

# GUIDE TO SUPERVISION OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

There have been many recent publications dealing with the needs of postgraduate non-English speaking background students in Australia. This plethora of research has arisen from the increasing number of international students that are attending Australian tertiary institutions. As the number of NESB students increases, so does our awareness and understanding of the needs of these students. At La Trobe University we aim to ensure all postgraduate students have a positive experience and are able to complete their degree in the appropriate time frame.

This document therefore, aims to raise briefly some of the dominant issues in the teaching and supervision of ESL postgraduate students and give some guide as to how to effectively work with postgraduate NESB students.

It should be noted that not all NESB students will present with the following skills, knowledge and expectations and thus not all sections will be relevant for all students.

## ORIENTATION

- ◆ On arrival, many students report huge gaps in their knowledge or the fact that their knowledge is outdated. It is thus often a good idea to establish early if the student needs to “catch up”. If there is **a gap**, students may audit an appropriate course taught within the school, may join an existing research team in a lab to be inducted into the culture and language of the discipline or may be referred to particular current texts to bring their knowledge up-to-date.
- ◆ Students will be well schooled in their **own academic culture and traditions**. Many of these may be very **different from our own**. It is important to make the student aware of some of the major practices and expectations of the faculty and discipline and point out there will be differences from their previous experiences.
- ◆ In the personal domain, students new to Australia can experience settling in problems such as accommodation problems, cultural adjustment or homesickness. Although these are generally not the concern of the supervisor, checking that these elements are satisfactory will assist the student’s academic progress. If any is unsatisfactory, the student should be referred to the IPO.

## ☀️ STUDENT – SUPERVISOR RELATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

Students often have very different expectations about the supervision relationship than those of the supervisor. Following are some of the reported attitudes and expectations of students. Supervisors

- ◆ must be respected
- ◆ must be agreed with at all times
- ◆ will construct my research topic for me
- ◆ will tell me what to read
- ◆ will plan my time for me
- ◆ will correct my grammar errors

Thus, it is imperative that discussion takes place with the student at the very beginning of their candidature so that there are no misconceptions about what you expect of them and of what they expect from a supervisor. The notion of students having to create **independent** scholarly work needs to be explained fully and the importance and processes involved in this stressed.

## ☀️ INDEPENDENT STUDY AND TIME MANAGEMENT

- ◆ Students often do not have **advanced library research skills**. Thus they should be given instruction in the use, not only of the library catalogue, but also in techniques for finding appropriate electronic resources. Students should also be made aware of the breadth of resources that are available to them.
- ◆ As noted, students will often arrive with expectations that their time will be filled by carrying out tasks designed by the supervisor. Sometimes there is little understanding of the nature of independent research. The research process and how time is spent in your specific discipline should be explicitly explained to the student.
- ◆ Use of timetables and establishing expectations of time spent in their research should be discussed.

## ☀️ COMPUTER SKILLS

- ◆ Some students arrive in Australia with little computer knowledge, either for simple word processing or for research purposes. The STEPS training programs are available to postgraduate students and students should be directed to those as needed. The library also runs excellent introductory sessions at the beginning of each semester. Librarians responsible for your School may give 1-1 appointments to assist postgraduate students.

## ☀️ CRITICAL READING OF RESEARCH ARTICLES

- ◆ Many students are unsure of the nature of critical reading, thinking and writing in a discipline. To gain an insight into the students competency in this area, some supervisors give the students an initial structured task in this area. For example, 4-6 articles on a particular area are given to the student to read. The task may be to produce a review of

the articles, to write an essay on the topic given, to write a comparative summary of the articles. Whatever it is, it should address the criteria of critical reading and writing skills.

### **UNDERSTANDING THESIS STRUCTURE**

- ◆ Students sometimes do not have a good understanding of what the final outcome of their study, the thesis, actually looks like. It is often useful to show the student a **model of a thesis** in their area, so they are aware of what they are working towards. In analysing carefully the final product, students can be made aware of the process involved in their study.
- ◆ Each part of the process in writing the thesis should be made explicit to students and the timing of each set down as accurately as possible.

### **CRITICAL WRITING**

- ◆ This is a problem for not only NESB students. The process described above of checking critical reading skills and requiring students to do a task will help supervisors assess the quality of students' critical writing. In discussion with students, supervisors could also point out the elements of critical writing necessary within the discipline. LAS (ESL) provides classes for this and will work 1-1 with students in assessing and teaching these skills.

### **SEMINAR PRESENTATIONS**

- ◆ Seminar presentations are often required of postgraduate students. Students should be inducted into the discourse and style of such presentations, by being required to observe some of these before they are to give their own presentation.
- ◆ LAS (ESL) runs workshops to assist students in this area.

### **USEFUL RESOURCES FOR LECTURERS AND NESB POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS**

This is only a taste of what is available for NESB postgraduate students. If you have any specific enquiries, please contact us.

#### **TEXT RESOURCES:**

The following are available from the LTU library:

Ballard, Brigid & John Clanchy (1991), *Teaching Students from Overseas: a brief guide for lecturers and supervisors*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne.  
**378.19820994 B189t**

Ballard, B. (1995). Some Issues in Teaching International Students. In L. Conrad & L. Phillips (Eds.), *Reaching More Students*. Queensland: Griffith Institute for Higher Education. Pp. 107-114  
**378.1250994 R281**

Beasley, Colin (1990), Helping ESL/EFL Students with Language and Study Skills *HERDSA News*, vol 12, no. 1, 16-18, 23. **Bundoora Serials 378.005 HER**

Biggs, J. B & A. Watkins (1996). *The Chinese Learner : Cultural, Psychological And Contextual Influences* Hong Kong : Comparative Education Research Centre ; Melbourne, Vic : Australian Council for Educational Research, 1996  
**371.9089951 C539**

Brick, Jean (1991), *China: A Handbook in Intercultural Communication*, NCELTR, Macquarie University, Sydney. **303.482 B849c**

Burke, E. & Wyatt-Smith, C. (1996, March). *Academic and Non-academic Difficulties: Perceptions of Graduate Non-English Speaking Background Students*. *TESL-EJ*, 2 (1).  
<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/www.education/celia/tesl-ej/ej05/a1.html>

Burns, Robert B. (1991), Study and Stress among First Year Overseas Students in an Australian University, *Higher Education Research and Development*, vol.10, no.1.  
**Bundoora Serials 378.0072 HIG**

Ginsburg, Elizabeth (1992), Not Just a Matter of English, *HERDSA News*, vol.14, no.1. 6 - 8. **Bundoora Serials 378.005 HER**

Hofstede, Geert (1986), Cultural Differences in Teaching and Learning, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol.10, 301 - 320. **Bundoora Serials 300 I612**

Kennedy, Kerry J. (1995), Developing a Curriculum Guarantee for Overseas Students, *Higher Education Research and Development*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 35-46. **Bundoora Serials 378.0072 HIG**

Mezger, June (1992), *Bridging the Intercultural Communication Gap. A Guide for TAFE Teachers of International Students*, National TAFE Overseas Network, Hobart.  
**374.008693 M617b 1994**

Pennycook, Alistair (1994), *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*, Longman Publishing, New York. **306.44 P416c**

Ryan, Y & Zuber-Skerritt, O. (1999). *Supervising Postgraduates from non-English Speaking Backgrounds*, Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press (**available from LAS(ESL)**)

Shaddock, Ann (1996), *Teaching for Cultural Diversity*, Centre for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Scholarship, University of Canberra. With video.  
**Bundoora AV Video 378.017 T253 te**

Stevens, K & Asmar, C. (1999). *Doing Postgraduate Research in Australia* M.U.P. Canberra (**available from LAS(ESL)**)