to affect positive changes to supervisory practices, although the on campus doctoral students may have formed supportive personal relationships. Other conclusions were that the “challenges in exhibiting agency derived largely from this political imbalance that traversed the three countries and the three disciplines represented by those participants” and “identity emerges as considerably varied, influenced as much by different personalities and situations as by disciplinary and national backgrounds” (van Rensburg et al. 2012, p 55). The results of these studies support the need to identify and develop best practices for diversity management in the university setting.

Institutional concern about attrition rates of doctoral students raises the question whether these students withdraw from a program due to perceptions of a lack of connectedness to supervisors, peers or other aspects. Doctoral students enrolled externally at this university represent a significant student load and associated commitment of staff for supervision. Although there were almost 100 students enrolled in doctoral programs (Doctor of Education - EdD and PhD) within the Faculty of Education in 2009, fewer than 10 were full-time on-campus (Erwee, Albion & van der Laan 2011). The majority of doctoral students in education are studying while working in locations as diverse as Australia, Brunei, Canada, Dubai, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and Thailand. In the Faculty of Business in 2009 there were 59 mostly full-time on-campus PhDs, but 25 external DBA (Doctor of Business Administration) students residing in Australia, Canada, Africa, Germany or Switzerland and the USA. Many studies have explored the way in which effective communication systems can facilitate contact between external or online students and the university systems, but very few studies have explored the actual need to be connected to peers and a wider university community.

The *Doctoral Student Connectedness Scale* was incorporated into a study of communication challenges faced by forty one external doctoral students in two faculties in this university (Erwee, Albion & van der Laan 2011). A three factor structure of connectedness needs

emerged namely a student-to-student connectedness, a student-to-faculty connectedness and a student- to-supervisor connectedness. Although the scale has a high reliability, the factor structure in this Australian study is more complex than in the American study from which the scale derived. The results indicate that there may be less than desirable levels of connectedness between students, their supervisors and peers. Interventions may be developed to offer external doctoral students a more complete learning experience through enhancing the teaching and supervision strategies of supervisors.

Best Practices to Manage Cultural Diversity in the Supervisory Relationship in this Distance and Online University

Diversity in the supervisory relationship demands the implementation of best practices to ensure the desirable outcome. Malan et al. (2012) advise that supervisory practices and interventions should be instituted to ensure that cultural misunderstandings between doctoral candidates and their supervisors are avoided. In this regard, the regional university encourages families of on campus international candidates to attend community research evenings when research posters are presented and staff and students socialises. Other successful interventions that this university implemented is the participation in celebration of multiculturalism such as Harmony Day or in multicultural food festivals to create among students and staff a better understanding of the multicultural Australian values or expectations about university research cultures. Although this regional university has professional development courses for staff about ‘Cross-cultural issues in tertiary education’, ‘Cultural awareness: managing your diverse classroom’, ‘Courageous conversations about race’ and ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-cultural awareness’, these workshops have not yet been adapted for the supervisory relationship.

Researchers argue that the doctoral student–supervisor relationship can provide a robust framework for the exercise of agency and the building of identity for students and supervisors alike (van Rensburg et al. 2012). These authors state that such a framework provides clear expectations for each person’s role in the relationship, and presents clear guidelines and milestones for the doctoral student’s journey. The framework advocates holding regular supervisory meetings, for example via Skype for distance or online students, providing prompt and detailed feedback to the doctoral student, and organising the reliable availability of necessary resources. In addition, many faculties or supervisors enable students to access networks of other researchers by organising research days or publication workshops. In addition,

doctoral students in other countries such as Germany or South Africa can defend their proposals via teleconferencing.

The faculties and research centres actively encourage building research networks consisting of cross-cultural teams for grant applications. Supervisors and doctoral students from different cultures have achieved success in obtaining national funds for Collaborative Research Network projects and local Australian Centre for Sustainable Business Development projects. Despite these positive actions there is still room for improvement as Erwee, Albion and van der Laan (2011) found that cohorts of external doctoral students in this regional university experienced less than desirable levels of connectedness between each other and their faculty supervisors. They concluded that various initiatives could be launched to create a sense of connectedness, improving program completions and reducing attrition.

The regional university instituted a series of three mandatory workshops that supervisors have to attend in order to register as doctoral supervisors. Getting supervisors, especially 'experienced' supervisors, to refresh their training is proving to be more difficult. Each of the presenters of the workshops has their own approaches to pedagogy, supervisory styles and workshop design. This stimulates interest among supervisors to experience new perspectives. The next stage in the development of these processes is to conduct a more systematic evaluation, and also to research over time the impact that is sustained in supervisory practices by those who have experienced these workshops. During workshops supervisors are made aware of resources on the USQ research website such as the staff training section that again includes access to a national resource site for supervisors (FIRST), the supervisory workshop dates, publication information, ethics guidelines and statistical support for dissertation students. A Community of Practice (CoP) was established in 2010 and its meeting topics deal with issues such as approaches to examination of doctoral dissertations, communicating with external doctoral students or insights about supervisory styles. There is greater awareness and networking among supervisors beyond their discipline and faculty confines. The CoP has presented two workshops on communication with doctoral students at a distance.

Erwee et al. (2011) note that experienced supervisors were sensitive to issues and circumstances that may affect communication, especially with international doctoral students studying at a distance or online. Such doctoral students have different personal and employment circumstances that affect availability of time and technology that may be needed for communication. These supervisors, especially those in two faculties with higher proportions of international doctoral students studying externally, displayed unique insights about their underlying value systems in approaching challenging students and situations. Many supervisors tend to start with a functional approach to supervision in the beginning of the dissertation process

and adapt their supervisory style to building professional relationships by the end of the dissertation process. In this sense the supervisors are adhering to an appropriate typology of supervision, but are also exploring other options by leading students from dependence to independence or interdependence (van Rensburg & Danaher, 2009). More training and workshops can be designed to assist supervisors to develop flexible approaches to supervision and mentoring.

Professional development for supervisors should include more sessions about relevant technologies. The university has decided to phase out Wimba as a communication vehicle for courses (also used for external doctoral students) and to replace it with Blackboard collaborative. Supervisors also need more guidance on using Skype to communicate with external or online doctoral students. Learning by doing with opportunity to practise is important and should be backed up with demonstrations that non-experts can follow. Trying new technology locally with colleagues is a useful step and access to a 'sand pit' facility in which to try new technologies would be helpful (Albion, 2006). Training could include participation by students who have used to the technology and other students could be invited to see how it works.

Best practices can only be successful if all stakeholders are included and in this case, they are the university, staff/supervisors and students. Eisenclas and Trevaskes (2003) highlight the need for students to understand and appreciate cultural expression and differences and to develop intercultural competence. In this regard, the authors promote a course in Intercultural Communication that they established at a university in Australia. The aim of this course is to teach intercultural communication in Australian universities. Although this course is not targeting doctoral students specifically, the idea of formally engaging students in intercultural communication may be a best practice to investigate further.

Conclusions

Australian universities have adapted to legal and societal changes in laws, policies and practices to implement diversity management in the university system. Although the legislative system is critical in setting the expectations and requirements regarding the management of diversity, success can only be achieved through fundamental changes in attitudes and behaviours of all parties. For the supervisory relationship, it is essential that cultural diversity is embraced and valued to ensure healthy and supportive working relationships. To facilitate such relationships, specific policies and practices need to be developed and executed. Examples of such policies

and practices as implemented by a regional university in communicating with external or online doctoral students, have been presented.

The specific regional university has taken a lead among universities in developing a multicultural policy. A series of three mandatory workshops for supervisors to enhance supervisory skills of current and potential supervisors and a Community of Practice to enhance networking among supervisors have been established. However, many of the professional development workshops for staff relating to cultural awareness and diversity management still need to be integrated into the current training for supervisors and doctoral students. The Community of Practice for supervisors could continue to be a vehicle for supervisors to share their strategies for more effective cross-cultural communication and awareness of the diversity of international online or external doctoral students' preferences. Training for supervisors and doctoral students could further explore the preferences that both supervisors and doctoral students have for the use of different learning or communication technologies. To develop intercultural competence, students could be trained in intercultural communication to promote a better understanding between cultures in the supervisory relationship. Furthermore, supervisors can expand their skills in the management of research teams with members from diverse backgrounds as well as enhance more flexible approaches to supervision. Supervisors and doctoral students need to appreciate their joint aim to build an academic culture and research networks. Lastly, appropriate social interaction during research evenings and presentations can build a sense of connectedness and draw in the doctoral students' family networks. With growing globalisation it is clear that cross-cultural interaction in universities but also all other sectors, is here to stay and it is imperative that all organisations develop strategies and good practices for managing cultural diversity successfully.

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