

## Checking on a nanny? Riko's friend's experience and a response

*I attended your very informative workshop at Barchester last month. You invited us to send in our experiences. So, I thought you ought to have the story outline of my friend's PhD that I told you about at the end of the workshop...*

*I, myself, was born and raised in America, but daughter of Japanese parents. I've always been very aware of the culture clash (and more aware now with these PhD stories). My mother had similar hardships with her Masters supervisors. I guess I'm an outsider looking in on a very familiar problem - half of the problem is the ability to converse in English, and the other half is the clash between Eastern and Western mentality.*

*Meiling's story is such a shocking but not surprising one. Her neighbor (also from China) is happily studying at Wessex Uni with a younger first supervisor. However, I also feel their approaches to life and learning are completely different. Meiling is a darker, more sullen, pessimistic girl, while her neighbor is usually cheerful and optimistic.*

*Please include this story in an exercise. It is a shame this happened, and the story needs to get out there. Will you be putting out a book on all of this? It would be great for people who can't attend your seminars to also have access to these informative case studies.*

*I know about these stories because I volunteer on the weekends at a free English class in South London. I help students proofread any written work (even short emails) as well as give them one-to-one lessons on English speaking.*

### Riko's account of 'what went wrong for Meiling's PhD'

1. Meiling has always wanted to be a therapist and help children. However, she can't get into a clinical program, so applies for a PhD instead (wrong mindset from the start).
2. She wants to study in the UK because China is not really as up-to-date on methods, and it looks good in China to have studied in the western world.
3. Guru phenomenon - typical Asian mentality of "work with the best and be the best". Meiling chooses to work with a Guru.
4. This Guru is known to take on risky international students to help college funds, so this isn't the first time this situation has happened.
5. Guru wants to continue his line of research, but Meiling's ideas don't really fit exactly. So, Guru tries to make them fit. Guru also talks on his mobile phone and

- checks emails constantly at every meeting. Guru cuts every hour meeting short by telling her to leave after 30 minutes.
6. Meiling becomes more and more unable to cope with Guru's demands and inattention, but the humble (Asian) student doesn't speak up.
  7. Meiling passes the first round of evaluations (perhaps not taken too seriously by the evaluators).
  8. Guru discourages Meiling from applying for any financial support and refuses to write recommendations for already prepared applications.
  9. Guru starts criticizing the student's English abilities. Guru's criticisms are not constructive, though. Instead, they are about punctuation and spelling errors.
  10. Meiling has to write more and more (30,000-word documents) for Guru and hasn't started her experiment yet by the end of the 1st year.
  11. Meiling flies to China to start collecting data at schools before attending methodological training courses in Belgium. Meiling has faulty concepts of how to collect data, and isn't given much direction or guidance by her supervisor.
  12. When Meiling returns from China and Belgium three months later, a second round of evaluations reject her transfer of status due to lack of results and empirical data.
  13. Drama unfolds with course administrator, Guru supervisor, and Meiling. Also, since Guru has connections to virtually all surrounding universities, Meiling can't get into any other programs.
  14. Meiling blames external conditions (e.g. UK academic system, poor supervision, no funding) for what has happened. How much of it was her or Guru's fault, and how much of it was the unfortunate situation?
  15. After a year and a half of English tutoring, Meiling's English has not improved much.

---

### Team task

Before turning the page list the main issues raised by this story on the acetate provided

---

## Riko's suggestions

How to avoid this situation in the future

### Students

1. Avoid Gurus as first supervisor, perhaps best as 2nd. (As you, John, stated in the workshop)
2. Audition your supervisors, ask their past students how they were; don't just base your decision to work with them on their work...also base decisions on how they supervise. Think about how you would do a background check on a nanny (not just look at her CV). If you get bad recommendations from past students, do not disregard them and think your situation will be different.
3. Don't expect to get funding as an international student, but link up with a supervisor who will help you fight for money.
4. Know what a PhD is geared towards (teaching and research) in the UK and USA, even if the PhD is regarded as something different in another country. Otherwise, you will end up doing a lot of hard work for just the title and be prepared to do the wrong thing after 3-4 years.

### Supervisors

1. Do not take on risky students for money. If you do, make sure you let them know they're risky (and why!)...
2. Treat all evaluations seriously so the student doesn't get the wrong impression or wrong feedback every step of the way.

Let me know if this is useful to you.

Best,  
Riko

## Reflections from a supervisor

I slightly sympathise with Guru, I have to say. The problem is that when you get a certain level of international reputation, prospective students do contact you all the time. Most of them are unsuitable, unfunded, or unrealistic. But just occasionally there is a temptation to take them on because they so much want to work with you, and will even pester and pursue you, if you initially say no. They insist they don't want to work with anyone else, even if you explain that you are very busy, and someone else would have more time to devote to their project. The way this University limits work, if you have PTs and second supervisions, you can end up being involved with 9-10 supervisees, all of whom really need the same level of attention.

But you relent, and then they arrive and are surprised that you are, actually, very busy, as you had warned them you would be. I explain to them that we have to arrange meetings at least a month ahead of time, and I can't be flexible and rearrange at a few days' notice, because my diary is so full, and that I need at least a week to read work. But some of them just ignore this, and are then unhappy if I can't move a meeting to the next day, or read the work they send me hours before the supervision.

There have to be realistic expectations on both sides. What I really hate is the email that begins, 'I know you said you were really busy, but could you just do this really important thing for me at really short notice or I'll lose my funding/not get a job interview/fail my transfer or upgrade.' So you are, in effect, morally blackmailed into doing it.

So I think one of the most valuable things I learned from your workshop is that I really must not be tempted to take lots of supervisions on, even if it means having to disappoint people, be they applicants or colleagues.

---

## Team task

One the acetate provided list your suggestions for

Postgraduate students

Supervisors

Departments/institutions

---