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The Subtle Art of Internationalisation of Higher Education

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Abstract

The wave of internationalisation of higher education have brought a great deal of opportunities for higher education institutions (HEIs) in which HEIs have largely benefited from enormous influx of international students on campus yet on the other end of the quadrant internationalisation have also exposed HEIs to certain unanticipated challenges. One of the imminent challenges facing the HEIs in the UK is the availability of qualified academic staff members to undertake supervisory roles at postgraduate level, in particular, given the continuous increase in postgraduate degree programmes. This dilemma is stressed in further details in this study and recommendations are made for policy makers, academic staff members and students.

Keywords: *Internationalisation, Higher Education, Student-supervisory Dilemmas, Institutional Dilemmas, Postgraduate Supervision, Catch-22.*

1. Introduction

Internationalisation of higher education that started with the beginning of the new millennium has engulfed the higher education sector worldwide (Nawaz, 2018). Developed education sectors such as those of America, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom are at the forefront of globalisation or internationalisation of higher education. Many universities, guided by different ideologies, have responded to the wave of internationalisation of higher education by engaging in “an ambiguous and unclear journey of internationalisation”, mainly driven by the economic imperatives without much thought as to how we may then make best use of the opportunities this opens up (Agnew & VanBalkom, 2009; Altbach & Knight, 2007). Furthermore, such internationalisation strategies have primarily focused on increasing student recruitment (Robson, 2015) and have paid scant attention on how these strategies effect on the academic faculty members, “albeit assuming a central position in an institution’s internationalisation process” (Kim & Locke, 2010). Furthermore, the proposed teaching excellence framework (TEF) for UK universities (Berger & Wild, 2016; Wild & Berger, 2016) and existence of research excellence framework (REF) have led universities to take additional measures such as segregating academic staff members into research oriented and teaching focused by revising their job contract accordingly. Such policies have introduced some unanticipated challenges for academic faculty members.

One such challenge is the lack of academics’ availability and/or willingness to undertake postgraduate (PhD, in particular) supervision. Such dilemmas have become increasingly inevitable in many universities worldwide and the UK, in particular, given the increasing postgraduate enrolments conjoined with higher student diversity and limited number of academics willing to take up supervisory roles (Murphy et al., 2007; Petersen, 2014; Robinson-Pant, 2009). As a result, lower conversion rates, delays in PhD completion, and student-supervisor conflicts are noted across the whole sector.

2. Background

2.1 Internationalisation of Higher Education

The term “internationalisation” covers different things, and includes different dimensions, with varied stresses at different levels of higher education (Zolfaghari et al., 2009). In this paper, internationalization of higher education refers to “the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution” (Knight, 1999). At the core of internationalisation is the movement of human

capital (Nawaz, 2016), urged by pull or push factors including the introduction of austerity in certain countries around the globe (Nawaz, 2017).

2.2 Student Dilemmas: International PhD Students

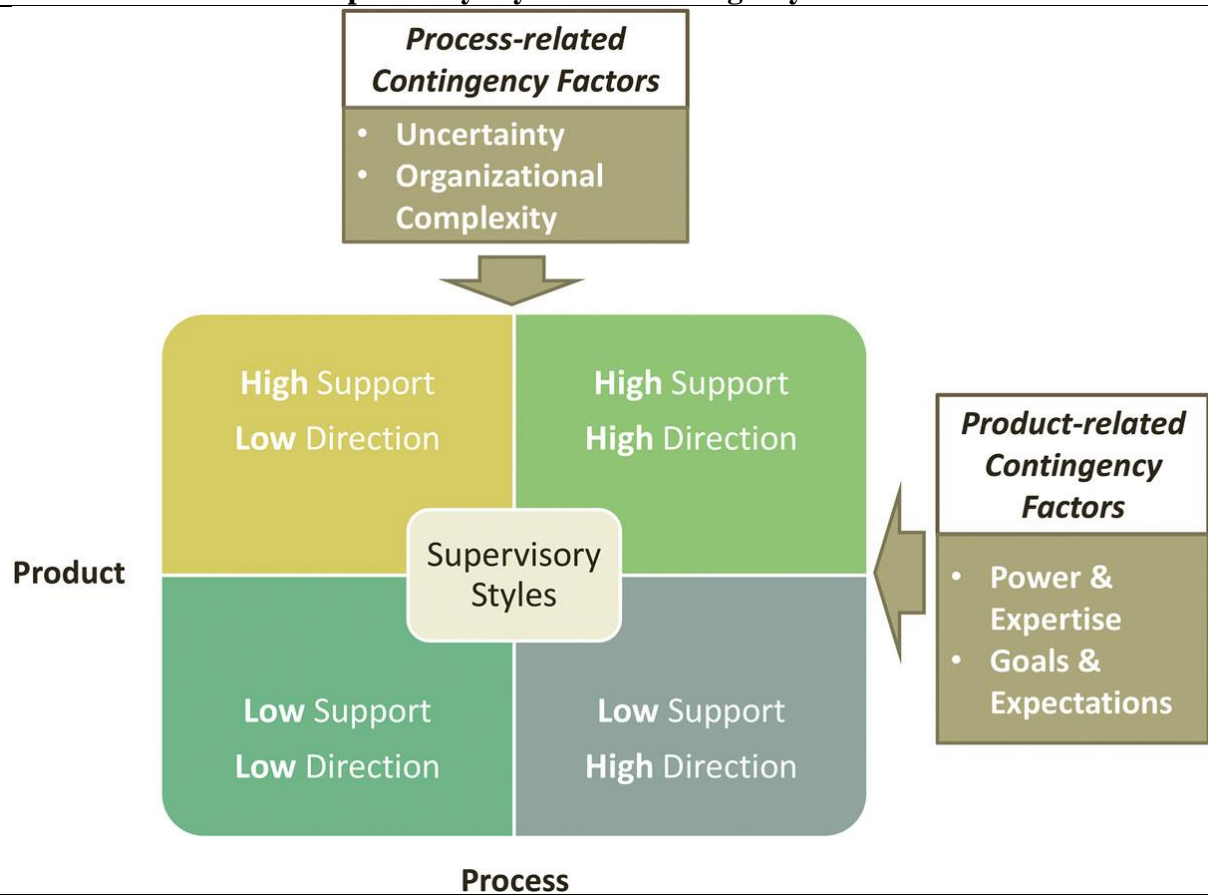
Previous research suggests that international students generally face a double bind: they need to develop positive relationships with the host institution to count on institutional support in order to maintain their legal status (Naidoo, 1991). More fundamentally, they are interested in a supervisor who not only can help them develop their social skills to adjust into the new environment (Robinson-Pant, 2009) but may perceive their supervisor to befriend them (Rose, 2005) and become “a part of their personal relationship network” (Wan et al., 1992). Rose (2005) further stressed that compared with home students, “international students may exhibit different learning styles, face differences in socio-political factors, have different acculturation experiences, report higher stress pertaining to environmental adjustment, perceive greater prejudice, be more affiliated with their own international groups, use less English, and encounter greater language barriers compared with domestic students”. It is therefore, argued that the supervisors shall expect such students, approaching them for formal guidance and direction for academic advice and social adjustments (Borg et al., 2009; Nawaz, 2016).

Pratt et al. (2015), however, argues that the dilemma is, since most of the postgraduate students come from diversified cultural and educational backgrounds, they may nurture an unfamiliar environment for both –the students and the supervisors that may lead to dissatisfactory outcomes (Brown et al., 2016). Therefore, it is crucial to set clear expectations and understanding of the roles to avoid student-supervisor conflicts (Harman, 2003; Heath, 2002; Murphy et al., 2007).

2.3 Student-supervisor Relationship Dilemmas

The empirical literature suggest that PhD is a stressful journey for students (Waijjer et al., 2016) and academics (Winefield et al., 2003). Empirical evidence, in explaining the success of a PhD project, highlights the significance of supervision style and quality (McAlpine & Norton, 2006; Murphy et al., 2007). It is well documented that effective supervision can significantly affect the quality and outcome of a PhD project (Gill & Burnard, 2008; Ives & Rowley, 2005; Rose, 2005). Therefore, it is argued that in order to provide effective supervision, it is crucial for academics to understand students’ needs/expectations, which may vary significantly, given the increasing student diversity in higher education (Petersen, 2014; Robinson-Pant, 2009).

Figure 1
Supervisory Styles and Contingency Factors



Source: Boehe (2016, p. 404).

In this regards, Rose (2005) have found that effective communication and honest feedback are the two most important things students expect from their mentors. In her earlier research (Rose, 2005), she reported that 75% of the research participants expected their mentors to “communicate openly, clearly, and effectively” and “provide honest feedback”. In Australia, Heath (2002) and Harman (2003), analysed the views of PhD students about their supervisors and have reported a strong correlation between frequency of student-supervisor meetings and PhD completion rates. Boehe (2016) is of the view that these factors may interact, particularly when supervision style conflicts with these factors (see Figure 1 for details)

2.4 Institutional Dilemmas: Excellence in Research and Teaching

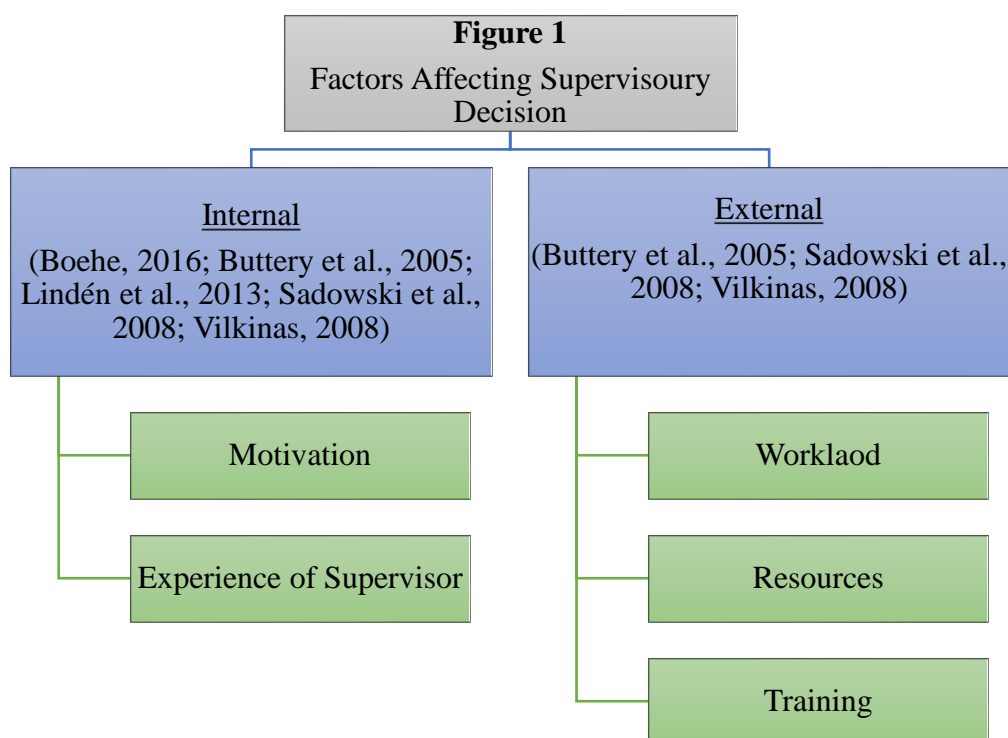
In an attempt to prepare well for the upcoming Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and Research Excellence Framework (REF), HEIs in the UK have adopted a new approach to maintain and improve their status in the league tables. Many HEIs in the UK have segregated their staff members based on their research track record and teaching excellence. In a industry-wise exercise titled *Potential for REF & TEF*, academics have been divided into

good researchers (those with potential to contribute to the REF through publishing in top-tier academic journals) and good teaching (those with good teaching records to maintain the quality teaching at campus). The rationale behind the move is to improve HEIs position in the league table. To simply this further, say an HEI has 100 academic staff members on their pay role. For the REF, the HEI is required to submit the total research output along with numbers of staff members. Now, not all of the 100 staff members are research active and may not contribute equally in the research exercise. However, if submitted the ratio –output to total staff will be very low. To avoid this HEIs have changed the contract of the existing staff members –based on their strengths –research or teaching. Assume in the this case if 40 out of 100 staff members are research active and have the potential to contribute to the REF, the HEI will submit their research output along with number of research staff i.e. 40 so the ratio will improve significantly.

It may sound a clever move from an institution perspective but it has dire impact on the academic staff members. Those classified as ‘*good teachers*’ have revised their focus on teaching excellence as they perceive benefit –both securing jobs and progressing in their careers if they maintain good quality teaching. Hence, they have washed their hands from any research related responsibilities –including supervision. This has resulted in an increase in the workload for those who work under the umbrella of ‘*active researchers*’. For researchers the challenge is to produce good quality research as they are expected to contribute to the REF as well as progress in their career. Ultimately, they are not very keen on supervising the students. As a result lack of academic availability, engagement and supervision is evident in the UK HEIs. It is therefore, imperative for the HEIs to take immediate measures first to identify factors behind this issue and secondly tackle these issues should they wish to remain in the higher education sector. In the following section highlights some of the related issues.

3. Factors Effecting Academics’ Choice of Supervision

The literature has identified a range of internal and external factors (see Boehe, 2016; Buttery et al., 2005; Lindén et al., 2013; Sadowski et al., 2008; Vilkinas, 2008) that can affect an academics’ choice to undertake a supervisory role (Askew et al., 2016). See Figure 1 below for details.



3.1 Internal Factors

Internal factors refer to factors affiliated with one's internal personal traits such as education & qualification, motivation to progress and experience.

3.1.1 Motivation

From a psychological perspective, motivation is an essential and very strong factor to opt for challenge in any walk of life. There is no exception for academic or any other occupation for that matter. Whitelock et al. (2008) notes that motivation could influence an academics' decision to undertake supervisory role. Motivation could be intrinsic or extrinsic (Houston et al., 2006). Academics are mainly attracted by intrinsic motivators such as desire to gain intellectual nobility in academia through publications (Houston et al., 2006).

The increased pressures for high quality research in addition to increased postgraduate supervision have added extra pressure on the research active academics. A feasible way of going forward and motivate academics for supervisory roles is to link the potential research projects (undertaken by a postgraduate student) to those of the academics' research interest. In this way, the academics will see the benefit of supervising a research project as they see the potential contribution through research publication. This will equally help the hosting HEI to achieve its objectives of research excellence by contributing to the REF to potentially improve the status in the league tables.

3.1.2 Experience of Supervisor

Experience here refers to both –having an experience to supervise at postgraduate level and experience gained through the process –good or bad. The best way is to pair up academics. That is, forming a new supervisory team where one or more young/new academic staff members join an experienced academic to supervise a research project to success.

3.2 External factors

Subsumed under external are all those factors that are controlled at institutional level rather than at individual level. These include but not limited to workload allocation, training and development opportunities, and resources to work effectively.

3.2.1 Workloads

As stated above academics are under increased pressures to maintain a balance between their research, teaching and supervisory responsibilities. Previous research suggests that intensified pressure and performance expectations (from institution and students) have a direct impact on an academics' workloads (Houston et al., 2006) and their commitments to research and teaching (Sadowski et al., 2008; Vilkinas, 2008). Simultaneously, demand for quality supervision by postgraduate students is high as they come from diversified cultural and educational backgrounds (Pratt et al., 2015). These students, therefore, expect their supervisor to help them develop their academic (Borg et al., 2009) as well social skills to adjust into the new environment (Robinson-Pant, 2009), which is time consuming.

This institutional issue can be resolved by a close coordination between head of the departments. Since line managers such as departmental heads are usually responsible for workload allocation therefore, it is a line management responsibility to adopt a fair workload allocation policy across the department. Offering a balanced workload for research active academics will in turn motivate them to undertake additional supervisory role, as they will feel valued by the institution.

3.2.2 Resources

Resources here refer to structural capital, largely defined as a combination of tangible (e.g., building facilities, work place –separate office facilities, latest machines etc.) and intangible resources such as statistical software used in data analysis, databases to access research data and subscription to academic journals in order to access the latest research trends. An academic may feel motivated and willing to opt for postgraduate supervision, provided access to the said resources. A well-equipped academic will equally feel more confident and supported.

3.2.3 Training

Training is an important external factor that could encouraged an academic to undertake supervisory role. Training ranges from simple training in the form of induction to understand the culture of the organisation –how things are done around to more sophisticated training to excel in certain management and supervision skills. Yet again, a well-trained academic will ultimately feel more confident and prepared to face the challenge of supervision.

4. Conclusion

Internationalisation of higher education has exposed the higher education sector to some unprecedented challenges. One such challenges that has been explored in this paper is identifying the factors affecting an academics' choice to undertake postgraduate supervision. The paper also highlighted the needs of international postgraduate students and proposed possible solutions for potential supervisors to satisfy the needs of this cohort of students. Lack of academic availability to supervise postgraduate students is an imminent challenge for the HEIs in the UK and elsewhere for that matter. HEIs are in a catch-22 situation hence, it is imperative for them to resolve these issues sooner rather than latter in order to remain in the league of higher education providers in the world and attract more students hence, achieving sustainability. Failure to act swiftly may result in HEIs losing competitive advantage.

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