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Supporting international students on professional doctorate programmes: A perspective from the United Kingdom

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This paper explores academic, personal and professional challenges associated with the increasing recruitment of international students to university programmes, particularly professional doctorate programmes. The discussion notes the 'culture shock', 'adaptation' and a 'change in self-perception' that international students face highlighted by Scherto (2007) and suggests how these should be considered. The three broad priority areas of pre-course information, pedagological issues and academic supervision are addressed. It is argued that this structured input should begin with the provision of clear information about what a professional doctorate is and the requirements of undertaking such a programme. The importance of finding ways of conveying this message to candidates from overseas requires careful consideration. Students need to understand their roles and responsibilities, and the instructional/assessment approaches to which they will be exposed, which may differ from their previous educational experiences. Therefore it is imperative for professional doctorate programme teams to gain a meta-awareness of cultural differences relevant to education and research. In an attempt to maximise the experiences of international students, programmes involving working and supporting each other in groups can be beneficial. Peer coaching is a recommended method for assisting students in developing academic and practical ways of progressing through the programme. Research supervision functions best when it is responsive and flexible to each student's character, approach to study, confidence and ability. By gaining intercultural awareness students can be supported in designing, conducting and reporting upon the research successfully.

Keywords: professional doctorate, international students, curriculum, higher education

Introduction

'Any "student abroad" learning experience needs to be supported by a curriculum that adequately prepares for that experience – a curriculum that develops international awareness and international competence' (Caruana and Spurling, 2007:29).

Current economic factors and changes in the UK higher education system have led to increasing initiatives to recruit overseas students. Globalisation has been occurring on large social and economic scales for many decades, with populations finding easier communication systems, collaboration and information sharing opportunities due to developing technologies and inter-country mobility systems. In Europe, for example, the Bologna Process was introduced to facilitate the internal mobility of students, teachers and administrative staff due to the nature of an increase in international mobility of students (Cardoso *et al*, 2007). The Aarhus Declaration of 2011, although mainly focussed on Europe, echoed these factors which can also be applied to internationalisation across the globe. The declaration pointed out that there is a requirement for universities to widen access to students from diverse backgrounds, emphasise research development and doctoral education and to have a clear internationalisation strategy (EUA, 2011). The aim of this paper is to consider a number of academic, personal and professional challenges associated with the increasing recruitment of international students to university programmes focussing on Professional Doctorate (PD) programmes. Such general challenges were highlighted by Trice (2003), and they do of course apply to PD programmes too. We argue that the 'globalised knowledge market' has a direct impact on higher education and necessitates adjustments in this sector. Kehm (2007) suggests that doctoral education is no longer just a pursuit of knowledge, but that knowledge assists in becoming a strategic resource in changing times. This is particularly relevant for students on PD programmes where the main emphasis is on creating change in their professional and working arenas. An international student may no longer be wishing to migrate for better working conditions only; rather, they may wish to develop the knowledge base for their own professions within their own countries of origin, or may have been sponsored to do so.

However, Ippolito (2007) points out that the concept of internationalisation is difficult to define and difficult to interpret. It can be confused with terms and concepts such as 'globalisation', which Ippolito argues is more in the vein of a spread of values and influence, whereas internationalisation could be considered to be more closely related to equitable relationships in institutions. Knight (2004) also highlighted the differences (and similarities): 'Globalisation' is

110

related to the flow of knowledge, technologies, people and ideas across global borders. This therefore has an impact on international dimensions within environments such as higher education. 'Internationalisation' could be considered to be more closely related to the integration of international and intercultural dimensions in teaching, research and services within institutions. Knight points out that this should be thought of as a process which also includes a global dimension. Ippolito (2007) states that internationalisation appears to be understood, perhaps wrongly, as focussing on how to support international students academically, rather than how to change philosophical underpinnings to curriculum development. An important point made is that the focus should not necessarily be only on providing for the perceived deficits and widening participation needs of international students, but also on understanding the interconnectedness of home and international students' needs and identities. This may not be easy to achieve and the discussion on the nature of internationalisation is a wider debate beyond the aims of this paper. However in looking at the needs of PD students we may be able to take small steps by firstly identifying, addressing and meeting the needs of international students within such contexts and then in providing wider, more informed intercultural approaches to curricula as a whole. McAuliffe and Cohen (2005) argue that research can answer local questions and identify patterns, meanings and relationships from professionals' (such as nurses) own native perspectives and then compare these across international and cultural boundaries. Therefore this may be a useful starting point in addressing such issues. The wider the variety of students on such programmes, the wider the variety of research and perspectives can be expected.

According to Taylor (2007:154) 'Doctoral education is set in the middle of this changing context for the university sector, and is subject to these wider imposed imperatives'. West *et al.* (2011) point out that departments which have a basis of student involvement and peer support can go far in reducing the negative factors that impact on students completing their programmes. Therefore it is imperative that aspects such as these are taken into account in the development and maintenance of PD curricula. Based on our own experiences of international students at the University of Huddersfield in the UK, it is appropriate to explore the unique challenges and issues that arise in the PD programme and to offer some considerations to colleagues in higher education.

There are many factors that create an impact on the specialised and diverse group of international students. Wellington and Sikes (2006) suggest that doctoral students present with wide-ranging academic, personal and professional needs. This is very pertinent as regards the characteristics of international Professional Doctoral students, whose professional priorities and assumptions on which they operate may differ substantially from those of their international counterparts in similar professions. In addition, studying in a second language, which is often the case, and in a different cultural context or socio-cultural climate, presents complex situations for the international student and their teaching/supervisory teams. Scherto (2007) found that students identified three stages in their experiences of studying in overseas institutions: stress and anxiety 'culture shock' from a lack of preparation into the culture and academic systems; adaptation to 'fit in' with the host country's social and academic norms; and a 'change in self perception' gained through interactive intersocio-cultural experiences and relations, leading to intercultural abilities. Being aware of these phases is extremely important and although appearing to be an issue of common sense, it suggests that emphasis should be placed on the former experiences of students, as they apparently seem more able to find their way in the later stages of their postgraduate education.

Bartram (2008) suggests that for such international students, socio-cultural needs actually take a priority over their academic and practical needs. The socio-cultural priority may seem to be beyond the remit of a PD programme team. However, it could be argued that having a cohort and peer involvement structure within a PD programme may help to provide some valuable interpersonal support for all students, particularly in the support related to academic issues. From our own experience, students value the emphasis on peer support and utilise these mechanisms beyond the formal requirements of the programme by continuing to interact and support each other at their own instigation. Furthermore, we acknowledge that as senior academics we can do more to influence these factors within the PD context for our international students. However, it is perhaps more realistically the responsibility of the university as a wider institution to provide mechanisms to assist with socio-cultural aspects. West *et al.* (2011) discuss the value of a doctoral support centre within their faculty in helping to alleviate attrition. Students were found to require technical and academic help, particularly in the relationship between course work and research skills (a noted factor in most PD programmes), as they were also having to manage financial, family and professional work situations which impacted on their time and energy in focussing on

their programmes. Add to this the fact that they are studying in a foreign country and this requirement for support is amplified.

It is therefore relevant to explore the types of support that can be realistically offered to ensure that students are supported from recruitment to graduation. The three broad priority areas of pre-programme information, pedagological issues and academic supervision are important considerations in terms of their potential for support to international students on PD programmes. However, internationalisation in its own right should not be ignored at the wider faculty and university levels.

Pre-Programme Information

According to Evans and Stevenson (2010) and as already mentioned, the initial months and transitional stages of doctoral programmes are a critical time for overseas students, when they require considerable support and structured input. This structured input should begin with the provision of clear information about the requirements of undertaking a PD programme, considering ways of putting this message across to candidates from overseas. This is not always an easy task. The nature of PD programmes varies and they do not uniformly adopt a standardised model. Deem and Brehony (2000) point out that the main difference between a PhD and a PD programme can be characterised as there being a lone PhD student with a supervisor, by contrast with the PD student as a member of a cohort.   Lester (2004) suggested that a PhD is usually considered as training to acquire the credentials to be considered an academic researcher, highlighting the debate that a PD programme is more focused on the training and credentials to be a researching professional (in practice). Adjustment to both of these systems may be difficult for students arriving from countries with different educational cultures. Communicating the differences between a PD programme and a 'traditional' PhD is challenging enough when dealing with home students, so the challenge of communicating the distinctions between such programmes to students from overseas is even greater.

The need to clearly identify structures, approaches and requirements of programmes also involves identifying educational equivalences clearly, outlining entry requirements explicitly and ensuring the candidate understands the required level of qualification prior to studying at doctoral level. Providing students with a full and unambiguous outline of the programme structures and

113

requirements is critically important. As increasing flexibility is being incorporated into many PD programmes, students need to understand their roles and responsibilities, and instructional/ assessment approaches, which may differ from their previous educational experiences. Offstein *et al.* (2004) found that international graduate students have many competing demands on their time, energy and attention, including the requirements of their programme, family commitments, personal disposition and standards, all of which could be heavily influenced by cultural factors and conflicting roles. By clarifying the nature of the PD programme from the outset, with emphasis placed on timetables, deadlines, the nature of postgraduate research studies and responsibilities, some of these factors may be alleviated. At the university organisational level, it is important that consistency and clarity is established firmly between universities, marketing, recruitment, admissions, student support services and postgraduate research staff to reduce undesirable confusion or errors which may adversely affect the student experience. To address this, Dolan and Macias (2009) suggest that within introductory materials there is a need to be explicit and clear about aspects such as the 'what, why and how' of academic standards, approaches to learning, programme outcomes and requirements, and how learning is facilitated. These issues are particularly important when considering the needs of students commencing a PD. Not only are there aspects of a taught or facilitated element to navigate, there is also a need to engage in the researcher/supervisory relationship whilst managing the progression through these elements in a way that is different from the approach to a 'traditional' PhD. As mentioned earlier this is not always easily achieved, particularly when there are great differences in interpretation of what constitutes a PD and a PhD award.

Pedagogical Issues

Pedagogical approaches such as acknowledging and addressing the different learning styles should be considered when planning an optimal programme that serves the needs of international students well. Intercultural learning approaches and research etiquettes are important aspects with a view to increasing social capital and collaboration (Evans and Stevenson, 2011; Wang and Li, 2011). It is important to recognise that students from differing cultural backgrounds have differing approaches to, and expectations of, learning and the educational environment. For example, it is known that some students from particular cultures prefer authoritarian and formal pedagogic techniques, whereas others prefer a freer, more participative, adult-oriented approach. Hung and Hyun (2010) argue that there should be a premise that universities (particularly western

114

universities) should recognise the cognitive and affective challenges faced by students (particularly those students from countries in the East) accessing an education system in a different country and culture. They argue that most universities actually fall short in fully meeting this. 'Lip service' may be paid to these issues in marketing materials produced and distributed by the university and its programmes, yet it is important to actually make these aspects happen. A PD programme requires students to attend teaching sessions and to demonstrate independent initiative throughout the research process. The nature of supervision will therefore be very different for students from diverse backgrounds. It is impossible to be aware of every cultural nuance, but Carroll and Ryan (2005) suggest there is a need to gain a meta-awareness of cultural differences relevant to education and research. In doing so there is a chance that the student, supervisor and PD programme team can build relationships that minimise these challenges and help gain shared perspectives. Hung and Hyun (2010) showed that the culture and study shock was more prevalent at the beginning of the student experience, as would be expected. The decrease in shock and increase in confidence came with the progressive development of language skills and understanding of the curriculum requirements and approaches. Supervision was a key aspect in this process and should therefore focus carefully on the early part of the experience of these students. The flexibility to achieve this might be difficult when there are policies and procedures related to the number of research students and the amount of time that should be spent on post graduate research supervision by PD programme teams. There are also tensions arising in the later, critical stages of the research process and thesis development. Ippolito (2007) identified some challenges to intercultural learning: time and academic pressures; language; indifference; and privileged knowledge. These may be difficult to address as a PD brings with it similar challenges in academic time pressures, particularly when most of the students are already working as high-level professionals and practitioners in busy environments. The language related to research is another aspect that most students appear to find initially difficult. Although the student may be studying within a cohort to begin with, they are primarily there to ultimately produce their own individual piece of robust research. The pressure this creates may lead to indifference to other students, and again professional backgrounds may bring discrete technological and knowledge boundaries. In an attempt to minimise the effects of these factors for international students, PD programmes involving working and supporting each other in groups can be beneficial. Peer coaching is a particular method used within the taught/facilitated

component of the Huddersfield PD programme in order to enable students to appraise and support each other in the development of their ideas and their knowledge.

Academic Supervision and Pastoral Support

Academic supervision, particularly when it involves research, should provide the necessary structured guidance that enables all doctoral students to attain their coveted award. The emphasis in research programmes is to ensure students interact with original materials and engage with new knowledge at the right level so that they can make an original and significant contribution to their subject, discipline or practice. This requires PD programme teams to ensure adequate learning support mechanisms are aligned with their supervision process to facilitate the student in delivering work that is at the correct level of criticality and analysis.

Doctoral education, by its very nature, is broad, precise and intensive. On the one hand, the student must attain, develop and demonstrate competence in core research skills such as literature searching, critical appraisal, synthesis of current literature, application of research methodologies and critical, analytical reporting of findings. While on the other hand, the PD student's path of personal and professional development is simultaneously evolving and advancing. The process includes building self-confidence and self-esteem while slowly transforming into a credible and reflective research practitioner. Here lies the challenge for the conscientious faculty member. The research supervisor must provide ongoing critical feedback while being careful not to belittle or degrade the efforts of the students; it entails ongoing feedback that is protracted and nurturing, while ensuring high standards of scholarship are met over a period for years.

Wang and Li (2011) looked at feedback experiences of international students and recorded negative emotional responses such as confusion, frustration, stress and uncertainly expressed by those that held a reactive perspective. These students had pedagogical needs that demanded explicit and directive feedback; they preferred to follow instruction. Other students in the study adopted a pro-active attitude and were more inspired, confident and determined. These students sought guidance and inspiration and engaged in critical conversation. Students differ, yet research supervisors must learn to navigate through the structures and cultural systems of the academy as

116

they try hard to do their best for the sake of the PD student, whatever social, cultural, personal and professional perspective they hold.

Research supervision functions best when it is responsive and flexible to each student's character, approach to study, confidence and ability, but this is not an easy task. The usual difficulties such as determining the true foci of the research and grappling with ethics committees are all part of the experience and are to be expected. However, international students may require further assistance in recognising cultural differences and approaches. The relationship between the student and supervisor can also pose challenges (Wang and Li, 2011). Interactions should be framed in the context of mentee and mentor, rather than apprentice and master, so that the student is encouraged to express opposing views, challenge the supervisor and engage in meaningful discourse. Ryan and Viete (2009) identified a list of principles along these lines to foster engagement in respectful conversations that promote learning in dialogue, in a multivoiced learning space; feelings of belonging; being valued as a person with knowledge and being able to communicate effectively, creatively and with confidence.

In addition, it is important for PD supervisors and academic tutors, who have the remit of pastoral support, to make special efforts to identify cultural norms and differences that could potentially be problematic in designing, conducting and reporting upon the research.

Conclusion

We have offered some of our thoughts and suggestions for supporting international PD students so that they can succeed and achieve their dreams. It is important to recognise 'culture shock', 'adaptation to fitting in' and 'change of self-perception' as important stages. Therefore early intervention with international students is important, as it appears that towards the latter end of their academic experiences they are able to cope more effectively with the demands of the programme and the different socio-cultural environment. The articulation of what a PD programme entails is difficult to convey to students due to the confusing nomenclature and structures, and perhaps even more so to overseas students coming from more traditional didactic pedagogical educational backgrounds. Therefore clear information on structures, processes and outcomes of PD programmes are important aspects to focus upon. There is some recognition that the cohort nature of some PD programmes provide assistance in setting up peer support systems

for students from diverse backgrounds and that this is a particular strength in transition. As PD students enter the research phase of their programme it is important that supervisors gain a meta-awareness of cultural differences and intercultural approaches so that flexibility can be shown in meeting their needs and facilitating their development towards independent thinking and research.

We believe that raising awareness of the challenges associated with providing appropriate pre-programme information, pedagogies, academic supervision and pastoral support to international students will not just ease their difficulties, but will go a long way towards improving the PD experience for all students regardless of their country of origin.

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