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The pedagogy of good PhD supervision

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Abstract: During the last decade, the scope and scale of higher education have changed dramatically in which internationalisation, often confused with globalisation, has led to more extensive pattern of activity and collaboration. Whilst internationalisation of higher education have paved the way for higher education institutions (HEIs) to attract good quality international students to accumulate economic and intellectual capital, it has also introduced some unanticipated challenges for the HEIs. One such challenge is the lack of academics' willingness to undertake postgraduate supervision. Such dilemmas have become increasingly inevitable in many universities in the UK given the increasing postgraduate enrolments conjoined with the introduction of teaching excellence framework and limited number of academics willing to take up supervisory roles. Against this background, the main contribution of this paper is to identify the factors affecting academics' choice to opt-in/opt-out of the supervisory role and offer a balanced approach to match the student (protégé) expectations.

Keywords: internationalisation; higher education; PhD supervision; student-supervisory dilemmas; teaching-and-research excellence framework; game of league tables.

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Biographical notes: Tasawar Nawaz's research involves interpretive and positivist dimensions in the areas of inclusive finance, corporate governance, human capital, and internationalisation of higher education.

1 Introduction

The scope and scale of higher education have changed dramatically during the last decade, in which internationalisation, often confused with globalisation, has led to more extensive pattern of activity and collaboration (Nawaz, 2018b). The higher education sector in the past few decades has transformed by various kinds of internationalisation processes that operate in a constant flux of globalisation (Nawaz, 2017a). The internationalisation activities of higher education institutions (HEIs) have expanded dramatically in terms of volume, scope and complexity (Altbach and Knight, 2007), which has resulted in an increase in cross border student flow (Kanama, 2016). In the UK, for instance, half of the full-time postgraduate students are non-UK domiciled.

Many universities, guided by different ideologies, have responded to the wave of internationalisation by engaging in ‘an ambiguous and unclear journey of internationalisation’ (Altbach and Knight, 2007). Such internationalisation strategies have primarily focused on increasing student recruitment and have paid scant attention on how these strategies effect on the academic faculty members (Nawaz, 2017a). Furthermore, the prosed teaching excellence framework (TEF) for the UK universities and the existence of research excellence framework (REF) have led universities to take additional measures such segregating academic staff members into research oriented and teaching focused by revising their job contracts accordingly (Wild and Berger, 2016). Such policies have introduced some unanticipated challenges for academic faculty members (also see, Nawaz, 2017b; Nawaz, 2016a).

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 given the increasing postgraduate enrolments (Murphy et al., 2007; Robinson-Pant, 2009) conjoined with higher student diversity and limited number of academics willing to take up the supervisory roles (Petersen, 2014).

Against this background, the main purpose of this paper is to identify the factors affecting academics’ choice to opt-in/opt-out of the supervisory role as a consequence of university’s strategic policies and offer a balanced approach to match the student (protégé) expectations. The study is conducted in the context of a business school affiliated with a leading teaching focused university in the UK.

2 The subtle art of internationalisation

Before exploiting the various strands of internationalisation at the sampled institution, it is imperative to define clearly the term internationalisation. Internationalisation has been often confused with globalisation and has been defined in the similar context. Knight (1999, p.16), however, clarifies that internationalisation of higher education is “the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution”. The foregoing definition is adopted in this paper, which focuses on one of the business schools operating in the UK (hereafter, UKBS).

2.1 Internationalisation at host institution

The focused higher education provider – the UKBS refers to the host institution in this research. The UKBS hosted by one of the largest universities (in terms of student enrolments) in the UK. UKBS consists of four main departments namely: accounting and finance (A&F); human resource management (HRM); shipping, logistics and supply-chain management (SLSM); and tourism and hospitality management (THM). Like many HEIs around the world, UKBS has embraced internationalisation in a variety of ways. It is profoundly involved in a range of internationalisation activities to increase and sustain long-term academic partnerships with HEIs globally.

2.2 *PhD students' population*

Majority of the PhD students at UKBS are full-time students for whom PhD research is the main task. Furthermore, most of these students are international. They are either sponsored by their governments or are self-funded. Thus, such students are under further scrutiny by the UK immigration to finish their degrees within the allocated time (e.g., 40 months for a full-time PhD programme), the sponsors to complete the project in a timely and the family (if self-funded).

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 (Robinson-Pant, 2009). More fundamentally, they are interested in a supervisor who is willing to help them develop their social skills to adjust into the new environment as well as they may perceive their supervisor to befriend them (Rose, 2005). Therefore, supervisors shall expect such students, approaching them for formal guidance and direction to not only cope with their academic commitments but social adjustments to a new environment and culture as well (Rose, 2005).

However, the dilemma is, since most of the postgraduate students in UKBS come from diversified cultural and educational backgrounds, they may nurture an unfamiliar environment for both – the students and the supervisors which may lead to dissatisfactory outcomes (Pratt et al., 2015). Therefore, it is crucial to set clear expectations and understanding of the roles to avoid student-supervisor conflicts or dilemmas (Murphy et al., 2007).

2.2.1 *Student-supervisor relationship: what PhD students expect from their supervisors?*

PhD is a stressful journey for students and academics. Empirical evidence, in explaining the success of a PhD project, highlights the significance of supervision style and quality (see Gill and Burnard, 2008; Murphy et al., 2007). It is well documented that effective supervision can significantly affect the quality and outcome of a PhD project (Gelegenis and Axaopoulos, 2015; Ives and Rowley, 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).

The specific needs of PhD students identified in this section are no different for those students studying at UKBS. Student expectations are academics responsibilities. Now the next step is to analyse the factors affecting academics decision to take up these responsibilities.

2.3 *Challenges of internationalisation at host institution*

In an attempt to prepare well for the upcoming TEF and REF, the UKBS has revised the contracts of all its academic staff members at grade 7/8 (lecturer/teaching fellow). The newly introduced contracts classify academics into teaching and scholarship and teaching and research. Academics under the former contracts are expected to be more innovative in teaching and learning while academics under the latter are expected to be active-researchers with a potential to contribute in the upcoming REF.

Such divide has introduced few challenges within UKBS being the host institution. The immediate effect of these measures is strong in disciplines offering accredited degrees. One such department is Accounting and Finance (hereafter, A&F) where numbers of lecturers at grade 7/8 are higher as compare to number of professors or associate professors (usually, grade 9 or higher). At the same time, the number PhD applications have risen for this department over the past five years partly, as the UKBS expanded its portfolio of internationalisation activities however; the conversion rate for A&F is the lowest within the business school. A trend analysis is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1 PhD conversion rate trends by departments (see online version for colours)

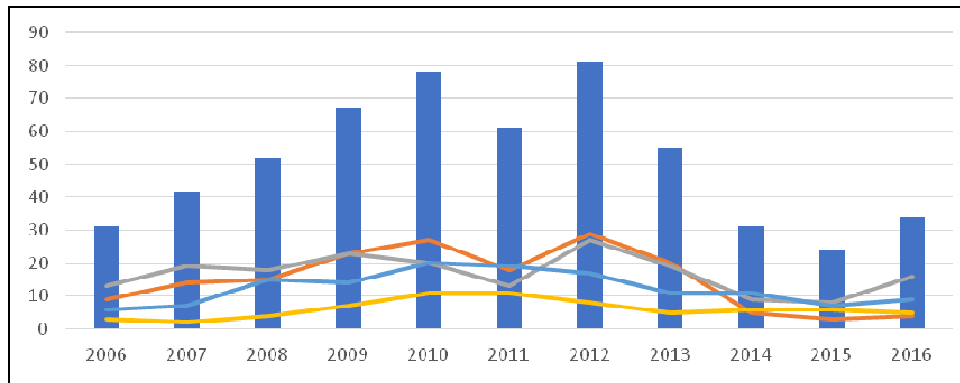


Figure 1 illustrates the conversion (accepted PhD students) rate in the UKBS for the past eleven years for the 2006–2016 period. The blue vertical columns represent the overall conversion rate. The horizontal lines in orange, grey, yellow and blue represent the conversion rates for the A&F, HRM, SLSM, and THM departments, respectively. As can be observed in the graph, the overall conversion rate declines significantly from 2014 onwards. This is when the academic contracts were introduced in UKBS. As can be observed, the impact of these newly introduced contracts is highest on A&F as compared to other departments with UKBS in terms of PhD supervision offers.

In UKBS, the challenge facing academics is to either focus on strengthening personal research profile through publications to progress in their academic career or supervising research students for timely completion (Green and Whitsed, 2013). Boehe (2016) notes that while both the activities are complementary, the trade-off likely arises when academics aiming to publish in top-tier journals supervise students with no research profiles and need more attention. This ultimately effects on academics’ workloads and research commitments.

3 Research approach

The research is based on secondary data collected form the publicly available sources such as annual reports, institutions’ website and press releases. Additional data is collected by analysing various policy and strategic documents related to the sampled

institution for eleven years, covering the 2006–2016 period. The initial analysis suggested a decline in PhD conversion rates since the introduction of revised contracts for academic faculty member specifically for A&F department. In the following section, main factors affecting academics' choices to opt for PhD supervision in the A&F department are highlighted, and plausible solutions are proposed based on my own practice as a supervisor for postgraduate, including PhD students.

4 Factors effecting academics' choice of supervision

The literature has identified a range of internal and external factors that can affect an academics' choice to undertake a supervisory role (see Boehe, 2016). They are no different for academics in UKBS. Boehe (2016) is of the view that these factors may interact, particularly when supervision style conflicts with these factors (see Table 1). Given the significance and magnitude, one most significant internal and one external factor is discussed in the following section.

4.1 Internal factors: motivation

Motivation is an important internal factor that 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; Nawaz, 2016b, 2017b).

A detailed analysis of UKBS's operations suggests that the application process practiced at the focused institution is one the main factors that demotivates academics to undertake supervisory duties and ultimately leads up to student-supervisor mismatch (Orellana et al., 2016). Students, especially those progressing from partner institutions, are expected to submit their research topic in the form of research proposal at the time of application. Thus, students select their research topic without any prior-consultation with the potential supervisor. These applications are then forwarded to the academics for consideration. The irony is UKBS expects the academics to match their research interest with those of the applicants, not the other way around. Academics' perceive it as an imposition. Such an operational strategy hints that the school is primarily focused on higher conversion rates rather than the quality of the research applications. Such an approach also suggests that the internationalisation strategy is not well communicated to the academic faculty members who are at the 'coalface of teaching and research' [Green and Whitsed, (2013), p.2], hinting that UKBS have largely failed to prepare their academic faculty members to face the challenges of internationalisation. Furthermore, the review and selection process is time consuming and there is no workload allowance for this job. As a result, academics tend to decline such applications, which have resulted in lower conversion rates in the shorter run and could potentially affect school's relationship with other partner institutions hence, the internationalisation strategy in the longer run.

Table 1 Typologies of supervisory styles

<i>Authors/year</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Typology/findings</i>	<i>Type of study</i>	<i>Observations</i>
Grover and Malhotra (2003)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interaction style (domineering versus participative). Interaction incidence (hands-on/frequent meetings versus hands-off/no meetings). 	<p>2×2 matrix resulting in four supervisory styles; authors discuss fit between style and student characteristics.</p>	Practitioner-oriented.	No theoretical or rigorous empirical anchoring; however, their dimensions seem to be in line with findings in later, more rigorous research.
Gatfield (2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structure (high/low) Support (high/low) 	<p>2×2 matrix results in four supervisory types: laissez-faire, directional, contractual and pastoral. The study suggests that the contractual style is most successful, but style should change according to the research phase.</p>	Conceptual and empirical study, in-depth interviews.	The support dimension resembles the dependence-independence/hands-on versus hands-off dimensions, and the structure dimension seems similar to the interaction style dimension in Grover and Malhotra (2003).
Wright et al. (2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outcome dimension (timely completed PhD versus generation of original insight). Pull approach/students as managed learners versus push approach/students as self-directed learners. 	<p>Authors find five types of doctoral supervision (quality assurers, supportive guides, researcher trainers, mentors and knowledge enthusiasts).</p>	Empirical study, phenomenological method.	Pull versus push approach resembles the dependence and independence dimensions emphasised by Delamont et al. (1998).
Murphy (2009) and Murphy et al. (2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Controlling versus guiding. Task- versus person-focused. 	<p>Supervisors tend to favour a guiding and person-focused approach whereas supervisees tend to prefer a controlling task-focused approach.</p>	Empirical study, in depth interviews.	Murphy et al. (2007) argued that the originality of research can best be promoted by the person focused approach.
Mainhard et al. (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Influence (dominance versus submission). Proximity (cooperation versus opposition). 	<p>Identifies eight types of behaviour along the two dimensions (proximity and influence): leadership, helpful/friendly, understanding, giving students freedom and responsibility, uncertain, dissatisfied, admonishing and strict.</p>	Empirical study, quantitative, research Instrument development.	Builds on Wubbels et al. (2006) and adapts teacher-student interaction instrument to doctoral supervision. The four types found in the studies by Gatfield (2005) and Murphy et al. (2007) are explicitly aligned with the proximity and influence supervisory typology.

Source: Boehe (2016, pp.402-403)

A viable solution is to advise applicants to match their research interest with those of their potential supervisor and identify a supervisor who is willing to work with them, prior to a formal application. This could be achieved by a close coordination between academics based in UKBS and its partner institutions. In my practice as a supervisor, I am always involved in the process from the beginning. I interview potential students via Skype to learn more not only about their topic but also to some extent about their preparedness to undertake the work. I have always shared my experience with other academic staff member to encourage them to adopt this approach. My practice is informed by the earlier research which has shown that academics who felt involved in the PhD process from an early stage, i.e., topic selection are more likely to undertake additional supervisory roles (Ives and Rowley, 2005). Such practice has helped my academic practice and the same could potentially help other faculty members involved in the higher education sector understand students' ability to undertake a good research as well as analyse student needs and expectations (Murphy et al., 2007).

This approach has equally helped the students to refine their topic as well as an early interaction has put them on ease to deal with me once they are on campus. Again, this is supported by the previous literature that an early interaction helps the student to develop viable working relationship with their supervisor crucial for the success of a PhD project (Gill and Burnard, 2008).

In my view, such an effort (i.e., academics involvement on an early stage) will also trigger an academics' intrinsic motivation to supervise as they deem the topic appropriate to their research interest (Ives and Rowley, 2005) and a potential to contribute though publications.

4.2 Extern factors: workloads

Research on academics' workloads have submitted that intensified pressure and performance expectations (from institution and students) have a direct impact on an academics' workloads and their commitments to research and teaching (Houston et al., 2006). At the same time, demand for quality supervision (Murphy et al., 2007; Rose, 2005) amongst postgraduate students in UKBS, like any other institution, 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 as well social skills to adjust into the new environment (Robinson-Pant, 2009), which is time consuming.

Such expectations can be met by a close coordination between the student and supervisor (Orellana et al., 2016; Rose, 2005), however, the dilemma is that supervisors in UKBS are already stretched between their research and teaching commitments as per their workload allowance. Consequently, academics choose to opt-out of PhD supervision, as they perceive no flexibility in their workloads. This is evident in the previous research, which reported a negative relationship between high workloads and academics' willingness to take on supervision. This issue can be resolved by a close coordination between head of the departments and school. This is a line management issue and the line managers should tackle this issue at departmental level by working closely with research-active academics to adjust their workloads. This will encourage the academic staff members to supervise more students.

However, this is not possible without empowering the line managers and providing them backing/support at school or university level. If the employer opts for a hands-off

approach in dealing with such dilemmas and fails to align the workloads of the academic staff members, this behaviour (i.e., no relief in workload allowance) may give an impression that the employer pays little value or recognition to doctoral supervision as previously observed by Vilkinas (2002). The greater danger is that the hands-off approach will bring the moral amongst the faculty members further down to a level where they start considering relocation, perhaps, to a competitor. If that happens, this will trigger another malaise –the brain drain (Nawaz, 2017b, 2018a).

5 Conclusions

This paper has explored the factors affecting an academics' choice to undertake doctoral supervision in the context of a higher education provider in the UK. Through a case study-based approach, this paper has highlighted the needs of PhD students and proposed possible solutions for potential supervisors to satisfy these needs. Consistent with the suggestion of Emilsson and Johnsson (2007, p.174), the paper concludes that promoting PhD supervision needs a “theory and evidence based systematic approach”, which provides supervisors with effective supervision tools, manageable workload (time) and a trustful environment where supervisors feel supported as well as accounted for their supervision responsibilities”.

Equally, the paper is concerned that the mounting pressures on academic faculty members brought by the employers, i.e., HEIs to produce research in order for the HEIs to climb higher in the league tables for universities is, in fact, taking the academics' away from their core duties – to educate the next generation. The *game of league tables* is a dangerous game, the government should intervene to correct the direction, and lead the higher education provides to the right direction, which is aligned with the greater purpose of higher education, i.e., transforming lives through education. This paper is an attempt to draw the attention of all the stakeholders including the researchers, academic faculty members, higher education providers, regulators, governing bodies, i.e., governments, students and the society, at large to this potential challenge. The paper hopes to encourage further debate on this issue.

In summary, the work life of an academic staff is predominantly rotating around two functions: knowledge creation and transformation through the process of teaching and research. As the academic environment is becoming increasingly demanding, there is a need to redefine and manage the relationships between broader work expectations, teaching, research and rewards for academics on institutional and individual levels to avoid potentially undesirable effects and counterproductive behaviours (Houston et al., 2006). This paper hopes to encourage this debate.

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