

## **Variations in Research Students**

*Karen Kwok, Junior Research Assistant,  
Centre for Learning Enhancement And Research (CLEAR),  
The Chinese University of Hong Kong*

Several experienced supervisors at CUHK have raised their concerns on the ability of their research students, and they shared their views on the strengths and weaknesses of the students in general.

### **Expectations from supervisors on the ability of their students**

Supervisors expect students to have some general knowledge about their chosen research area before they enter the PhD program. In particular, research in fields such as Chemistry, and Sports Science and Physical Education, are largely experiment-based. Research students are therefore expected to already have the practical skills and experience required to conduct experiments in an independent manner.

When they are in the PhD program, it is important for research students to be proactive throughout their research project. Supervisors do not expect students to simply follow their guidelines, but to think for themselves how to conduct their project and optimize the amount of research achieved, as well as the quality of results obtained. In other words, students have to drive their own research. Thus, it has been suggested that they need to be more open-minded, and to discuss questions with their supervisors and fellow students in a more active manner. Supervisors are always appreciative when students come to them with ideas about their research and to obtain their opinion and suggestions.

Research students are also expected to have a high standard of English language ability. To be proficient in writing, speaking and reading English is required both throughout a PhD and also after graduation as an academic. They have to be able to communicate in English in order to connect with other academics worldwide. However, as Professor David Donald from the Faculty of Law pointed out, this can be a challenge for students when English is not their first language.

In addition, it is preferable that research students have good interpersonal skills. The success of a research project may depend on the ability of a student to collaborate well with their supervisors and peers, as many tasks are performed with a team rather than alone. Professor Stephen Wong from the Faculty of Education mentioned that part of the research process might involve conducting interviews in order to collect data. A student with good interpersonal skills when interacting with an interviewee may enhance the quality of the interview and thus acquire better quality information. During their PhD study period, students may also have an opportunity to attend conferences or seminars. They therefore have to be open to discuss their research findings, exchange ideas and in some cases collaborate with worldwide researchers in their field, so as to optimize the chances of a successful research project.

### **Strengths of research students at CUHK**

Most of the research students who are recruited at CUHK have an outstanding academic record in their undergraduate studies, with the majority of them being awarded a first class

honors degree. In general, research students with an excellent academic record have a solid background knowledge of their own field. They are therefore well-trained with basic research knowledge and skills before entering the PhD program.

Moreover, most research students are hard-working, especially those from the Mainland China. They do whatever their supervisor tells them to do, and complete their tasks both accurately and efficiently. Professor Huang Jianwei from the Faculty of Engineering explained that “research students are capable of working very hard towards clearly outlined research objectives.” Professor Stephen Wong from the Faculty of Education also mentioned that throughout the supervision process, most research students are highly devoted to their research work. “Even Saturdays and Sundays they are still working in the laboratory.”

### **Weaknesses among CUHK research students**

On the whole, CUHK research students are found to be too passive when it comes to asking questions. The reason behind this might be the influence of the learning culture in Chinese societies. When at school, Chinese students are expected to stay silent for most of the time while they listen to the teacher. This is not an issue during their undergraduate studies when they attend lectures but when they enter the PhD program at CUHK, they still expect their supervisors to tell them what to do rather than being able to work in an independent manner.

Supervisors have also raised the problem of language ability. The level of English language usage among students, especially those from the Mainland, may not be as good as expected. Professor Dora Lau from the Faculty of Business Administration pointed out that to have a great improvement in one’s language ability within the normative period of a PhD may be difficult to attain. Meanwhile, she suggested that students who realize their language constraints should work harder in reading and learning how other people write, practice more by writing conference and journal papers, and proactively seeking comments to improve their writings.

Research students also tend to rely too heavily on scholarly writing. According to Professor Jimmy Yu from the Faculty of Science, students may believe too strongly in authority, such that they are not brave enough to challenge the traditional views in order to explore new perspectives with regards to their research topic.

Supervisors also noticed that some students are less likely to engage completely in their research work. Professor Stephen Wong mentioned that this is more often observed in the local students. He also noted that students who show passion for their work, and who get deeply involved and are persistent in their research are more successful than those who simply have an excellent academic record.