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Language, study skill and related issues facing international students in the first year of their MPhil / PhD studies: relevance to institutional language, academic and other support services

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1. Introduction

1.1 The socio-political context

On 18 April 2006, the UK government unveiled the second phase of the Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education (PMI), which aims to attract an additional 100,000 overseas students to study in the UK and encourage partnerships between universities and colleges in the UK and overseas.

"These links highlight the growing internationalisation of education at all levels" said then prime minister Tony Blair, adding that this internationalism meant "sharing experience and knowledge and being open to innovation and creativity from whatever direction it comes". One of the aims of PMI Phase 2, we may note, is to "ensure that international students have a high quality experience" (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) Press notice 2006/0058).

Figures for 2006/ 2007 from the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) indicate the scale and context of the initiative to enhance educational internationalism. Table 1 summarises:

Table 1 All international students (non-UK domicile) in HE, 2005/06

All international students Level of Study	Mode of Study		
	Full-time	Part-time	Total
Postgraduate research	29,505	17,280	46,785
Postgraduate taught	81,030	30,425	111,455
Postgraduate other	6,160	7,175	13,335
First degree	121,240	8,960	130,200
Other undergraduate	10,690	17,595	28,285
Total non-UK	248,625	81,435	330,060

UKCISA information also confirms that international students studying at UK universities are concentrated in postgraduate sectors. In UK 2005/06 international students constituted:

- 11% of full-time first degree students and 10% of all first degree students
- 65% of full-time taught postgraduates and 40% of all taught postgraduates

- 48% of full-time research degree students and 41% of all research postgraduates.

The Australian Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) 2005 statistics on student internationalisation indicate its global dimension. In the year 2003, 76,877 and 122,226 international postgraduate and undergraduate students respectively were studying at Australian universities. The comparison is relevant to our study since we consult the related Australian literature frequently below in our quest for insights into the key issues.

So the stakes are clearly very high indeed, especially perhaps in the postgraduate sector. Failure to optimise the chances of the nearly 50,000 international postgraduate *research* students in UK here to achieve their best academically in a positive socio-cultural environment could have grave consequences. Failure affects not only the students concerned and those close to them but also their institutions at home or in their other countries, and the UK universities that may not have supported them adequately during their studying and living here. UK research funding policy initiatives over the past ten years (e.g. the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) *Strategic Plan 2006-11*, to regulate and audit the quality of research student training) make it increasingly important for universities to keep informed of the problems and progress of their postgraduate research students.

The independent-study, sink-or-swim ethos once common in research-oriented departments of British Universities has now mainly given way to “policy attention to the ‘training’ students need both to successfully complete their PhDs and in their future careers” (LLAS Sociology, Anthropology and Politics Subject Network, 2006). Already in 2002, UK research councils had published a list of 36 generic target abilities for institutions to include in their research degree training programmes. These covered areas such as research skills and management, the research environment, personal effectiveness, communication skills and team work. The research council inventory is taken

into account below in the development of our own research student data collection instrumentation.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The focus of the study described here, based as it is at the Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment (CRELLA), is on the academic, communication, management and psycho-social problems which may face international research students in the first year of their MPhil / PhD studies, with particular reference to the University of Bedfordshire (UoB). Our purpose is to contribute to the means of collecting information in these key areas, through a portfolio of instruments, using both closed- and open-ended approaches. The data obtained would be of relevance to institutional language, academic and other support services.

In the process of developing the instrument portfolio as described in the literature review, Section 2, and in the instrument design Section 3 of this report, we shall produce pilot data which we discuss in Section 4 below. The pilot data may also be informative on the situations of research students at the University of Bedfordshire and other UK universities.

2. Literature review

2.1 International research student context

Through its current research projects and student doctoral research, CRELLA has a strong record on the investigation of international student academic reading problems, for example in its International English Language Testing System (IELTS) funded research projects, Weir, Hawkey and Green, 2007 report on the cognitive processes underlying the academic reading construct, Hawkey and Weir (2008) investigate the process of item writing for academic reading tests.

These and other CRELLA studies view academic reading in context, of

course, in the process confirming that the other three language skills, of writing, listening and speaking also figure prominently in the problems identified by international students. Green, Unaldi and Weir (2008) report a survey of 766 University of Bedfordshire students, 477 of these international. Table 2 below confirms the relevance of all four language skills in any study of issues facing international students in their studies.

Table 2: English as an additional language (EAL) student perceptions of the relative difficulties of the four language skills

	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking
Most difficult	20.5%	19.7%	40.0%	34.5%
Second most difficult	31.4%	32.3%	33.9%	29.3%
Third most difficult	22.9%	21.7%	16.6%	16.8%
Fourth most difficult	25.2%	26.3%	9.5%	19.4%

The historical research heritage of CRELLA staff is relevant to the study described here. Roger Hawkey's doctoral research (1982) involved the investigation of inter-relationships between cognitive / affective and social factors and language learning through a longitudinal study of a group of overseas students in the first year of their postgraduate studies in the UK. Cyril Weir's own PhD research (1983) sought to identify the language needs of international students in tertiary education in the UK. Tony Green was awarded his PhD (2003) for an in-depth study of the impact of the IELTS on English language courses for international students. All three CRELLA staff members have since pursued further, through their academic work and publications, their interests in language learning, assessment and related matters. Hawkey's research will inform the present study in particular in its attention to factors beyond language affecting international research students success; Weir's close focus on student language needs will also influence the instrumentation we develop for our inquiry, and Green's study of international student language preparation is of particular relevance to the kinds of language programs required to support the students concerned.

Our own experience with international student problems at UK universities leads us to consider recent research across a *wide range of* potential problem areas. Reading for the project confirms the wisdom of this approach. In addition to EAL student *language skill proficiency problems*, the study attempts to take account of *academic literacy* issues (e.g. Bartlett and Chanock, eds., 2003), this category embracing the broad and often rather confused area of "study skills" (e.g. time management, note-taking, see below) and "research skills" (including, for example, *research questions, methods, thesis writing*, an area almost as widespread and untidy as one which it overlaps. We shall also cover student *research supervision and advising* (e.g. Acker, 2001), key *psycho-social factors* (e.g. Green, 1997) 2002), and *practical contextual* problems (see, for example, Matus-Grossman *et al*, 2002). Our study must take account, in addition, of the effects of *combinations* of problems associated with postgraduate research (e.g. Kiley and Mullins, eds., 2002).

The main intention of this study is to recommend an approach to obtaining, from the key stakeholders, namely the international research students, information that will help their university to help them to achieve their best academically in a positive socio-cultural environment. We have thus made considerable efforts to learn from the ways other universities and related institutions had attempted to do this. The precedent student and supervisor data collection exercises reviewed included those from the Universities of: Alberta, Auckland, Bath, Berkeley, Canberra, Case, Western, Deakin, DeMontford, Edinburgh, Flinders, Griffith, Keele, Oxford, Lancaster, Liverpool, London (University College), Melbourne, Nebraska, Ottawa, Sheffield, Stockholm, South Australia, St Benedict and St John's Colleges Minneapolis/St. Paul, Sunderland, Sydney (Faculty of Engineering Postgraduate Research student survey, 2006, and Survey of Higher Degree Research Students, 2006), Worcester (USA) , York (UK) and the Australian National University, Canberra. Relevant project development documentation was also sought from: AusAID, LLAS Sociology, Anthropology and Politics and

their 2007 postgraduate Research Experience Survey instrument, the National Research Committee (UK), National Research Council (USA) and the Sweden National Agency for HE.

2.2 Language and Socio-cultural aspects

In addition to the previous CRELLA studies mentioned above with their primary, though by no means exclusive, focus on international student academic reading needs, this present study is informed by theoretical and practice-related work across the conventional four skills. In line with current approaches to language teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) the model of communicative language ability of Bachman (1990), Bachman and Palmer (1996) is accepted. This attempts to take account of a range of communicative language competences, including, as well as the *grammatical* and the *textual, pragmatic, organisational, illocutionary* and *sociolinguistic* competences. We are also informed by Weir (2005) who, with his socio-cognitive framework for test validation, braves the complex world of metacognitive *processes* such as goal-setting, organising, topic modifying, which mediate and monitor *the knowledge base* available to the student including *language competence* and *content knowledge*. Such processes clearly involve the kinds of strategies required by EAL (and English as *first* language (EL1)) students in meeting academic literacy demands.

Typical of attempts by the universities themselves to specify academic literacy is the *Statement of Competencies Expected of Students entering California's Public Colleges and Universities* (2002), developed by the Committee of the Academic Senates of the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California. This usefully includes a wide range of the target academic language skills which may be lacking among EAL and EL1 students. From the point of view of our project, some of the Statement's more interesting target strategies and processes across the four language skills) are:

predicting the intention of the author from extra-textual cues; understanding the "rules" of various genres; retaining versatility in reading various forms of organization; having strategies for reading convoluted sentences; understanding separate ideas and then being able to see how these ideas form a whole; making connections to related topics or information; synthesising information in discussion and written assignments; arguing with the text; identifying key examples that attempt to prove the thesis; anticipating the direction of the argument or narrative; formulating adroit judgments about oral communication; delivering focused and coherent presentations; using gestures, tone and vocabulary tailored to the audience and purpose; speaking with a command of English language conventions; listening and simultaneously taking notes; differentiating between illustrative comments, supporting evidence, and evidence which contradicts the thesis; fulfilling a range of roles in small group discussions, asking clearly framed and articulated questions, ask how comments are related to the stream of ideas.

We see from the *California Statement of Competences* how closely what we call language, in the case of our international students the target language English, connects with other facets of their situation. Relatedly, Ballard and Clanchy (1991, 1997) identify as key factors: *argument, cultural difficulties in being direct and culturally divergent attitudes to knowledge compared with those of their assignment markers*, this latter problem causing frustration on behalf of markers at what they considered students' "inability" to deal with academic discourse. Ballard and Clanchy (1997) note:

..... lecturers all acknowledge the positive qualities of their students, but they are also clearly irritated by their unexpected weaknesses and extra demands that fall upon them as teachers. And, like a chorus, they all voice the (convenient) belief that the real problem is poor English (Ballard and Clanchy, 1997, p. 2).

Such negative reactions may be expected to be lessened by increased awareness of and attention to what the *Warwick University Intercultural Effectiveness in Global Education* study (2008) terms "critical competences",

as defined in both the intercultural interaction and the applied linguistics literature, namely: *awareness, attitudes, skills, knowledge and proficiency* (Fantini, 2000; Byram, 1997; Orwig, 1999). A 2004 University of Melbourne survey notes significant *socialising problems* for no fewer than 38% of their international students, a warning to the present study of the importance of covering this area of the international research student experience. The 2006 Oxford University postgraduate student questionnaire also emphasises the social dimension. With the individual supervision element inherent in the research student's academic experience, it is important (see, for example, Hawkey 1982, Mankletow and Lewis, 2005) to try to recognise individual learner differences across all five critical competences, and offer choice and flexibility in the research supervision process.

The message for our study from this brief excursion into the language, academic literacy and socio-cultural contexts of the international research is that investigations of potential problem issues should be *broad in scope yet sensitive in application*.

2.3 Study and Research Skills

As noted above, the constructs of *study skills* and *research skills* overlap. In fact the Birmingham University *Study skills - Guide to Effective Learning* (Gel/bham.ac.uk) describes study skills as synonymous with rather than overlapping "academic skills". The Guide covers areas such as: *essay writing, examination preparation, oral presentations, getting the most out of lectures and group work, completing assignments, projects, dissertations, becoming a more effective and efficient learner* "and many more". The Manchester University (humanities.manchester.ac.uk/studyskills) study skills list adds "*self-evaluation, time management, note-taking, psychological factors, computing and IT, making yourself employable*, and, underlining the overlap, *research skills* (as part of study skills).

Typical of the countless books on study skills is Kitzik (1997-2008), characteristically titled *How to study and make the most of your time*, who covers matters such as *scheduling, the study process, places, study space, "power study"; strategies (thinking skills SQ3R, reading skills e.g. main idea, key detail, note taking (reading, "research" and lecture), record keeping; exam task types, writing types, grammar, punctuation*. Lewis and Reinders (2003) add a relevant extra dimension with their book on study skills for EAL students, based on interviews with international students and their teachers. Similar skills areas are described but with a useful slant towards E.S.L needs in sections on *communicating with staff and students, learning new words* including *"university words", and language improvement*. The book's guidance on University life in general also looks at things from the international student perspective.

Under the *research skills* construct, Wisker (2001), in her *Postgraduate Research Handbook* (2007), in the main attempts to distinguish research skills from the study skills construct. The skills she identifies include *starting, choosing, proposal writing, managing supervisors(!), timing and tasks, learning approaches and styles, research cultures, research questions, literature review, methods, data collection and analysis, thesis writing and examination*. A very comprehensive and informative Glasgow University Faculty of Medicine Research Skills and Techniques inventory includes: *recognise and validate problems, critical thinking, develop theoretical concepts, know recent advances in field; relevant research methodologies; analyse and evaluate findings, summarise, report, reflect on progress; understand research context; observe confidentiality, ethical, attribution, copyright, Data Protection Act issues; project manage through to research goals; use appropriate financial, bibliographical, and other sources of information; use IT, present information clearly appropriately to purpose; articulate ideas clearly to a range of audiences; defend research outcomes at seminars and viva examination; demonstrate flexibility, self-awareness, self-*

discipline, motivation, commitment to continued professional development.
(medicine.gla.ac.uk/rtp//jointskills)

Many of the aspects of the study and research skills noted here are pursued in our data collection instruments as signalling potential problem areas. Given the overlap between linguistic and academic domains, it was likely that the various categories identified would be shared across for example the language-related research supervision and support needs questionnaires (see DC1, 3 and 4 below) and the open-ended language-related and study skills problem report form (see DC 2 below). The logical attraction of developing a *portfolio* of research student information collection instruments was clear to us from early on in the project.

2.4 Research Supervision

This study, initiated as it is by an academic centre with its own significant research supervision function, was always likely to be concerned with this aspect of the academic-administrative context. In the actual day-to-day functioning of a department such as CRELLA, it is clear, that the need to balance the requirements of student teaching and supervision; research and publication, conference participation and other outreach, that *supervisor : students roles and relationships* are key aspects of *all* these. The investigation of potential areas for improvement in student : supervisor relations will thus cover more than the supervision function.

The University of Canberra (Centre for the Enhancement of Learning Teaching and Scholarship, 2003) publishes a useful set of assumptions to be questioned by supervisors and their international students. One is new international students need to *change* in order study in a different culture. Okorochoa (1997), in a study supported by the UK-based Society for Research into Higher Education, makes the interesting related point that supervisors should respect students' educational, professional, and cultural knowledge and experience (see Ballard and Clanchy above), and that supervisor and

students should *carefully negotiate their respective roles and responsibilities* to clarify their mutual expectations. This construct is operationalised (see Lawson, 2001, Flinders University) in a questionnaire “designed to facilitate discussion of expectations held by postgraduate research students and supervisors” (p.1). Our own data collection instrument (DC4) below learns from Lawson, from Kiley and Cadman (1997) of the Advisory Centre for University Education, University of Adelaide, and from work at the Centre for Learning and Teaching, University of Technology, Sydney. The main purpose of the joint, split-differential questionnaire, which allows for student and supervisor to respond separately or jointly to questionnaire items on the same questionnaire, is to help them to establish an effective working relationship. Solutions to some of the supervision-related problems faced by research students may be presumed to lie partly in the hands of their supervisors. As Taylor (2006:1) points out, the assumption that research supervision is a mere “adjunct of research”, that (Rudd, 1985: 79-80) “if one can do research then one presumably can supervise it” is defective. Taylor cites Brown and Atkins (1988:115) as typical of the current view that while being active in research is probably a necessary condition for effective supervision it is not a sufficient one for supervisory success, which is seen increasingly as “probably the most subtle and complex” form of teaching “in which we engage”. Taylor summarises key messages from the growing literature on the pedagogy of doctoral supervision as enjoining supervisors to think of supervision as a form of teaching; to reflect on their expectations of their students and their students’ view of research; to discover their own preferred supervisor style, and, particularly interesting this, “to monitor the changing balance of dependence and independence over the course of the research project” Taylor, p.2).

Illustrating the student view of “what makes a great research degree supervisor” responses by 30 students to the 2006 University of South Australia Student Experience questionnaire pinpoint: *responsiveness* (including being available to students, having the time to supervise,

responding to emails and being a good manager of time and task); *empathy* (caring, about the research, showing kindness, respect, good listening, showing interest beyond academic issues); *knowledge and kudos*, track record in the chosen field, ability to critically review the students' work from a position of expertise and academic rigour.

The format as well as the content of the 2006 AusAID student questionnaire is also instructive. Participants are asked to give objective responses on a telling range of potential problem areas such as *academic background, settling in, access to books / equipment; English; Understanding the work expected; Health / Personal; Relations with your lecturer / supervisor; accommodation; isolation or homesickness*. Follow-up questions where a problem is admitted then invite suggestions on how it was alleviated and requests to rate support services that have been used. As will be seen below, our own piloting and findings favour *a portfolio* of closed and open-ended data collection instruments and a follow-up rather than a one-off approach to research student problem data collection and analysis.

We expect the findings of our research, though subject to the usual caution applicable to provisional pilot data (see Section 4 below), to be relevant to individual students and research supervisors and to institutional language, academic and other support services, both at the University of Bedfordshire and at other universities.

2.5 Research Student Administration and Support services

In the informal discussions within our own Centre of research student problems beyond those covered in our research projects, we noted, as does, for example, the 2006 AusAID student questionnaire, the relevance of international students' *finances* and *accommodation*. So does one of the most practicality-focused instruments in our review, the 2006 University of Ottawa questionnaire, which inquires into student *financial and accommodation situations* as well as *computer, library and welcome services*. The influential

2006 *University of Sydney Survey of Higher Degree Research Students* is also noted for its comprehensive coverage of research students support facilities and services. The University of Sheffield code of practice for research degree programmes (2002) informs us helpfully on support services, including aspects such as *computer, libraries services* and *research training*.

Given the importance of practical issues and student support services, and the fact that one of the aims of this study is to provide information useful to University of Bedfordshire, we note that this university's own Website refers to it's the following student support systems: *accommodation, childcare, health, counseling, the disability advice team, international students' support team and support while you study, academic advice*.

Our DC 5 combined open- and closed item questionnaire below, another instrument in the proposed portfolio for information collection, attempts to cover research student *administrative, financial, socio-cultural* and *personal experience* issues.

3. Instrumentation design and pilot data collection

3.1 Approach

Our approach to the collection of the information required to develop the portfolio of instruments for use in investigating language, study skill and related issues facing international research students included the following action.

- We had discussions with other research supervisory members of CRELLA on key problem areas focus areas based on experience with research students at CRELLA and elsewhere, and on appropriate data-collection frameworks.
- We also invited advice from Centre students on potential research-related problem areas.
- We drew insights from continuing CRELLA research on the academic reading activities and problems of students in their first-year of study and

on cognitive processes underlying the academic reading construct (see above).

- We attended three sessions, on the research examination process, thesis preparation and academic writing, of the University of Bedfordshire Research Student Training Programme 2007/08, where we were able to observe, address and discuss our study with the students, and invite them to respond to the pilot *language and study skill* and the *research supervision and support needs* questionnaires (DC 1 and 3, see below).
- We consulted relevant research and instrumentation by 29 universities and seven research organisations (see literature review above).

We made the following design and implementation decisions on the basis of the above actions:

- that our inquiry into language, study skill and related issues facing international students was broad enough to warrant a *portfolio* of data collection instruments rather than a single instrument
- that we should follow the participants' stated preference for a combined closed- and open-ended data format, with the option of more than one administration of a data collection instrument through their period of research
- that, at the initial pilot stage at least, the instruments would be administered through email and attachment, with every participant contacted (and, often replying) *personally* and thus more likely to be available for follow-up participation, for example through a further questionnaire or open-ended *pro forma* (see below); this approach led in general to closer contact with the students concerned and their volunteering more information relevant to our study.

Our information-seeking design was modified slightly in the light of discussion with the University of Bedfordshire research ethics committee on the issue of *informed consent* if part of the sample pilot population for the

research were students from our own research centre, CRELLA. Our assurance to the Committee that CRELLA students would not play a case-study or any other non-anonymous role in the research satisfied the committee.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments DC1 and DC2: Student Language and Study Skills problem questionnaire

Informed by the literature review and piloting for content coverage and format within the Centre, the *Student Language and Study Skills problem questionnaire* (DC1 in the portfolio, see below and in the discussion of pilot findings at 4.2) was developed. Note, in the light of the discussion of the apparent overlap between “study skills” and “research skills” above, that DC1 covers language in line with the communicative competence construct and key skills and strategies associated with academic literacy. It is our information collection questionnaire DC3 (see also below) which then has its main focus on research supervision and research student support areas.

The *Student Language and Study Skills problem questionnaire* (DC1) may characterised as follows:

- a 44-item instrument covering the language and study skill interface, using a four-choice Likert scale (*A serious problem ... Quite a serious problem ... A bit of a problem ... No problem*) with space for additional participant open comment
- items covering potential problems with language elements (e.g. *grammar, vocabulary, dialect, accents*)
- language macro-skills items (*reading, writing, listening, speaking*)
- items covering language micro-skills, processes, strategies across the four macro-skills (e.g. *distinguishing main from supporting ideas, listening for underlying assumptions, using discourse indicators (e.g. introducing, developing, emphasising, clarifying)*)
- study / research skills, bridging these two overlapping areas and operating from narrower to broader levels (e.g. *referencing, keeping good records,*

data collection and analysis, computer skills, delivering presentations, working with others, balancing studies and personal life).

DC 1 was modified, though only marginally, in the pre-piloting feedback phase. The original category "stress management" was deleted as too presumptuous, especially as it was probably covered in other related more analytic items (e.g. *managing work load*, and *balancing the demands of studies and personal life*). Table 3 shows DC1 (scaled to fit the page of this report).

Questionnaire DC1 was completed for piloting purposes by an opportunity sample of 24 students, contacted mainly through the Research Training Program. The participating group represents a fairly strong sample given that University of Bedfordshire figures for 2006 claim a total of 131 research students, 76 full-time and 55 part-time, including "writing" students, who may no longer be attending at the university in any regular way. An analysis of results from the pilot administration of DC1 appears in Section 4.1 below.

Table 3: Student Language and Study Skills problem questionnaire DC1

<i>Please put a mark in the column that best shows the extent to which, as a research student at the University of Bedfordshire, you have a problem in each of the following English language or study-related areas.</i>		A serious Problem	Quite a serious problem	A bit of a problem	No problem
1	English vocabulary				
2	English grammar				
3	dialects, accents				
4	speaking fast				
5	long texts				
6	difficult subject matter				
7	lack of background knowledge				
8	expressing relevant concepts in the field				
9	reading texts quickly to decide whether to study them carefully				
10	finding relevant information quickly				
11	distinguishing main from supporting ideas				
12	following complex arguments				
13	reading critically to evaluate authors' positions				
14	relating new information to existing knowledge				
15	making notes on information which will be needed				
16	summarising				
17	asking questions to help clarify concepts				
18	deciding what is important and what is not				
19	evaluating evidence				
20	listening for key points in a lecture, seminar / workshop/ supervision				
21	listening for underlying assumptions				
22	anticipating what is coming when listening				
23	taking efficient notes				
24	keeping good records				
25	relating lectures, seminars to previous material				
26	using discourse indicators (e.g. introducing, developing, transition, emphasising, clarifying, anticipating, concluding)				
27	using appropriate levels of writing formality				
28	data collection				
29	data analysis				
30	balancing qualitative and quantitative research approaches				
31	writing reports				
32	structuring writing in research mode (e.g. abstract, introduction, literature, methodology, data collection, analysis and findings, conclusions)				
33	reference skills (e.g. headings, numbers, bullets, footnotes; contents and index, cross-referencing)				
34	following up references through library and other sources				
35	computer skills				
36	delivering seminar or research group presentations				
37	using presentation aids effectively (e.g. OHP, PowerPoint)				
38	participating effectively in workshops, discussions				
40	working with others				
41	managing work load				
42	concentrating				
43	problem-solving				
44	balancing the demands of studies and personal life				
Further comments on your language and study skills experiences:					
Many thanks!					

DC2 is an open-ended report form covering in broad open-page format the areas covered analytically in DC1 above, that is *reading, writing, listening, speaking* and *study skills*). DC2 is intended mainly for later follow-up with students who have already completed DC1, thus operationalising our portfolio construct. The form simply requests open-ended responses to five questions: "Describe the main problems you have met so far in" *reading* (then *writing, listening, speaking*) "in English in connection with for your M/Phil / PhD".

The fifth question on DC2 is:

Describe the main problems you have met so far with *study skills* in connection with for your M/Phil / PhD? (time management, reference skills, presentation skills, computer use etc.)

No data have yet been collected through DC2, which is intended mainly for research student longer-term follow-up use, and would thus be administered to selected students at a later date.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument DC3: Student Research Supervision and Support Needs

Again learning from the literature review and expert opinion within CRELLA and beyond, the *Student Research Supervision and Support Needs questionnaire* (DC3 in the portfolio, see Table 4 below, and provisional pilot findings analysis in 4. 3). Note, in the light of the discussion of the overlap between study skills and research skills above, that DC3 emphasises an area not yet really broached by DC 1 or 2, namely research supervision and the context of the supervised research experience.

The DC3 questionnaire may be characterised as follows:

- a 34-item, four-choice Likert scale instrument (*Very important ... Fairly important ... Not that important ... Unimportant*), probing aspects of the supervisor : student : research support nexus
- with space for additional participant open comment items on each item and on additional matters.

DC 3 was adjusted slightly on the basis of piloting feedback, with items added on *supervision time-tabling, staffing (one or more supervisors), the nature of thesis help, and outside research contact-making*. DC3 is shown as Table 4 (to a scale adapted to fit the page of this report).

Table 4: Research Supervision and Support Needs questionnaire DC3

<i>Please put a cross (x) in the column that best describes the importance to you of <u>the following research supervision features</u>:</i>		Very important	Fairly important	Not that important	Unimportant	<i>Please add comments here to clarify or explain your views on the importance of each research supervision or support need.</i>
1	face-to-face supervision available when I need it					
2	a regular supervision time-table					
3	director of studies / supervisor email/ other non-face-to-face responses to my queries					
4	supervisions with either member of my supervisory team					
5	supervisions only with both members of my supervisory team					
6	guidance on research topic selection					
7	guidance on research topic refinement					
8	additional information on my topic					
9	help with my literature search					
10	help to obtain access to books, journals, papers I need					
11	formal training in research methods					
12	formal training in statistical analysis					
13	formal guidance with thesis writing					
14	feedback on my progress compared with other research students					
15	close editing of my thesis drafts					
16	guidance on the broad shape of my thesis					
17	clarification of all the University research student regulations relevant to my progress					
18	meetings with my supervisor(s) and fellow research students together					
19	access to a suitable working space in my Department					
20	access to efficient library services					
21	access to efficient computer facilities and services					
22	regular departmental research student seminars					
23	close contact with my research student colleagues					
24	a stimulating research atmosphere					
25	opportunity to take part in departmental research projects					
26	appropriate financial support for participation in departmental research projects					
27	social contact with research students in other departments					
28	help to attend relevant conferences					
29	help with journal publications					
30	help with making contacts in my research field					
31	advice on my academic career					
32	supervisor(s) as academic role model(s)					
33	practical advice from supervisor(s) on non-research matters					
34	friendship					
<p><i>Please add here on <u>other relevant research supervision matters</u> which you feel are not covered above:</i></p> <p><i>and/or other comments?</i></p> <p><i>Many thanks! RAH 1/5/07</i></p>						

Questionnaire DC3 was completed by 30 students, again contacted mainly through the Research Training Program. This is again a fairly strong number of participants given the relatively small University of Bedfordshire postgraduate research student cohort, but, as with the overlapping group of students completing DC1, the selection is opportunistic than random or stratified random. This will be taken into account in the analysis of responses in 4.2 below, which will be non-inferential and qualitative, as much concerned with possible future uses of the portfolio of information collection instruments as with tentative conclusions from the present use.

3.4 Data Collection Instrument DC4: Expectations on Supervision

Taking account (see Okorocho, 1997 and Ballard and Clanchy 1991 above) of the collaborative roles which supervisor and student should negotiate between themselves, and the way this is operationalised (Lawson, 2001 at Flinders University, Kiley and Cadman 2001) we propose a split-differential questionnaire (DC4 below), which allows for student completion or, in adapted form, for student and supervisor both to complete to generate helpful mutually helpful information and establish good working relationships. The draft DC4 below comes in the form of:

- a 21-item one to-five-scale item instrument, covering potential supervisor : shared responsibilities
- with the statements either identical for supervisor and student e.g.
Supervisors are responsible for selecting the research topic 1-2-3-4-5
Students are responsible for selecting the research topic or
- with the statement on one side of the differential scale phrased from the supervisor's perspective, the other from the student's e.g.:
Supervisors are responsible for specifying a research schedule 1-2-3-4-5
Students are responsible for specifying their own research schedule.

DC4 is shown here, again scaled to the page of this report, as Table 5.

is intended to offer a range of documents from which students, supervisors and, in some cases research student support service administrators, could select according to need.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments DC5 and 6

Our portfolio is completed with data collection instrument DC5, a combined open- and closed-item instrument on research student administrative, financial, socio-cultural and personal experiences, and DC6 the completely open research student self-portrait form. DC5 is presented here in scaled down format.

Table 6: Research Student Administrative, Financial, Socio-cultural and Personal Experience profile form (DC5)

Please answer the following questions on the administrative, financial, socio-cultural conditions and experiences of your time so far as a research student.								
How are you being supported financially? Is the support adequate? Any financial problems? Any income from current work?								
Where are you living here, in what kind of accommodation? How is it? How about transport between your accommodation and the university?								
Are you accompanied here? If so, how is/are your family/companion(s) doing here?								
How is your life socially? Have you made friends? How do you find people's attitudes to you?								
What do you intend to do when you finish your research studies here?								
Other comments:								
Please use this section to indicate if you have used the following university services and to rate the overall quality of the services you have received.								
<i>Have you used this service?</i>				<i>The quality of service was:</i>				
		<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>V poor</i>	<i>Poor</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>V good</i>
1	Student Union							
2	Research Graduate School							
3	Learning Resources Centre							
4	Library Services							
5	Accommodation Services							
6	Counselling Service							
7	Breo (Blackboard)							
9	Job Shop							
10	University Volunteering							
11	Other relevant student support services?							
+								

Notice that the areas of inquiry in DC5 are those reviewed in 2.5 above, including *finances, accommodation, personal and social circumstances*. The second part of the instrument, in Yes/No and Likert scale format, seeks student opinions on the university support services they may have accessed.

DC6 is completely open-format designed (and piloted) for possible follow-up use and giving students the scope to portray freely their circumstances as research students. The use of DC6 would add to our portfolio the potential for informative personal portraits of the students drawn from perspectives of their study, outside, and inner life contexts. A pilot DC 6 response indicated that the format was indeed likely to produce insights that might be missed by the more closed-format instruments.

Table 7: Research Student Self-portrait (DC6)

Please use this page (and extra ones if needed) to paint a portrait of yourself as a research student at the University of Bedfordshire. You may wish to cover: your study and research activities and relationships, your motivations, attitudes, and your life outside the university. Your portrait will help us to make sure we do our best to match the research support we provide with the real needs of our students.

Many thanks!

4. Some pilot Findings

Reference to the development and piloting of our research instrumentation above has mainly been in support of our intended research methods and tools. In this report, however, accepting the view of (Prescott and Soeken, 1989: 60) that pilot studies are often "underdiscussed, underused and underreported" and (see van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001: 3) tend to claim that much was learned from piloting, "without offering the reader details about what exactly was learnt". We shall present data from the pilot administrations of questionnaires DC 1 and 3, as analysed using the non-inferential statistics befitting the status of the information concerned.

4.1 Characteristics of the pilot groups

Students completing the Language and Study skills problem questionnaire (DC1) was (see above) an opportunity sample numbering 24 participants, a useful, though non-stratified sample of the 131 University of Bedfordshire research student population. Table 8 presents key biodata for the group.

Table 8: Profile of the Language and Study skills problem questionnaire (DC1) completing group

Gender	F 14	M 10	Ages	19-24: 4 35-39: 4 51+: 2	25-29: 5 40-44: 3	30-34: 5 45-50: 1
Countries of normal residence	UK Europe: 11 Mid-East: 3 S and E Asia: 10	First languages N = 9				
Degrees	Master degrees in arts, social sciences: 6 Master degrees in science and technology: 11 Other postgrad. qualifications: 5 MPhil: 2					

The Research Supervision and support needs group completing the DC3 questionnaire was also an opportunity sample, though, numbering 30 participants, it represented a respectable proportion of the University of Bedfordshire research student population (N=131 in 2006). A summary of the group in terms of their key biodata is as follows:

Table 9: Profile of the Research Supervision and Support questionnaire (DC3) completing group

Gender	F 19	M 11	Ages	19-24: 6 35-39: 4 51+: 4	25-29: 6 40-44: 5	30-34: 5+ 45-50: 0+
Countries of normal residence	UK Europe: 14 Mid-East: 4 S and E Asia: 12		First languages N = 11			
Degrees	Master degrees in arts, social sciences: 10 Master degrees in science and technology: 14 Other postgrad. qualifications: 4 MPhil: 2					

4.2 Language and Study Skills questionnaire (DC1) pilot findings

Table 10 here summarises pilot responses the Language and Study Skills questionnaire (DC1). All these data should, of course, be treated as tentative given their provisional pilot status and the primary role of this stage of the research, namely to develop the data collection instrument portfolio.

Table 10: Language and Study Skills questionnaire (DC1)

Main language +_study skills problems based on "serious" + "quite serious" at 50%+

1. data collection	33%	if "bit of a problem" added:	58%
2. dialects and accents	33%	"	75%
3. data analysis	29%	"	75%

Problems based on 3 scale selections, "serious" "quite" serious to "bit of a problem" at 60%+

1. difficult subject matter	79%
2. reading critically to evaluate author's position	71%
3. following complex arguments	71%
4. writing in research mode	71%
5. writing reports	67%
6. background knowledge	67%
7. using appropriate levels of writing formality	63%
8. grammar	63%

Least of a problem based on minimum 60% selecting "no problem"

1. working with others	88%
2. using seminar presentation aids effectively	63%
3. computer skills	63%
4. participating successfully in workshop, discussions	63%
5. long texts	63%

Tentative suggestions may be noted here that:

- it is at the study skills end of the language : study skills spectrum that the main problems lie for students who have reached the research degree stage; *data collection* and *data analysis* both appear with strong "serious

problem" selections and high totals of "serious" + "quite serious" combined percentages.

- In terms of "purer" language items, *grammar* does appear as a problem for some (at 63% "serious" "quite" serious to "bit of a problem"), as does accent and dialect (at 75%, reciprocally for both EAL and E11 users), but it is, in general, academic literacy issues that are more problematic, e.g. *reading critically to evaluate author's position; following complex arguments, writing in research mode; using appropriate levels of writing formality* (these are, of course, the kinds of area in which CRELLA itself is already engaged in researching, see above).
- Often, of course, the "language" and "academic literacy" issues merge, as indicated by an entry in the DC1 "further comment" space: "*I think it is all about the need to get more experience in writing a thesis! It will be a first time experience. Any extra training on writing in English will be very helpful*".
- In "the least of a problem" responses, it is heartening to see two items indicating positive experience in co-operation among research students and their peers: *working with others* (a very high 88% claiming "no problem") and *participating successfully in workshops, discussions* (63%).

4.3 Research Supervision Needs questionnaire (DC3) pilot findings

Table 11 here summarises pilot responses from the administration of the research supervision needs questionnaire DC3. As with the data in Table 10 above, the data should be seen as provisional given their pilot status as outcomes from our data collection instrument development process.

Indications will be noted that the students regard as important to them:

- supervision sessions (77% considering it important that face-to-face supervision is "available when I need it")
- supervisor research guidance of various kinds e.g. on topic refinement (100% "very" or "fairly" important ratings, compared with 90% for help on topic *selection*); and high need percentages also for supervisor help with journal publications (very important for 67%), conference attendance

(90% very + fairly important), and the “broad shape of the thesis” (83% very + fairly important).

- *formal* training in research methods (90% very + fairly important), statistical analysis (63% very important), thesis writing (87% very + fairly important) and various aspects of the research ethos (e.g. 87% very + fairly important ratings for “a stimulating research atmosphere”).

On other matters more susceptible to *independent* action by the research students, for example, university regulations and non-research issues, the students appear not to expect supervisor intervention.

Table 11: Summary of main points from Pilot DC3 use by 30 students

Very important (based on 60% + “very important” selections)	
1. face-to-face supervision available when I need it	77%
2. help with journal publications	67%
3. access to efficient library services	63%
4. formal training in statistical analysis	63%
Very important + fairly important (at 80% + selections, not including the above “very important” items)	
1. supervisor guidance on topic refinement	100%
2. formal training in research methods	90%
3. help to attend relevant conferences	90%
4. supervisors email etc responses to queries	90%
5. guidance on research topic selection	90%
6. access to efficient computer facilities and services	90%
7. supervisions with either member of my supervisory team	87%
8. formal guidance with thesis writing	87%
9. a stimulating research atmosphere	87%
10. supervisor(s) as academic role model(s)	83%
11. guidance on broad shape of thesis	83%
12. access to suitable work space in my department	80%
Unimportant + not that important (at 35% + selections)	
1. feedback on my progress compared with other students	50%
2. help to obtain books, journals I need	57%
3. social contact with research students from other departments	47%
4. meeting supervisor and other research students together	43%
5. advice from supervisor on non-research matters	43%
6. clarification of relevant University regulations	37%

Of interest from the 76 specific comments and 11 general *open-ended comments* added by the 30 research students in addition to the Likert scale responses summarised in Table 11 above, were the following key points:

- Face-to-face supervisions with both supervisors, need to be scheduled, not necessarily with a *fixed* time-table as such but with some kind of agreed

pattern of regularity and with an internal structure to the meetings, involving clearly-defined responsibilities for each member of the supervision team and non-face-to-face contacts as necessary.

- The importance of and occasional problems with topic refinement is mentioned in the open-ended comments.
- The importance of formal support in statistics and research methods is echoed in the open-ended comment. The support available for example through the UoB research training course (see above) is acknowledged, but there may well be a need for specific as well as more general training and help (see , for example, with thesis editing vs thesis writing guidance).
- The library services (see Table 9 above) are seen as very important; positive comment suggests that they are good at UoB anyway.
- The objective-item importance given to help with journal publications, project participation and conference attendance is supported in the open-ended comment.
- A stimulating research atmosphere is mentioned several times, though the students are realistic about its likelihood: “The people create the atmosphere” and “It’s good to know who else is involved in research and what they are looking in to”. But “Everyone is doing different things”...

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Our study has targeted language, academic literacy, psycho-social and administrative problems which may face international research students in the first year of their MPhil / PhD studies at the University of Bedfordshire. Our purpose has been to contribute through a portfolio of instruments to the collection of information in the target areas, mainly from the students themselves, though also with the involvement of supervisors.

We have developed six draft instruments:

1. a questionnaire (DC1) to elicit information on international research student language and study skills problems

2. a report form (DC2) for open-ended responses on language and study skills problems
3. a student research supervision and support needs questionnaire (DC3)
4. an expectations on supervision data collection instrument (DC4)
5. a combined open- and closed-item instrument on research student administrative, financial, socio-cultural and personal experiences (DC5)
6. a completely open-ended research student self-portrait form (DC6).

In the development and piloting of the instrumentation, the indications were that each instrument is likely to produce information relevant to a university's efforts to "ensure that international students have a high quality experience" (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) Press notice 2006/0058 cited in Section 1 above) . There are also indications from our study that a portfolio of data collection instruments has the possibility of producing information where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The instrument development and tentative data presented and discussed above have emphasised the multi-faceted complexity of the factors affecting international research students' experience at a university such as UoB. We have seen throughout this study that "language" constantly overlaps "study skills", which are anyway intricately involved in "research skills" in the territory occupied in a key authoritative role by the supervisor and team, calling frequently on the support systems of the university.

Given this view, supported by our study, we recommend further pursuit of a portfolio data collection approach to language, study skill and related issues facing international students in the first year of their MPhil / PhD studies, in the quest for optimal institutional language, academic and other support services. We believe firmly that the research completed so far, both in its theoretical dimensions and its empirical investigations, could be used to strengthen and refine further the university's ambitious efforts to enhance the experience of a key stakeholder group, its research students.

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