'SETTLING IN': POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDENT EXPERIENCES; AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

International student cohorts continue to be increasingly vital to higher education institutions in Australia; currently, they account for 20 per cent of enrolments. However, there is concern that over the past few years, enrolment numbers have been dropping. Reasons for this decrease may vary from: tuition fee increases, new overseas universities adding to competition, the global financial crisis, student preferences toward US and UK universities, or perceived lack of Australian scholarship support for international students. At a time when uncertainty in financial markets loom, it is crucial that recruitment, retention, and overall experience, of international student's remain a focus in a university's strategic intent

Studies on international students highlight that *adjustment* is crucial to a student's positive educational experience abroad. Cross-cultural differences and English language barriers are main factors in adjustment—influencing well-being and academic achievement. Although literature on international students is extensive, studies of international postgraduate research students is limited. Problems experienced by this cohort are heightened due to the somewhat isolated nature of research programs. The focus of this paper is on international postgraduate research students and factors that contribute to how they adjust or 'settle in', to their research student candidature.

The research involved in-depth interviews and focus groups with a cohort of postgraduate research students in a Group of Eight, research-intensive university in Sydney, Australia. The findings revealed that students had problems with: selection of supervisors, work opportunities within the faculty, knowing what is expected of them and lack of sense of belonging as means of connecting with a broader community of peers and academics. As faculties become aware of international research student challenges, even prior to enrolment, they can provide targeted support in order to contribute to and optimize the educational experience abroad.

Introduction

The number of international students in Australia has increased greatly since the turn of the century, with education services becoming the largest service export in the country (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2011). However, more recent figures show a change in pattern with numbers of international students decreasing -8.9% in 2010-2011; (41,964 students) (Australian Education International, 2012). Reasons for such change include more restrictive migration policies, the increase in value of the Australian dollar, the growth of overseas competitors, and a change in perception about Australian education (ABS, 2011). As universities vie for the best and brightest students, it is critical that the quality of education offered rests not only on its academic merit, but also in the overall student experience. Improving the quality of the international student experience can be a strategic repositioning for universities attempting to target the falling numbers of such a valuable cohort.

This paper focuses on international students enrolled in postgraduate research programs and draws from two themes in the literature. The first theme relates to international students' process of adjustment to a new environment as being influential to their academic experience. The second major theme to emerge concerns how the unique factors of a postgraduate research program can challenge a student and whether or not they have a successful and on-time completion of their degree.

This paper unpacks the experience of international postgraduate research students currently enrolled in a Group of Eight, research-intensive university in Sydney, Australia. Findings from the research revealed unique challenges that occurred in their postgraduate candidature: the selection of appropriate supervisors, being aware of what is expected of them as a research student, involvement with work opportunities, and belonging to the academic community. Authors suggest that targeting some of these problems that arise in a postgraduate research program, faculties can better support international students in overcoming the less concrete adjustment difficulties, and contribute to providing a more positive academic experience abroad.

IPR Experience

Moving to a new environment is one of the most traumatic events in life, involving often difficult periods of adjustment (Berry 1992). Adjustment is understood as the "fit" to the new environment (Andrade, 2006, p. 134), or time of 'settling in' as defined by the authors. It involves learning and adapting to a new set of rules (Kiley n.p.): social, cultural, and academic in this context. There are extensive studies on the adjustment of international students, and despite disagreements over the processes involved (Coles & Swami, 2012; Brown & Holloway 2007; Russel, Rosenthal & Thomson, 2010), there is consensus over two main influential factors: cross-cultural differences and language difficulties. For those international students embarking on postgraduate research programs, those adjustment factors can add challenges to the program and potentially complicate students' academic experience. Characteristics of postgraduate research programs important to successful candidatures and retention have been discussed within the graduate research literature (Pearson 1999; Wisker, Robinson & Shacham, 2007; Lovitts, 2001), however, studies that bring together such specificities of research programs with adjustment difficulties of international students is limited (see Kiley n.p.; Lewthwaite, 1998) . In the following paragraphs we aim at bringing the two discussions together - international students' adjustment and postgraduate research characteristics - to enhance our understanding of the distinct IPR students' experience.

Cross-cultural adjustment

Cultural patterns significantly influence learning style and, consequently, international students' adjustment to new academic pressures (Fox 1994). Some authors have referred to Hofstede's (1991) four cultural dimensions when studying international students (Pearson & Beasley, 1996; Kiley, n.p.): power distance, individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/femininity. Kiley (n.p) noted that the "power distance", meaning behavioral influence by differences in power, is highly influential to the relationship of mostly South East Asia [SEA] students with their Australian supervisors, as students tend to respect and acquiesce unquestioningly to their supervisors' greater authority. Also, the "highly collective" cultural dimension of most Asian students, meaning the tendency to function in tightly bound groups and to be concerned with the wellbeing of all, is discussed as justifying a more passive attitude in their learning process than that shown by their Australian counterparts, of greater individuality (Pearson & Beasley, 1996, p. 81). It has been pointed out that international students at times suffer from misconceptions in their learning style (Chalmers & Volet, 2006; Karuppan & Barari, 2011), which are rather a reflection of deeper cultural dimensions (Andrade, 2006). The lack of acknowledgement to cross-cultural differences can compromise efficient adjustment to the new environment affecting students' academic achievements (Westwood & Barker, 1990).

Language barrier

Besides cross-cultural differences, language proficiency significantly adds challenge to settling in or adjusting, given that communication is an essential factor in the adjustment to new cultures (Ruben & Kealey, 1979). Although English proficiency tests are used in the process of acceptance of international students', they do not ensure adjustment of those students to the new environment. Additionally, authors indicate that students' self-perception of their English skills does not necessarily match their formal proficiency (Xu, 1991; Lewthwaite, 1998), being students' self-confidence the factor influential to students' interaction with local social groups (Ruben & Kealey, 1979). However,

it is the very interaction with locals that benefit the development of international students' confidence with language skills, and adjustment to the new environment (Westwood & Barker 1990; Al-Sharideh & Goe 1998; Coles and Swami 2012). Therefore, language barriers affect and are affected by levels of integration and adjustment to the new environment.

Postgraduate research students

This paper extends and adds to previous research about experiences of international students (IPR) enrolled in postgraduate research programs (Pearson and Brew, 2002; Hair, 2006; Wisker et al. 2007). There has been extensive debate on the role of supervision; supervisors as coaches and mentors to students' immersion in the intellectual research journey (Nulty, Kiley et al., 2009; Pearson & Brew, 2002). It has also been suggested that engagement with the academic community is a significant source of stimuli and development for students (Alston, et al., 2005; Wisker et al. 2007). More recently though, scholars have found that the postgraduate research experience is also being influenced by students' growing expectations to engage in academic work (Austin, 2002); this has been flagged as a broader change to higher degree research education in terms of expectations (Johnston & Murray, 2004; Pearson, 1999; Steinmetz, 2009), associated new demands from supporting institutions, and from students themselves seeking prospects for future career (Enders, 2002).

Such unique characteristics of a postgraduate research program involving supervision, community and academic career, can take on a heightened challenge to the international cohort providing the previous discussion on cross-cultural and language barriers. This research supports and expands discussions from the literature on international and postgraduate student experience. Results further indicate general strategic areas to be targeted for the improvement of those IPR students' academic experience.

This research

This paper reflects the results of a project developed to understand and improve the experience of a postgraduate research student cohort. The research was approved by the Human Ethics Research Panel in the faculty (approval number 105100). Standard qualitative protocol was followed throughout the entire research process. A notice and explanatory email was sent to the faculty's postgraduate email list (all local and international students). The initial email was followed up with individual recruitment inquiries; this produced a schedule of interviews between February and September of 2010. Initially, the research design proposed interviews only, however, due to time and budget constraint at a later stage students were offered the option of focus groups. Methodologically, the focus groups were very productive and yielded rich data; they allowed opportunity for sharing and effectively exploring students' experience.

Participants

Initially, the project involved a total of 39 participants (local and international), drawing from a total of 109 postgraduate research students in the faculty. Amongst the participants, 19 were international students of non-English speaking background and of a mixed demography. Of those, 10 were interviewed and the other 9 took part in mixed focus groups. After interview and focus group transcriptions and thematic analysis, it was evident that the responses from the international participants revealed a different postgraduate research experience worth specific attention. It was at this time when the authors elected to explore the data collected from international postgraduate graduate students instead of the cohort as a whole. This finding suggests that there is indeed scope for future research with postgraduate research student cohorts (local, international, full-time, and part-time). Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, only the responses from the 19 international student participants were considered.

Questions

In guiding the in-depth interviews and focus groups, an initial literature review on postgraduate research experience was undertaken from which five major themes were extracted concerning student

experiences: *expectations and motivation* to enroll in a postgraduate program, access to and quality of *infrastructure and resources*, being part of students and academic *community*, *supervisors and supervision*, and overall *satisfaction* with the program. Within each theme, there were a number of broad questions; most of the time those were answered in a nonlinear manner. The interviews and focus groups were recorded and consecutively coded and analyzed using NVivo 9.

IPR students

From the five broad themes explored in the in-depth interviews and focus groups, four other themes emerged as 'hot topics' contributing to the overall experience. IPR students strongly debated the selection of appropriate supervisors; dealing with what is expected from them in the new research culture; with expected work opportunities; and engaging with the peer and academic community.

Selection of supervisors

The significant role of supervisors and good supervision has been extensively debated in the literature (Hair, 2006; Wisker et al., 2007); consequently the selection of appropriate supervisors can be suggested as an important step to students' candidature. Two students describe:

> I know it is our responsibility to find appropriate supervisor but sometimes we get confused with the things we find online. Because I am in my country, I cannot find what this person is doing. I can only see the picture and the profile. ... So it is kind of tricky.

> I got information from the website. His website is very good, and he did a lot of projects and papers, so I saw that he is a good academic. But after I arrived in Sydney he didn't have a correct attitude and I wasn't happy.

Often times, preliminary research to determine supervision arrangements are done via desktop research; IPR criteria for selection are mainly based on academics' expertise in accordance with their research topic, as well as the number of publications, as shown on academics' profile online. However, an important aspect of supervision is the level of rapport between supervisor and student (Lewthwaite 1998). Building rapport was seen to be a vital aspect of the student-supervisor relationship, and although some were happy with their current supervisory team, there were others who did not have such positive experiences. One stated:

> I have to change [co-supervisor] on the first year. That is not a good thing. …It is not good for me, it is not good for him, it is not good for any sort of relationship that will initially build up on that.

The situations some international students have to deal with regarding appropriate supervision and co-supervisor can critically add to their already difficult process of settling in, which involves the intention of developing good relationship in the new academic environment, and more importantly with the supervisory team. There is a need to address the gap that may sometimes exist between the expectations that stem from information provided online and the reality students meet as they arrive.

Expectations with learning culture

IPR students at the faculty stressed their experiences in terms of learning approaches. Unawareness of what was expected of them was mentioned as a source of confusion at the start of their candidature. Two students respond to this issue:

> The education culture is totally different. Here, the teacher leaves you to do everything yourself but in my country the teacher will tell you what you are going to do. […] So I had no idea; I was lost and didn't know what to do.

> We become a bit left out [...], confused because we don't know what to expect.

The issue discussed above can relate to what has been discussed in the literature as cultural difference in "power relation"; or where behavior is influenced by greater/lesser compliance with those of higher authority. In this stance, the unexposed requirement of independent learning was experienced by some students as source of confusion expected specific direction from their supervisors. Once aware,

students adapted to the new demands and recognized the value of the new learning style they had to assume; nonetheless, the possibility of engaging with more familiar learning process is referred to as source of contentment. They said:

> In my undergraduate it was more teaching driven; they teach you things and you absorb the knowledge. ... It is quite different from the research. I really feel great for the respect for students and their thinking. But sometimes I hope someone would guide me through some things [laughs]

> I came from this background of being spoon fed so I'm happy if something like that happens to me here, like 'show me this in two weeks time'. I'm happy with that; then I can produce.

Also reflecting differences in cultural dimensions, students commented on their difficulty with the new demands for critical writing and thinking. Since learning and writing style are reflections of deeper cultural patterns (Fox, 1994), it is therefore a much more difficult pattern to break in the adaptation to the new requirements. Some students related to that and we have highlighted one of the more poignant quotes below:

> It is difficult. For example my supervisor, the first time I wrote and sent my writing to him he said 'the problem is you're not being critical; you don't have that kind of critical thinking'. So it is the same, either writing or discussing, I don't have that kind of thinking. [...] But my supervisor always said, from the first meeting, 'I have no doubt that your writing will be good'. He always said 'I have no doubt'. ... now I see that my supervisors just wanted to encourage me, because it was really crap [laughs]. He gave me the time, never pushed me like 'the writing is not good'. So I made the progress step-by-step and finally I am getting it.

In the postgraduate research context, due to its very solitary nature, it is important for supervisors to more explicitly deal with cross-cultural differences and, as expressed above, rightly encouraging students continued advancement. The supervisory role becomes also crucial due to the way that some students culturally relate to differences in hierarchical position:

> In my country we consider the teacher as authority, or having more power. For example, […] I would never call my teacher by the name, we would always say 'doctor' or 'professor'. It is part of the procedure, prestige, or protocol. Here no, you can call them by their name.

and another student:

> My supervisor in China, for example, they are a kind of father, so you never go against them.

The use of titles (Mr/Ms/Mrs, Dr, or Professor) to relate to supervisors might appear as a detail in the student-supervisor relationship. It rather reflects a much deeper cultural difference, which affects the way some international students approach discussion and contest arguments with their superiors, which in turn is a crucial stance to critical research process.

Overall, the experience narrated by the interviewed students support discussions from the literature on how cultural dimensions penetrate through different aspects of the learning experience. More commonly, the narrated experiences from interviewed students more evidently relate to differences on the cultural dimension of "power relation" (Hofstede, 1991), reflecting in different expectations in learning styles, with students waiting for directions from their superiors; less critical approach; and more deferential and compliant supervisory relationship. Students highlight the difficulty in breaking those lifelong structures and adapt to the new cultural stances, which in the postgraduate context become key to developing a better relationship with their supervisors and assuming ownership of their research projects.

Expectations of work opportunities

As pointed out in the literature review, changes occurring in student expectations to research degrees suggest that far from the traditionally isolated immersion in academic research activity alone, students now enroll in postgraduate research programs in the pursuit of academic career goals (Austin, 2002;

Enders, 2002). Indeed, the IPR students interviewed showed expectations of engaging in academic work, which was leveled with different motivations in enrolling in the program. For instance, while some students enrolled in the postgraduate research program "to try something new", or because others "didn't want to have much stagnancy in my life", a greater number of IPR students enrolled in the program for the pursuit of an academic career:

> When I got this position in my university back home, they require you, under the ... Academic Staff Training Scheme, to get a PhD in order to be a lecturer.

Another student comments:

> It's for career development. I know that if you want to teach in uni you really need to get a PhD.

For those with academic career goals, engagement with work in the faculty as tutors, guest lecturers or research assistants is an important component to their research program. There are also those students who didn't have the expectation of working in academic roles. Nevertheless, the involvement with those activities has shown to be inspiring and motivational to student's research while changing their perspectives to future career:

> … I was giving a couple of lectures about my topic. … Especially when you see that people are interested in what you're writing, and they want to know more. It makes you do more work.

And:

> I love the interaction with my students. At the end of the day I realize I am happier producing architects than projects. […] What I have now with teaching I am really happy with.

Therefore, to engage in academic work within the university environment is an important component of IPR students' educational experience. However, language limitation is discussed as a road block to achieve their expectations of working in academic roles:

> There are opportunities to work in the faculty. But I didn't think I could do it. [...] First there is the difficulty in speaking. Also experience. But I would like to work.

> I want to do it [work in the faculty]. Until I feel my English is good enough I'll ask my supervisor. I want to do some tutoring, in studio, maybe next semester.

However, it has been highlighted in the literature that often English limitations can be associated with self-confidence rather than levels of proficiency (Xu, 1991; Lewthwaite, 1998). In this instance, it could be suggested that the engagement with work would also function as opportunity for students to unlock language blockages. Furthermore, other students wanting to engage in academic work felt that the opportunity was not feasible. While a proactive attitude might be expected from them, some students experienced conflicts in expressing their interest, having more regard to possible opportunities made available by their supervisors:

> If someone offers, I would like to [work in the faculty]. [...] Both my supervisors have opportunity but they never offered me, which is a bit disappointing. Maybe I should express my interest. Maybe...

Differently, another student experienced that work opportunity was offered by the supervisor through a process of gaining supervisors' confidence on student's competence, as chances were provided for the student to demonstrate it:

> My supervisor also gave some opportunities for me to develop, like go to conferences and meet new people. And then I became a tutor and finally I could become lecturer here as well. He gave me some opportunities after he could see my capability.

Such symbiotic exchange, with students showing their capacities to do work as circumstances are also provided, is an importance process in advancing students' academic goals and avoiding frustration with unmet expectations. Therefore, it is initially important for supervisors and academic staff to be aware of students' expectations of work opportunities, maintaining an open communication and offering different opportunities as appropriate.

Belonging to the student and academic community

The literature on postgraduate research education supports the importance of postgraduate research students engagement with the academic community, not only for building network for their future career (Austin, 2002), but also for a quality candidature (Wisker, Robinson, et al., 2007) and for the development of a sense of belonging to the academic environment (Steinmetz, 2009). This has been also pointed out as an important factor for the international cohort in the process of settling in (Westwood and Barker, 1990; Berry, 1992). The IPG students interviewed expressed the importance it represents for them to connect with both students and faculty members. Students responded:

> ... it enriches the experience. So I am not only focused on my research but I can also develop other aspects which might be useful for my future career, like building my network.

> I would be happy to recognise more people in the faculty. It would help academically as well as personally; it would make me happier.

Therefore, building a network is perceived as a valuable mechanism for career development and to wellbeing more generally. Some international students have commented on benefits that stemmed from opportunities provided by the faculty to engage with academic staff. For instance, since 2010 the faculty has re-established a number of research clusters; groups formed around a shared research interest open to all academic staff and research students. Some students expressed their experiences with the research clusters:

> I got into teaching because of the research clusters. I didn't even know the academic, but he was there for my review. ... And then he just asked me to teach and that's why I've been teaching for the past 5yrs.

And another found opportunities from non-traditional ways of engagement with academics:

> I really enjoyed working as a research assistant in the cluster because I kind of got to know people. ... so I knew my review panel! I wasn't afraid of my review because I knew my panel and felt more comfortable.

Thus, engaging with academic staff can be highly beneficial in opening up doors and enhancing students' perceptions of being part of the faculty's community, consequently contributing to their academic experience. Also, the engagement with a peer community was described as different but equally important:

> We kind of encourage each other... We know from earlier students, (we call them senior students) they published in A journals through their PhD, and it gives us motivation 'yeah, we can also do that and finish in time'. So it kind of gives us high spirits and motivation to do productive research.

Others were more directly guided by their peers:

> We didn't have a guide or course, but all these people guided me, 'you should do this' or 'you should have done this by now'. So it has been good.

As expressed, peers support provided students with needed direction in the very independent research process, as well as encouragement to embark in new research endeavors. Furthermore, the social interaction of amongst students is referred as beneficial in terms of improving English skills:

> I have this difficulty in English and they really helped me to improve it. ... they also explain to me if I don't understand something. They always helped me and we always talk in English.

As discussed in the literature, international student's interaction with a mixed community is highly beneficial to the improvement of their English skills as well as confidence building (Russel, Rosenthal & Thomson, 2010; Westwood & Barker, 1990). Furthermore, due to the very independent and lonely nature of the research program, being part of a peer community is simply put as a relief from isolation and to enhance a sense of belonging:

> I think it is really good for PhD students, for research students, to communicate. Because sometime you just read papers, just know a few academics, talk to your supervisor, a few

neighbors and that is all. … A lot of times I feel very isolated.

We don't have classes. We don't mix with the other students. It's like we are alone. ... Now we are starting to get support. Now that the Director of Postgraduate Research is here, now that we are meeting with other students and we are starting our own meetings, that's helping us feel part of a community. But before that, nothing. No help. No support. And I think all the students' meetings, sometimes they can be like 'is this good for me?'. Well, it is good because we get to know people, and we get to know other problems and you get to support each other and even make friends. And that is something that is very valuable.

It is clear the different benefits stemming from IPR students engagement with a community of peers, involving the opportunity to share knowledge, providing research direction, language support, as well as wellbeing. Therefore, due to the lack of courses and other opportunities for interaction in the postgraduate program, it is important that educational institutions provide other forms of opportunities for social interaction. The support that the student is referring to on the quote above is a set of initiatives from the Director of Postgraduate Research student that started in 2010 (a monthly morning tea involving presentation of students' research, yearly postgraduate research conference for the faculty, and support students' initiative in creating a knowledge sharing group). In the interviews, students suggested other ways to enhance engagement with peer and staff community and their sense of belonging to the faculty. A couple of students suggested improving online information:

I think a lot of staff here are definitely skilled and knowledgeable in their expertise. Finding them is a different matter. … It is a matter of availability and visibility. Is there a profile of the staff I can look at?

There is no homepage with data on students. I suppose in other faculties they have this profile of students. […] Here the PhD students don't exist! You don't know if they have PhD students.

Also, the quality of the space provided emerged as influential to enhance or limit interaction. In the faculty, there are two research labs: the level 6 lab, which is a large space partitioned in a number of individual cubicles, and the Mezzanine lab, a smaller and more integrated space. Students have made pointed comments about the partitioned space:

It is very isolating. You can tell when you go up there. Everyone is there, on their own cubicle, doing their own thing, and it seems there is no one there. … The quality of the space, the community and the postgraduate culture, is missing.

Another student narrates a different story about the Mezzanine lab:

In the Mezzanine group, although we have very different kind of topic, we try to help each other in every stage. We become like a family. We know if someone is going through difficult times so we encourage him or her. The best of this Mezzanine group, for me, is that when we have a presentation we practice to each other. ... I really appreciate that forum.

Clearly, there are different experiences in the different research spaces, expressed as being influential to peer interaction and the construction of a research culture, and affecting students' academic experience. The quality of the space was also thought to affect interaction with faculty staff members. Despite the importance of community engagement, it is important to note here to students' reference to different socialization needs:

I understand the importance of building network, internal networks and external networks. Still, it depends on the preference of each student. … Everyone has their own business and research.

Your experience of doing first year, second year or third year is totally different. First year yes, I feel I need contact with people, I think I need to know their research. Goes to the second year I feel that it is too much, back off. When it goes to the third year, I need isolation.

Different requirements for social interaction reflect both personal preferences, as well as distinct levels of pressure along the course of research program.

The above discussion suggests that community engagement, with both peers and academic staff, play a key role to IPR students, affecting wellbeing through a sense of belonging, adaptation, academic and career development; however socialising requirements are different throughout students' candidature. Despite different requirements, students were appreciative of the initiatives that contributed to greater engagement with the faculty's community, which, in turn, evidently contributes to a positive and constructive postgraduate experience abroad.

CONCLUSION

As long as educational institutions aim at maintaining high levels to attract international research students, their experience and needs should also be regarded. Findings from this project highlight that the experiences of IPR students uniquely involve a complex relationship between characteristics of the postgraduate research program and the settling in difficulties with language barrier and cross-cultural differences.

From the pronounced experiences discussed in the IPR student interviews and focus groups, it has become evident that supervisors and community are the key stepping stones to cross-cultural adaptation and overcoming language barriers and helping students accomplish their goals within the research program. In what typically can be a very isolating journey, opportunities for engagement with peers have been discussed as fruitful to settling in into the new environment, especially through strong peer support, and breaking language barriers. Also, opportunities to engage with academic staff assisted students with pursuing their academic career goals, and importantly building trust and familiarity with the faculty's staff members. More than other staff members, supervisors were viewed as having a greater role in supporting students in their working expectations. Supervisors have also been discussed as important mediators between differences in expectations regarding learning style, avoiding in this the situation of students 'being lost'. Because of the key role supervisors have to IPR students, stress can derive from possibly insubstantial selection of the supervisory team. Such situations can spring from a selection process often based on desktop research from a distance, with expectations being built solely on online information and not always meeting realistic expectations.

Academic staff, supervisors, and students need to be aware of differences in learning culture, providing opportunity for better guidance to the continually evolving demands and mediating differences in expectations. Supervisors and academic staff members should also stimulate open dialogues with students, acknowledging their expectations and getting feedback not only in regards to their research, but also their intentions with the degree, especially regarding work opportunities. Providing them with timely support in the achievement of their personal and career goals are major roles for supervisory teams to adopt in order to assist students in settling in. It is essential for students to be able to access reliable information online, while it could also be helpful to provide them with the flexibility to make adjustments to supervisory team   . Finally, given the importance of community and due to the isolating nature of the research program, it is important for institutions to provide opportunities for students to engage with staff members and peers. Students were appreciative of opportunities for fruitful social interactions, such as the research clusters, monthly peer discussion and support to other students' initiatives. Moreover, as students suggested, the Internet stands out as a potential tool in facilitating engagement while enhancing students' sense of belonging to the institution's research community. Not only virtual space, the quality of office spaces was also perceived as facilitating or limiting social interaction, sense of community and overall research culture.

Education institutions can act in a number of ways to improve IPR students' experience abroad, assisting them in the difficult process of settling in while providing for their unique needs and expectations. Through engaging students in a more positive and productive research experience, educational institutions are also investing in the reputation they hold abroad, ensuring the ongoing attraction of such a valuable cohort.

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