

2017-01-01

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### Recommended Citation

Nomnian, Singhanat (2017) "Thai PhD Students and their Supervisors at an Australian University: Working Relationship, Communication, and Agency," *PASAA*: Vol. 53, Article 2.

DOI: 10.58837/CHULA.PASAA.53.1.2

Available at: <https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/pasaa/vol53/iss1/2>

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## **Thai PhD Students and their Supervisors at an Australian University: Working Relationship, Communication, and Agency**

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### **Abstract**

PhD supervision is crucial for higher degree research students in western academic contexts. Despite an increasing body of literature regarding the international student-supervisor relationship, Thai students in Australian higher education are under-represented. This qualitative study aims to explore discursive practices that impact on Thai students' experiences taking place during the course of their PhD supervision in an Australian university. Drawing upon interview transcripts, it was found that Thai students' working relationship and communication with their supervisors, as well as their exertion of agency were interconnected and addressed as key practices underpinned by the relationship between these two parties. The complexity of PhD supervision requires an open dialogic and culturally appropriate pedagogical engagement to lessen implicit tensions between international students and supervisors. Supervisors need to consider students' prior learning experiences and cultural baggage through culturally sensitive supervision. Non-native-English-speaking (NNES) international PhD students' academic and sociocultural orientations regarding the implications of the

supervisor-supervisee relationship, academic English proficiency development, intercultural communications, western academic norms and expectations, and coping strategies with supervisors' feedback should be adequately promoted. The study highlights the importance of the international student-supervisor relationship for their PhD achievement and satisfaction in Australian higher education.

**Keywords:** Thai PhD student, supervisor, working relationship, communication, agency

## Introduction

Internationalization of Australian higher education has led to a significant increase in the number of international postgraduate research students at universities across Australia. Pennycook (2008) views Australian universities as global education contact zones that provide multicultural spaces for interactions between local and international staff and students. Although Australian higher education has increasingly relied upon international students for revenue, special linguistic and sociocultural needs are not adequately addressed (Zevallos, 2012). Non-native-English-speaking (NNES) international PhD students in particular have faced a range of changes and challenges regarding their academic socialization process in terms of expectations, writing requirements, and western academic discourse in their research journey due to their different sociocultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds (Wang & Li, 2008; 2011). Issues of international students in Australian higher education have become a focus of attention in recent years due to the fact that these students bring linguistic and cultural diversity to the university landscape. Fotovatian (2012), however, claims that they are homogeneously labeled as 'international students' whose voices are minoritized, marginalized, suppressed, unheard and differentiated from local students, which can potentially lead to a loss of their self-confidence.

Previous studies (e.g. Cadman, 2000; Kettle, 2005; Koehne, 2005) regarding NNES international PhD students in Australian university contexts explore relevant issues related to learners'

identities, academic expectations and performance, their linguistic competence, and sociocultural adjustments in Australian academic and social communities. Choi, Nieminen, and Townson (2012), for instance, state that international PhD students in physics are often perceived as being English-deficient and having a passive learning style. Fotovatian and Miller (2014) explore Asian PhD students' struggles to overcome their language and cultural difficulties, engage in discourses of power, and construct their legitimate institutional identity, particularly in the process of their PhD supervision. Lin (2014) suggests international students, as new entrants into Australian higher education, recognize and familiarize themselves with explicit and implicit 'new rules of the game' including academic English proficiency development and relevant knowledge disciplines acquisition (p.370). Robinson-Pant (2009), for example, reports on her supervision experience regarding her feedback on students' drafts of literature reviews to be more critical, which international students found rather frustrating since they had to learn how to read and write critically in English. A growing body of literature regarding international students in Australia, however, has focused more on the student-supervisor relationship as one of the significant barriers leading to students' academic failure and dissatisfaction (Yu & Wright, 2016). Harman (2002), for instance, claims that there were weaknesses in PhD supervision in Australian research-intensive universities due to the limited time available to supervisors and their inability to cater for larger and more diverse PhD student populations who felt dissatisfied.

Supervision is a common and critical part of the relationship between higher degree research students and their assigned supervisors for doctoral studies in higher education. Some of the students' potential challenges in the course of their PhD supervision in general can include over-commitment, perfectionism, procrastination, lack of effort, and disorganization (Kearns, Gardiner, & Marshall, 2008). Kearns and Gardiner (2012), for instance, claim that research students from a non-western educational culture may find supervision difficult and daunting because they may not take an assertive role to let their supervisors know what they do not understand or whether they need something to be done differently; and thus supervisors would not know what the students' hidden problems and needs are.

According to Gill (2007), Chinese postgraduate students underwent a stress, adaptation, and growth journey that transformed their understanding of the learning experience and adjusted themselves to British social and academic expectations if they were provided with supervisors' support and sympathy in a facilitative intercultural learning environment. A power distance between supervisors and international PhD students, however, can potentially lead to a hierarchical structure of interpersonal relationships and different work ethics. Perceptions of international students' relationship with their supervisors were found to be a major cause of international students' stress and anxiety (Yu & Wright, 2016). Wang and Li (2011) suggest that international students' level of English proficiency, cultural backgrounds, prior learning experiences, academic competence and research capacities may have an impact on their views toward the power relationship in supervision. Learning new rules of the game of PhD supervision, international PhD students encounter tougher challenges regarding the complexity of the supervision process and academic practices that require adjustment from their home university to the new host university (Robinson-Pant, 2009). Consequently, students can claim a legitimate membership of the academic community.

Although there are a number of studies regarding Asian students in Australian higher education, research into Thai PhD students' experiences during their doctoral supervision are under-represented. Drawing upon their narrative accounts, this present study explores Thai students' working relationship, communication, and exertion of their agency through different discursive practices taking place in the course of their supervision that can highlight pedagogical implications to meet the students' needs and the university's requirements. This study aims to highlight the importance of the international student-supervisor relationship for academic success and satisfaction in Australian higher education.

## **Literature Review**

This present study employs Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004) identity construction and negotiation in multilingual settings with specific reference to how language users' linguistic choices and attitudes are unavoidably connected to sociocultural, political, and linguistic contexts. Drawing upon a social constructionist perspective, Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) view identity options as constructed and validated through discourses available to individuals at a particular point in time and space. A poststructuralist perspective, however, views language as a symbolic power exerted on language practices impacting on individuals' identities (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004, p.12). Identity construction and negotiation are linked with multiple and interrelated factors including age, occupation, ethnicity, gender, geographical locale, institutional affiliation, and social status; and thus identities are viewed as modifiable and changeable depending on the way individuals identify and position themselves in particular contexts (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004, p.16).

Based on a poststructuralist perspective, Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott and Brown (2013) develop a multifaceted concept of identities including reflexive, projected, and recognized. Reflexive identity is viewed as the self's view of the self by incorporating self-concept, attributes and capacities. It is a complicated network of not only the individual's qualities such as images, feelings and private dialogues, but also their skills, capacities, and power, which are semiotically represented to others in interaction. Harré (2001, p.61) claims that certain aspects of a person's attributed self are manifested to others through the projection of 'impression management' and 'strategic self-presentation' by focusing on the conscious construction of identities or reputational characteristics. Thus, reflexive identity refers to the 'inner' self, while projected identity refers to public representations of the 'outer' self. Because people normally hide what they see as their 'real selves' for strategic reasons, there is often a gap between their projected and reflexive identities (Harré, 2001, p.61). Projected identities, however, are related to reflexive identity in that projected identities are contextualized to specific others in specific settings and contexts; yet, they may fail to achieve recognition because they contradict what others already know, or believe they know (Benson et

al., 2013, p.21). In contrast to projected identity, recognized identity is preconceived and known by others in the course of interaction because individuals will have to act so that they intentionally or unintentionally express themselves, and the others will in turn have to recognize in some way, which can be considered as interactive identity. Supervision as social interaction necessarily involves articulations of reflexive, projected, and interactive identities that influence Thai PhD students' conceptions of themselves and their supervisors in terms of their working relationship and communication.

Negotiation of Thai PhD students' identities is specifically intertwined with human agency allowing them to change and transform themselves to construct desirable positions. The concept of human agency is relevant in this study because it enables Thai PhD students to become active and responsible agents accountable for their course of PhD studies. According to Davies (1990, p.360), human agency can be described as follows: first of all, individuals are not passive receivers – in fact, they are able to figure things out actively; secondly, individuals are responsible and accountable for their own decision-making on relevant choices, actions, and expected outcomes based on their existing resources and personal skills made available; and finally, individuals are legitimately positioned and favorably recognized by interactive others as agents within particular discourses and contexts. Cortazzi and Jin (2013), for example, claim that Asian students from a Confucius heritage culture view their teachers as highly respectable authorities whose teaching is not only based on knowledge, but also morality and ethics, which may not be the main virtue of the less hierarchical structure in Western academia where philosophy of teaching and learning aims to co-construct knowledge. It is important to note that Davies' (1990) concept of agency focuses on existing resources and choices available for an individual to position himself/herself as an agent to perform a particular action and make decisions for a positive change in life. Indonesian, Malaysian, and Singaporean students in Australia, for instance, embrace new academic norms and construct themselves as 'cosmopolitan locals'; yet, they still maintain collective identity among their co-nationals (Weiss & Ford, 2011, p.244).

According to Fotovatian's (2012) sociocultural theories of second language in use and the role of agency in participation, an individual's choice to take part in second language interactions is co-constructed and negotiated according to three factors: the individual, the sociocultural context, and those involved in the interaction. Kettle (2005), for example, found that despite language and cultural barriers, a Thai postgraduate student constructed his/her desirable identity from 'nobody' to 'somebody' by actively exerting his/her agency in classroom discussions in order to position himself/herself as a 'legitimate' class member and represented a positive image of Thai students in an Australian university (p.55). Nomnian (2017) points out that Thai postgraduate students' agency played significant roles in determining their interactions with tutors and classmates depending on the Thai student's personality, financial investment, and changing attitudes towards learning, which encouraged them to become more active and deterministic so as to achieve their academic goals by embracing various teaching and learning contexts and practices in a British university. Elliot, Baumfield, & Reid (2016) suggest that international students should remain an active agent via a dialogic engagement in order to gain legitimate membership of the community of academics. In many respects, Thai PhD students in this study followed a similar path.

In this present study, Thai PhD students' agency is a matter of the individual's desired and desirable positions and choices depending on the way in which they discursively constructed and negotiated themselves as responsible and accountable, the extent to which they committed to that construction, negotiation, personal history and trajectory while engaging in the PhD supervisory process. PhD experience in western academia including Australia can be a lonely journey since it is typically characterized by a professional and personal developmental endeavor consisting of an autonomous learning style in most cases without prescribed formal curriculum (Elliot et al., 2016). Fotovatian (2012) views doctoral study as a process of identity transition in which students engage in departmental interactions under the supervision of one or two academics whose aim is to develop students' institutional and professional identities. It is, therefore, an essential part of the students' supervisory practices that



aim to promote and prosper their personal, psychological, intellectual, and professional development through the supervisors' acknowledgement of the students' achievements, critique of unclear issues, suggestions and guidance for further improvements (Pitts, 2005; Wang & Li, 2011).

## **Research Methodology**

### ***Research setting and participants***

This present study adopted case study as a research method because case study as an empirical enquiry explores a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context of an individual unit which can be a person, a class, or a community (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Yin, 2003). Case study is based on a qualitative and interpretive research paradigm that could be viewed as personal and subjective, and that can potentially portray a much more complex reality of individual experiences through substantiated interpretations (Denscombe, 2003; Holliday, 2002). Underpinned by the qualitative case study research method, the research setting in this present study took place at an Australian university located in one of the most multicultural and multilingual cities in Australia. The rationale behind the selection of this particular Australian university was that it was the host institution of the researcher, who had been awarded the Endeavour Postdoctoral Fellowship by the Australian Government to conduct this study. This Australian university was claimed to be the top young research university that was not only well-known among Thai students in the disciplines of science and technology, but also had strong academic and research collaborations with a number of universities in Thailand. Case study can therefore potentially uncover various variables and issues that are inter-related within the complexities of particular evolving educational circumstances, and that requires researchers to be more process-oriented, flexible, and adaptable to changes and challenges in the chosen case of investigation (Anderson, 1998; Denscombe, 2002).

**A summary table of Thai PhD research participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age (years old)</b>	<b>IELTS Overall Band/ TOEFL</b>	<b>Previous Job in Thailand</b>	<b>Funding Type</b>	<b>Previous Education Degree(s) from a Thai/ foreign university</b>	<b>Current Degree(s) at an Australian University</b>	<b>Years of living and studying in Australia</b>
Nathan	M	36	6.5	University lecturer	Thai Government	BSc (Computer Science) Thai university	MSc (IT) PhD (IT)	7 years
Alex	M	43	5.5	University lecturer	Thai Government	BSc (Computer Science) MSc (IT) Thai university	PhD (IT)	More than 3 years
Bob	M	43	6.0	University lecturer	Thai Government	BSc (IT) MSc (IT) Thai university	PhD (IT)	4 years
Kim	F	37	6.0	University lecturer	Thai Government	BSc (Computer Engineering) MSc (Computer Engineering) Thai university	PhD (IT)	5 years
Bee	F	35	6.0	University lecturer	Thai Government	BSc (Applied Statistics) MSc (Applied Statistics) Thai university	PhD (Applied Statistics)	More than 1 year
Peach	F	37	5.5	University lecturer	Thai Government	BSc (Maths) MSc (Maths) Thai university	PhD (Maths)	More than 2 years
Rain	F	34	5.5	University lecturer	Thai Government	BSc (Nursing and Midwifery) MSc (Nursing and Midwifery) Thai university	PhD (Midwifery)	More than 1 year
Amy	F	38	n/a	University lecturer	Thai university	BA (Accountancy) Thai university MA (Accountancy) US university	PhD (Accountant)	4 years
Charlie	M	32	99/ 120	Scientist	Australian university	BSc (Biology) MA (Museum Studies) Australian university	PhD (Environmental Science)	2 years

According to the table summarizing the Thai PhD students, the research participants in this study were a group of nine Thai PhD students; five females and four males, aged 30-45 years old, from various academic disciplines including Engineering, IT, Midwifery, Mathematics, Applied Statistics, Accounting, and Environmental Science. All of them had graduated with a Bachelor Degree from a Thai university and had had prior work experience at universities in different regions in Thailand. Charlie was funded by an Australian university and Amy was funded by a Thai university. The rest were funded by the Royal Thai Government. The duration of their study at the university varied from one semester to four academic years. Drawing upon the interpretive and qualitative research stance, the participants' construction of meanings in their complex sociocultural realities is construed through interpretation rather than generalization, prediction and control (Usher, 1996). According to Mason (2002), it is important for researchers to understand, engage, and reflect with their study in order to read the data through an interpretive lens by use of interviews that yield insights into the participants' on-going life trajectory. Thai PhD students' experiences during the course of their supervision in the Australian university were then explored and qualitatively interpreted without aiming to generalize the results for other cases.

### ***Data collection and analysis***

I conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant in this study because a series of principle questions could be fashioned to probe one's emerging views. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to deviate from an interview schedule and ask additional exploratory questions as a follow-up on participant's particular responses and thereby gain broader perspectives and deeper understandings (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Drever, 1995; Krizmanic, 1990). In this paper, the main interview questions concern their personal backgrounds including education, careers, and current degree; reasons for studying at an Australian university, expectations, perceived academic and conversational English proficiency, attitudes toward the use of their English with 'native' and 'non-native' speakers of English, views on supervisors and supervision, linguistic and

academic support by university, perceptions toward teachers and colleagues, and academic challenges.

These questions aimed to provide insights into the participant's thoughts, perceptions, emotions, plans, motives, and expectations, which contributed to each individual's construction and negotiation of identities during the supervisory interactions. Davies and Harré (1990, p.62) state that identities can be constructed and negotiated in talk and through talk between an interviewer and an interviewee as they engage in conversations. I conducted and recorded an hour-long interview with each participant with a digital audio-recorder at a location chosen by the participant. I used either Thai or English depending on the preference of each participant. I transcribed and translated each interview and the transcript to the participant for validation prior to analysis. Based on research ethics approval gained from both Thai and Australian universities, confidentiality was considered upmost and as such the participants' names used in this study are pseudonymous.

I employed thematic analysis in this present study because it allowed me to identify, analyze, and report patterns within data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), there are six steps to thematic analysis namely: familiarizing oneself with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report, all of which will be discussed as follows. Firstly, I familiarized myself with the collected data by reading and re-reading the transcripts several times. Since I conducted the interviews, transcribed the recorded interviews, and translated from Thai to English, I was highly familiar to the participants' data. In addition, I was also friends with the participants, and that allowed me to have informal conversations with them to gain a clearer understanding of the data revealed in the interviews. Next, I generated initial codes including personal, linguistic, academic, professional, racial, ethnic, and cultural identities based on theoretical and conceptual frameworks with regard to identities in multilingual contexts. Then, I searched and reviewed the themes. After that, the themes were defined and named as presented in the findings.

## Findings and Discussion

There are three main practices including Thai PhD students' working relationship, their communication with supervisors, and their exertion of agency, which have an impact on their identity construction and negotiation in relation to their supervisors during the PhD supervision.

### *Working relationship with the supervisor*

Supervisors were crucial to all Thai PhD students' academic and research success since they could advise and guide them in an appropriate direction. The students, however, felt that it was important to create the right chemistry in working with their supervisors despite the fact that there were positive and negative experiences encountered by the students.

#### **Extract 1**

*Choosing a supervisor is like choosing a husband. It depends on how well we work together. My supervisor allows me to share my ideas. (Bee)*

Bee viewed herself as a 'wife' and her supervisor as a 'husband'. This metaphor provides a nice visual description of the working relationship with her supervisor which conjures up a picture of a couple who are committed to embarking on a mission to complete a thesis within the given time frame required by the university. The 'married couple' had to go 'through thick and thin' in succeeding and overcoming obstacles through different stages of Bee's thesis journey. The supervisor, however, was considered as a family leader who facilitated Bee's endeavor by giving opportunities to share her thoughts that allowed both of them to recognize issues arising from the thesis process.

The following extract elaborates on Bee's working relationship with her supervisor through her narrative, which illustrates her self-reflection as a 'good, neat, on-time, well-planned, and diligent' student who had gradually learned her supervisor's working style and expectations.

**Extract 2**

*I think he sees me as an attentive student whose work is good, neat, on-time, and well-planned. However, I have to admit that at first I didn't know my supervisor's working style. During my language preparation course, he told me to take my time. I kept updating him on my progress to show him that I was diligent. One week before the end of the language course, he gave me an assignment that had to be done in two weeks. But, I informed him that I couldn't do it by the due date. He told me to work harder. I was shocked that I was criticized by him right at the outset. Then, I realized that I should have told him about the deadline problem. I needed to notify him three days in advance if I couldn't meet the deadline. In Thailand, Thai students are able to tell their teachers on the submission date that they can't finish and the teachers will not say anything. (Bee)*

Bee's marriage metaphor is even more apt in that there are downs as well as ups. Though the relationship was positive at many levels, she was shocked initially by her supervisor's criticism that she was not meeting his work standards. She then learned the strict rules of a game with regard to his expectations as supervisor at an Australian university, in contrast to the more flexible and relaxed supervision practices of teachers in Thailand.

Beyond Bee's metaphor of the 'husband-wife' working relationship, it is vital for Thai students to be aware of their supervisor's attitudes towards work time and private time so as to help balance the collegiality and professionalism equation.

**Extract 3**

*Working with a supervisor requires space between us. I have gradually learned his working styles. I respect his time and space. I am lucky that he is very caring. At the office, everyone works very hard. I have gained the respect of my supervisor and colleagues. My supervisor knows that I can perform according to his expectations. He trusts in me that I am a responsible student. (Amy)*

Amy felt that both parties not only needed space and time for one another, but also the reciprocal respect and trust between the two should be earned. Consequently, she took up 'responsible', 'trustworthy', and 'respectful' positions through hard work to meet her supervisor's expectations.

**Extract 4**

*I am diligent and mature. I think he trusts in my standards. I may be seen as lazy, but I always keep my standards high -- like when I did an experiment and found the results were not good. I adjusted it without informing him and told him about it. He said it was my work. He relied on me and gave me freedom to modify it. I can consult with him when I have problems. I am trustworthy. (Kim)*

Likewise, Kim viewed herself as a 'diligent, mature, trustworthy, and reliable, but lazy' student and a problem solver who had a high working standard. She was also satisfied with her supervisor's open-mindedness allowing her to work from home because some supervisors were so strict that they required their students to come to the office every day.

**Extract 5**

*Some strict supervisors would like their students to come to the office to work from morning to evening every day. But my supervisor does not require me to come into the office every day; but I still need to show my work. I need to be responsible and independent, which I like. (Kim)*

Alex, for instance, encountered an authoritative supervisor who always monitored his presence in the office. Working with a Chinese supervisor, he claimed that he was being treated like other Chinese students who behaved like office workers.

**Extract 6**

*My supervisor used to keep an eye on me to see whether I came to work or not. He didn't see me in the office. He*

*expected me to come at 9 am. and leave at 5 pm. like other Chinese students. My supervisor is Chinese. (Alex)*

In addition, Alex's experience of working with his supervisor was rather undesirable. He took on an unobtrusive rather than assertive identity when facing difficulties as he not only avoided conflicts with his supervisor, but also felt that his spoken English was not fluent enough to challenge his supervisor.

**Extract 7**

*As a student, sometimes I want to argue with my supervisor. However, I think "silence is golden". I don't want to cause bad feelings between my supervisor and me. Also, I'm not confident in my spoken English, so I'd rather not argue with him. I listen to him most of the time. (Alex)*

Bob, on the other hand, believed that his feeling of 'kreng-jai', meaning consideration or politeness according to his supervisor's interpretation, was underpinned by a Thai characteristic that discouraged asking for help from his supervisor.

**Extract 8**

*As a Thai student, I am very 'kreng-jai' (considerate). I understand that there is no such term in English. Yet, my supervisor is also aware of this and she refers to it as 'being polite'. (Bob)*

Bob's 'kreng-jai' (being considerate and polite) toward his supervisor was underpinned by the concept of Thai politeness and hierarchy. Kummer (2005) states that a Thai person's verbal and non-verbal expressions are concerned with one's communication partner in terms of their interpersonal factors such as age, gender, educational background, and professional position; and thus, a Thai individual must be aware of his/her position with respect to his/her interlocutory partners. In this case, Bob's female supervisor, an internationally-recognized IT professor, was clearly someone he was expected to respect.



Similarly, since Peach's supervisor was a talker, he preferred her to actively engage in discussions more instead of being a passive listener.

**Extract 9**

*I think he expects me to respond more. I'm more of a listener than a talker. My supervisor is very talkative, so I listen to him most of the time. (Peach)*

Unlike her Indian colleagues, Amy also kept silent as she felt that her knowledge and experience were not sufficient to challenge her supervisor.

**Extract 10**

*In terms of the relationship with my supervisor, I do not insist on my ideas even when I disagree with him because I have less knowledge and experience than him. I notice that Indian students like to argue with their supervisors. (Amy)*

Nathan, on the other hand, approached his supervisor strategically in a more subtle and friendly manner in order to narrow the supervision gap.

**Extract 11**

*I tried to bond with him and get close to him in discussions. I tried to learn from his experience and actions. I approached him in a friendly and respectful way and built a close relationship from that. Basically, there should be events organized, not related to study, to get to know supervisors as a person. I join my supervisor's New Year dinner to meet his family at his house every year. I have built up a close relationship with my supervisor. I don't have any problem in approaching him if I have issues. I feel more like a friend to my supervisor. But I respect him very much. (Nathan)*

The extracts above demonstrate the power relations between these students and their supervisors, who were seen as authorities of

knowledge and experience and had to be obeyed. It is, however, important for Thai students to adapt themselves to their supervisors so as to strike the right balance between both parties for effective supervision.

Working relationship suggests that these PhD students had to adjust their learning styles to be compatible with mandatory Australian academic procedures such as supervision, thesis preparation courses, doctoral assessment stages, and thesis submission. According to Elliot et al. (2016, p.1183), the term 'enculturation' refers to students' thoughts, language and common practices conceived through original and long exposure to the home culture deeply rooted within international students' psychological domain that is being challenged and contested by 'acculturation' to conform to the new norms by learning, unlearning, and re-learning ideas, thoughts and behaviors in order to survive and thrive in the new academic discourse. Positive and healthy relationships between the Thai students and their supervisors illustrate effective supervision allowing the students to construct academic identities that suit disciplinary demands.

The findings suggest that the virtues needed for productive supervision include responsibility, reliability, maturity, trust, and respect to meet the expectations of both parties. Alex, Bob, and Peach, however, found it hard to overcome personal attributes such as consideration, politeness, shyness, passivity, and insecurity that prevent them from appearing more active, confident, talkative, and assertive during supervision. In order for Thai PhD students to engage in a better working relationship with their supervisor, explicit and open communication is essential. For Thai PhD students, expectations which their supervisors took for granted were not necessarily well understood, and they then had to develop strategies to deal with the implicit expectations of the supervisors. This being the case, it might be useful for universities and service providers to identify and find ways to promote existing sources of educational, linguistic, and social influences on international students in order to offer a variety of social, linguistic and academic orientation activities and on-going support, rather than a one-size-fits-all program (Lin, 2014).

### **Communication with the supervisor**

Communication becomes significant in building and strengthening the bonds between Thai students and their supervisors. Moreover, explicit communication between supervisors and Thai students strongly facilitates the students' identity construction and negotiation towards becoming more academically-oriented and self-confident.

#### **Extract 12**

*My supervisor is well-known in midwifery. She is the Dean and President of ACM. I never knew that before. I was quite stressed and uncomfortable when talking with her at first. There was a gap between me as a student and my famous professor. One day, my supervisor told me that Australia is not like Thailand in that there is no hierarchy. We are colleagues. She wants me to feel equal to her. Since then, I have changed myself from someone who never asked and often said 'Yes', to someone who always dares to ask and question my supervisor. (Rain)*

Raised in a hierarchical society and educated in Thai academia, Rain gradually transformed herself from a 'passive' to 'active' learner by developing her self-esteem via open discussion with her supervisor who positioned herself and Rain as colleagues. As a result of feeling equal and on a friendly footing, Rain reconstructed herself as a confident and stress-free student.

#### **Extract 13**

*Communication is the key. If I don't communicate with my supervisor, we will not understand each other. Then we can't move on with our project. Sometimes I communicate via figures or report when our communication is unclear. I have to listen to my supervisor's ideas and suggestions and discuss with her about the research project. Sometimes our ideas do not match each other; and that requires adjustment. (Bob)*

Despite the fact that it took time for Bob to adjust his communication with his supervisor, he also found communication with a supervisor helpful in that it provided an opportunity for him to gain advice to further his research. Even though he might not communicate well verbally, he used written communication as a way to enhance his supervisor's understanding.

Likewise, Nathan highly valued communication with his supervisor as a way to progress in his research project.

**Extract 14**

*Interactions with supervisors are crucial because the relationship has to become as close maybe as friends. We have to work closely. If the relationship doesn't go well, it's not good for the research project. (Nathan)*

**Extract 15**

*I am not clever and diligent. But what has brought me to where I am today is my ability to communicate. I am confident in talking with my supervisor. However, even now, I cannot communicate 100% with him, as I notice from his feedback. He talked about issues different from what I wanted to talk about. I may not have organized my thoughts and put them into spoken English. I need to prepare a script before meeting with my supervisor. Thai students learn about writing but cannot speak. I need to re-organize my speech and check with my supervisor to see if we are on the same page. I would like to know his ideas about my project and whether he agrees with me. (Charlie)*

Besides communication styles, English is an essential part of their spoken and written forms as it shows how well they can perform and deliver their research academically. Being a speaker of English as a second language, Amy's supervisor was aware of her lack of English ability, and thus tried to encourage her to become a more competent English user by reading more academic journals.

**Extract 16**

*He is Austrian. He knows that my English is a second language. He supports me a lot. He told me to read a lot of journal articles. He also expects PhD students to be competent in English. (Amy)*

Unsurprisingly, most students still found their use of English inadequate and had to work hard on different linguistic aspects and skills, particularly speaking and writing.

**Extract 17**

*I feel comfortable speaking with my supervisor who recognizes my accent. I have difficulties pronouncing /r/ and /l/. She never says that she does not understand me. She will ask me to explain more. I regularly have meetings with her and am very close to her. However, if I speak with other professors, I may get anxious. (Rain)*

Rain, for instance, felt happy to talk with her supervisor who was familiar with her Thai accent in English despite her not being able to pronounce certain sounds like /r/ and /l/ correctly; yet, her supervisor tried her best to understand her. Speaking anxiety seems to be a common problem for other Thai students such as Bob, who also became so apprehensive that he could not reply his supervisor instantly.

**Extract 18**

*I still get worried and nervous. Sometimes my ears close. I don't understand what my supervisor asked. She sometimes asks me questions using simple key words like 'what', 'next'; but I didn't know what to answer. It takes me time to think and answer my supervisor because there are issues of both content and language. I still have to translate from English to Thai and Thai to English. I have not been able to solve this problem yet. (Bob)*

Because of his limited content knowledge and English competence, Bob had to translate from English to Thai and vice versa. Yet, his supervisor's English accent was intelligible to him.

**Extract 19**

*I am familiar with my supervisor's English accent. (Bob)*

Charlie recognized certain English expressions that enabled him to understand whether his supervisor agreed with him.

**Extract 20**

*If he disagrees, I will know. People here are compromising when they speak. My supervisor will say "Your ideas are good, but..." and that gives me a signal that he disagrees. I am not sure if he disagrees with me because of my English or the content of the project. After the meeting, I normally email him a summary of what we talked about as evidence. (Charlie)*

To confirm their agreement, Charlie summarized key points arising during the meetings and emailed his supervisor so as to make sure they both understand each other.

**Extract 21**

*When my supervisor told me that she didn't understand my written English, I had to have a native speaker correct my English. It's not her responsibility to do it. But in IT, we use short phrases to explain diagrams and equations. Like,  $x = \dots$ ; where  $x$ ; or if  $x$ . (Bob)*

Bob's English writing style was based on his academic discipline of information technology (IT), which was not stylistically complex, whereas Amy's social science writing required elaboration for which her supervisor's assistance was needed.

**Extract 22**

*I must also learn my supervisor's writing style. I have been told to summarize key ideas and end with citations. I have to read a lot of journal articles. My supervisor helps by correcting my drafts. (Amy)*

Being aware that Alex was not competent in English, his supervisor was the first reader to assess whether his work met the standard for submission. He viewed his role as that of a PhD student who had to write and submit his thesis while his supervisor was considered as being a sort of internal auditor who determined whether his thesis met external examination standards.

**Extract 23**

*I think he sees me as immature and needs to push me. He knows that my English is not good, so he is caring and supportive. He always helps to guide my ideas. For now, my main aim is to submit my thesis and graduate. I don't look for perfection in my work because perfection will be assessed by my supervisor. (Alex)*

Communication with supervisors was in part challenged by the Thai students' limited English proficiency in both spoken and written skills. Elliot et al. (2016) claim that international students normally face English difficulties in recognizing accents, decoding nuances, interpreting meanings, and ensuring clarity of the ideas expressed. Because most students in the study were from science and technology disciplines, they employed technical terms and simple grammatical structures to make communication with their supervisors easier to understand. Communication with supervisors would be more effective if it could foster personal learning, enjoyment and development through friendships, social activities and wider support networks, which Elliot et al. (2016) refer to as 'third space' (p.1189). Taking international students' personal interests, preferences, and needs into account is crucial in order to achieve successful academic acculturation during their transition from home to host university. It is clear in this study that every Thai student encountered difficulties in

their use of English; yet, they felt that their supervisors were supportive, sympathetic and helpful in guiding and suggesting ways to improve their written English as they knew that English was not their student's mother tongue. Australian higher education should be responsible for promoting international students' English proficiency and offering intercultural communication training to better equip them during their studies (Zevallos, 2012). Openly mutual intercultural communication and sensitivity between supervisors and international research students is vital to effective supervision in order to meet the psychological and pedagogical needs that respond to the culturally embedded challenges encountered by students in the Australian academic context.

To conclude, communication is by all means a potential way to gain a mutual understanding between supervisors and students in terms of personal expectations, challenges, and fears in conducting PhD research projects. It is, however, important for supervisors to play an active role in opening up a convivial space in which students can engage with their supervisors, who are highly regarded as authorities providing directed guidance and ultimately determining the students' academic success or failure. Students, on the other hand, have to exert their agency for overcoming obstacles as part of their learning process.

### ***Thai students' exertion of agency***

Thai students' exertion of their agency enabled them to take on an active responsible role in the conduct of their PhD studies. Peach described her identity as being stereotypical of a Thai student namely, insecure and nervous due to her supervisor's criticism.

#### **Extract 24**

*Being like a normal Thai student, I'm afraid to talk with my supervisor. I'm not sure if I make myself understood or I will be criticized by my supervisor. I pretty much still have a Thai personality. (Peach)*

Similarly, educated in the Thai academic system, Bob admitted that he was a slow-learner who had to advance himself by changing his working and learning styles to be compatible with his supervisor's.



**Extract 25**

*It's so hard for me to change my learning style as I have been in this system for quite some time. Now I need to change myself; otherwise, I can't deal with my supervisor. I know that I am a bit slow and cannot keep up with my supervisor's schedule. I need to adjust my working and learning styles to match my supervisor's working style. We need to be like working buddies who need to do things together. I am more punctual. I need to be in the office earlier than my supervisor and leave the office after her. (Bob)*

At least he was aware that he needed to be an independent learner who had to make many of his own academic decisions without supervision. This is fundamentally different from the relatively close nature of relationships between supervisors and students in the Thai academic culture. Although this supervision seemed to leave him in isolation, he had to work hard to keep up with the supervisor's expectations.

**Extract 26**

*I need to become more independent in my learning as my supervisor never tells me how to learn. At first, I thought I was going to be told what to do and how to do it. I was initially aware about this issue; yet, I never realized that I have to learn everything independently. There is no spoon feeding of what to read or do. I need to do a lot of reading as much as possible so that when I am asked, I can answer. I have changed a lot. (Bob)*

Likewise, Rain constructed herself as attentive and diligent according to her perception of her supervisor's expectations.

**Extract 27**

*My supervisor sees me as attentive and diligent. I never postpone my work. (Rain)*

To some extent, Kim also became more open to talk with her supervisor if any issues arose, because she was afraid that, otherwise, she would have to change her supervisor again.

**Extract 28**

*Since I changed my supervisor, I have been telling myself not to hide my feelings from him. If I don't feel comfortable, I tell him. In the past, I didn't dare to say anything to my supervisor as I was worried that he would be angry at me or disagree with me. Nowadays, I try to tell them, but not everything. (Kim)*

Bee, on the other hand, felt conflict within herself as a typical Thai student who often submitted to authority. Yet, she wanted to be more assertive and dared to challenge her supervisor. She had to compromise her typical Thai nature – humble and respectful – to accommodate a more ‘contesting’ identity as a PhD student, which seemed contrary to the stereotypical representation of Thais.

**Extract 29**

*There is a self-conflict contradiction. Although I am a Thai student, my ideas may be different from my supervisor's. Though I still have some of the personality traits of a typical Thai student who shows respect and is humble in front of their teachers, I do question and express my concerns to my supervisor, which other Thai students don't dare to do. (Bee)*

It is, however, important for Amy to balance aggression and assertion before negotiating with her supervisor by stressing her ‘selling point’ meaning concrete, persuasive and sound knowledge of the topic for the discussion. Through her academic intellect, she felt confident and mature enough to conduct more professional discussions rather than personal conflicts.

**Extract 30**

*One good thing about me being Thai is that I am not aggressive with my supervisor. I have a selling point and*

*abilities to negotiate with him. I can express my ideas and discuss with him freely. We don't have personal conflicts.*  
(Amy)

Recognizing the passive and relaxed nature of Thai students, Nathan suggested more proactive involvement and progressive planning with his supervisor, which he viewed as a way towards academic achievement in the Australian academic discourse.

### **Extract 31**

*Thai students have problems in terms of how to initiate, approach, interact and have good discussions with their supervisors. It's important to have a good plan before meeting their supervisor. From my experience, I had to report what had been done. I had to give an up-to-date progress report to my supervisor. I had to have a good structure of what to discuss, expected outcomes, problems and issues. I think that's key to success for Thai students.* (Nathan)

Being aware of the rules of the PhD program that required a doctoral thesis, Alex employed writing software called *Grammarly* to help with his thesis writing, without much emphasis on improving his spoken English. Since he was a keen IT student, he made use of the existing software to assist his writing, which demonstrated his independent learning style and determination to succeed in his PhD studies.

### **Extract 32**

*There is a software package called Grammarly to help with writing. For now, I need to finish my PhD thesis. I don't pay much attention to improving my speaking. I mainly need to improve my writing.* (Alex)

Having recently joined a PhD program, Charlie considered Thai students to be hard-working and responsible whereas their Australian counterparts were lazy. In addition, he was very confident that he had the potential to succeed in his studies.

**Extract 33**

*Australian supervisors like Thai students because Thai students are hard-working and highly responsible. Australian students are lazy. At the moment, my supervisor doesn't judge me because I believe he knows my profile and trusts that I can handle my PhD studies. Otherwise, he wouldn't accept me to be his student. (Charlie)*

Despite avoiding being viewed as stupid and under-performing by his supervisor, Charlie was well aware of his limited knowledge in his field and PhD requirements including proposal development and review of literature; thus, he was eager to do the readings, engage in lab meetings, and prepare for scheduled consultations with his supervisor.

**Extract 34**

*I need to find evidence to support my answers and logic to solve problems, especially with my supervisor. I will not use my emotions to solve problems. Everything must be based on logic. But I still cannot express my ideas or critical thinking with my supervisor well enough. At the moment, I am doing a literature review because I don't have enough knowledge; otherwise, I would show my stupidity to my supervisor. It may take me at least three months to develop a proposal. I would like to have a lab meeting where I can show my ideas and listen to others' ideas, which can sharpen my thoughts. When I receive feedback from my supervisor, I will know if I am sharp or not. I have done literature reviews since I was an undergrad. I can connect knowledge from what I have read. (Charlie)*

Thai students in this study exerted their agency to meet the university requirements and their supervisors' expectations despite their limited English proficiency. They had become more active, assertive, independent, and responsible in their learning to suit Australian academic discourse. Some of them, however, felt that they had to negotiate their Thai student learning style and behavior

generally regarded as more humble and respectful of their supervisors, who were seen as agents of authority who should not be questioned or challenged. Otherwise, they would be viewed as aggressive, which was not culturally acceptable among Thai students. Balancing between the Thai and Australian academic discourse was sensitive and dependent on the individual context.

The findings reveal that the students reflexively positioned themselves as change agents, taking on active roles in their studies and preparations for PhD supervision in order to become legitimate members of the academic community at the university. Although Australian higher education institutions may not be able to address all the international students' needs and concerns, it is important for universities to establish mechanisms and learning support aimed at encouraging and enhancing international PhD students' preparedness to become more proactive, not only in the process of supervision, but also in colloquia, seminars, and forums for the doctoral students community (Elliot et al., 2016). Harman (2003) claims that most Australian universities have developed codes of practice for supervisors and students, and established new appeal and grievance procedures for students in order to promote better interpersonal skills of supervisors for effective and high quality supervision. Despite the intellectual and emotional struggles Thai students encountered in their supervision, their aspiration and determination was underpinned by their personal, educational, professional, and governmental/ university expectations that drove them to be optimistic, goal-oriented, and committed to achieving their PhD mission.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides insights into the experiences and perceptions of nine Thai PhD students as they underwent their higher degree research studies, with a particular focus on their supervision at one Australian university. Thai PhD students shared, to a certain extent, similarities between the obligations, contradictions, conflicts, resistance, and contests they had encountered. Each student, however, experienced their supervision experience uniquely and meaningfully via their discursive practices including working relationship, communication, and exertion of agency. This study views the

university in question as a multicultural educational institution where the Thai student agendas and goals, backgrounds and past experiences, socio-cultural identities and sources of sponsorship were interconnected.

PhD supervision requires an understanding of Thai PhD students' experiences and practices as being socio-culturally and historically dependent upon their working relationship and communication with their supervisors as well as their exertion of agency. Thai students' reflexive, interactive, and projected identities of themselves and their supervisors can be changing, contradictory, and multiple in accordance with their relationships, situations, and discursive practices in which they encounter. They can construct and negotiate a variety of identities through their actions and interactions at specific points in time and space; and, thus, particular identity options are specifically and discursively produced as a result of certain working relationships, communication, and Thai students' agency. The study also reveals that the challenges Thai PhD students face in the Australian university could potentially derive from insufficient preparations, the implicit expectations of both supervisors and students, adjustment to the work standards in a western academic discourse, including but not limited to their academic English competence. Supervisors need to take into account their students' prior learning experience and cultural baggage in order to work and communicate with them through culturally appropriate supervisory strategies. Students, on the other hand, need academic and social acculturation regarding the implications of their supervisor-supervisee relationship, academic English proficiency development, intercultural communication, western academic norms and expectations, and managing strategies, with constructive supervisor feedback for effective PhD supervision.

To this end, Thai students' working relationship, communication with supervisors, and their exertion of agency are not mutually exclusive, but rather are interconnected within the complexity of PhD supervision that requires an explicit dialogic and culturally sensitive pedagogical engagement to minimize implicit tensions between international students and their supervisors.

## Acknowledgements

This research was supported by Australian Award: Endeavour Postdoctoral Research Fellowship. I would like to thank Distinguished Professor Alastair Pennycook for his constructive guidance and critical comments throughout this project.

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