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International postgraduates' research experiences; learning from reflective cases

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Abstract: It is vital to learn from the research experience of international business and management postgraduates to improve the quality of education in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This paper provides an in-depth reflective case study of challenges and learning from a life cycle of a postgraduate research programme at an international business school in the United Kingdom (UK). It demonstrates that there is a wide variety of challenges in the field, but one seems to be common for most participants; the development of a suitable research question. Also, the paper identifies the need to understand and manage the research process well and it provides a classification of concepts of learning which are applied to the case study. It concludes that there are many issues that interrelate, with the main challenges and learning identified. These need to be tackled for HEIs to improve in ways that match what they profess.

Keywords: International; Postgraduate; Research; Experience; Reflection.

Biography: Peter Sharp is an academic in the Faculty of Business & Management at Regent's University London and has published research on a variety of business, management and pedagogical matters. He teaches on international business and management modules and supervises dissertations at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Contents:

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1. Introduction

"Students play an active part in shaping our strategic direction, the judgements we make about higher education standards and quality, and in developing national guidance for higher education institutions" quotes Anthony McClaran, the Chief Executive Officer of the Quality Assurance Agency (2012a, p.3).

In 2012, a student-centred approach to quality issues in higher education led the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to form a 12-month partnership with the National Union of Students (NUS) to understand students' experiences. This entailed engaging 5,000 students in a survey (QAA, 2012a). This research is based on the premise that understanding students' experience in higher education is vital for developing suitable higher education programmes. The focus of this research is to learn from the research experience of international business and management postgraduates to improve the quality of education in HEIs. If staff and students reflect well in this area, better research methods modules and dissertation projects should be developed along with appropriate systems to facilitate learning between lecturers, programme directors, dissertation supervisors and students. As a contribution to this field, this paper presents a summary of significant literature and a reflective case from the postgraduate department of an international business school in the UK.

2. Professionalism and the concept of learning

This paper assumes that it is important to be professional in the roles of lecturer, programme director and supervisor so the learning experience of students is enhanced. However, what does it mean to be a 'professional' and what does it mean to 'learn'?

2.1 Professional lecturer

A professional is described as 'showing the skill of a professional … engages in a specific activity as one's main occupation' (Thompson, 1995 p.1092). From this point on in this sub-section, the term 'professional lecturer' will be used to refer to the roles of lecturer, academic manager and supervisor. One aspect of being a professional lecturer is continual personal development which is linked to the ability to enhance students' learning experience (Race, 2001).

This means that professional lecturers need to be aware of the actual level of students and the level they aim to help them move towards (Ramprasad 1983). Also, a professional practitioner is a person who is sensitive to the objectives in his or her field and critically assesses himself/herself to improve the problem situations they face (Schon, 1996). A professional lecturer will develop good ways to plan and evaluate student learning (Gibbs, 1999a), actively seeks solutions to relevant problems (Austin, 1978; Cowan, 1998) and uses appropriate approaches to record material for future evaluation, reflection and improvement of their approach in helping students learn (George and Cowan, 1999).

2.2 Meaning of learning

There are many different definitions of the word and many different facets may be relevant when the term is used (Thompson, 1995). The varieties of definitions that are used in literature refer to different facets of the concept. These facets include: gaining knowledge and skills, memorising things and becoming informed (Thompson, 1995). Various combinations of these facets are proposed for a definition of this concept (Brown, 1993).

Different authors emphasise different aspects and facets of the concept. For example Kolb (1984) defines learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. He then explains this process in terms of the creation of knowledge through a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Kolb (1984) categorises four forms of knowledge produced: divergent, assimilative, convergent and accommodative and emphasises the personal individual nature of learning. Others, however, emphasise the social aspect of learning (e.g. Vygotsky, 2002).

Mezirow (2000) conceives learning in similar terms to Kolb (1984). However, Mezirow (2000) emphasises the use of theoretical constructs as a means of interpreting and understanding experience and guiding future action and how these change with the learning process. Apart from differences of emphasis there are other difficulties in interpreting the words used to define learning. For example knowledge as a concept is multi-faceted and defined in numerous ways as well (Sharp, 2004) and consequently there is a danger that the definition issues can become circular.

The multi-faceted nature of learning and different emphases in the definitions can be problematic because if there is no common understanding about what it means arguably there is no common basis for devising courses. This is one reason why there are so many courses in further and higher education which use different strategies for learning and assessment (Race, 2001).

However, in this research, rather than regarding definitions as a stumbling block, the author accepts that learning is multi-faceted. Below, different categories are provided for different theoretical views on how learning happens, which provide a theoretical basis for analysing the primary data later in this paper.

2.3 Theories of student learning

Broadly there are three theoretical views on how learning happens. Each will be explained with a brief critical assessment. The three approaches can be referred to as *Behaviourist*, *Cognitive*, and *Constructivist*.

The Behaviourist view suggests that learning is something that can be measured by observing responses to stimuli, and that with repetition and reinforcement of the use of the stimulus, the desired learning outcome is more likely to be achieved. This view stems from experiments in psychology. Originally experiments were conducted on dogs whereby a bell was rung and meat brought out to feed them. With reinforcement and repetition of the use of the bell eventually the dogs salivated at the prospect of eating some meat, even if no meat was produced for consumption (Skinner, 1954). Applying this to human learning environments, one may refer to the use of school bells and on another level, the demonstration of learning outcomes by students in response to an implemented teaching strategy (Race, 2001).

This approach undoubtedly has had a significant impact on the teaching and learning practices used in education. However, there are significant problems with it. First, it is arguably very simplistic. Based on inputs and outputs, arguably it does not allow room for much independent thought and creativity because the outputs that are articulated standardise what is being looked for. Also, arguably some outputs that are looked for would entail little thought, just a 'knee jerk' reaction, and are based on the stimulus from the lecturer, rather than motivation from the students. It is largely a reactionary approach to learning, rather than one that is owned and perpetuated by the student (Light and Cox, 2001). This approach is not considered to be as student-focused as other approaches and feedback from research suggests that this approach is limited in its value especially in the learning experience of students doing research where there is an expectation for students to do a considerable amount of independent learning (QAA 2012b).

The Cognitive view is one that is based on how people conceive and perceive problems and solve them. Arguably, this is an approach that aligns with the experience of students grappling with a research problem. In going through a cycle of perception: applying a conceptual approach and reflecting on what happens in practice, the individual will remember how to do something better next time which is, arguably, what researchers do as they learn from their research experiences. Some authors emphasise how this happens through communication with others (Vygotsky, 2002). Others, emphasise the process in terms of an oscillation of learning cycles that happen as an individual grows up and learns to think in a more complex way (Kolb, 1984). This school of thought is closely related with the action research methodology used in different environments including business and management, information systems development and learning and health environments

(Baskerville, 1999; Checkland and Scholes, 2000; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). However, the authors of action research emphasise different features of the methodology in the same way as different authors within the cognitive school emphasise different aspects of the learning cycle (e.g. compare Kolb, 1984 and Cowan, 1998).

This approach can be criticised on a number of counts. First, some argue that people do not always have a conceptual construct in their minds before they approach a problem and therefore may suggest there is too much emphasis on abstract conceptualisation. Arguably concepts, and certainly formally articulated ones, are rarely used in practice to solve problems (Polanyi, 1998). Secondly, some versions of the learning cycle or action research, suggest that learning is sequential and cyclical, although many would argue that learning is a more complex process than this and is not necessarily sequential (e.g. Buzan, 1989).

The Constructivist view states that humans do not have pre-installed knowledge, and that knowledge, our criteria and methods for understanding it and the disciplines to which it contributes, is 'constructed' (Light and Cox, 2001). A distinguishing feature from the cognitive view is that it is more contextual in its approach and less conceptual. However, it does overlap with the cognitive view in that active experimentation and experience is necessary to acquire knowledge. Again, arguably, this is part of the experience of students doing research because they 'construct' their learning as they develop unique lines of research.

The main weaknesses with this approach are that it is hard to say that there is no preinstalled knowledge when from birth we experience things every day that shape thinking. Arguably knowledge becomes installed with each experience a human has. There is also another potential difficulty with this view and that is, ultimately if taken to its extreme, this approach implies that individuals only learn within their own context and what they learn is not of value to a wider community.

These different viewpoints shape the way we may interpret challenges and what is perceived as being learnt during an individuals' research experience. The trends in higher education emphasise the cognitive and constructivist approaches and arguably these approaches particularly apply to students doing independent pieces of research (QAA 2012b). These approaches fit with modern trends in higher education that emphasise approaches like 'flip teaching' (Gurteen 2013).

3. Challenges of learning research for international business and management students

There are many challenges that have been identified for international postgraduate students who come to the UK. These include social, academic, and practical needs (Bartram 2008). International postgraduate students' social practices are complex and these practices have an impact on learning experience (Chapman and Pyvis 2005).

Most agree that there is a need to be aware of cultural differences and be sensitive to their effects (e.g. Grey 2002; Hofstede 1986; Ryan and Viete 2009). However, some authors categorise cultures in terms of differences and place the onus of responsibility on teachers (Hofstede 1986). Others claim that this approach is too simplistic (Signorini *et al.* 2009). Some authors discuss the impact of colonial and post-colonial factors (Manathunga 2009). Others refer to other difficulties. In particular when postgraduate students do research they often lack critical thinking skills because these were not valued in their home country in previous courses they have done (Brown 2007).

A recurring theme is the significance of challenges supervising international students in research. Many challenges are identified including the challenge of overcoming misunderstandings that may occur because of linguistic differences (Brown 2007; Ryan and Viete 2009). Other challenges include the lack of skills of students especially at the beginning of the research process in defining the research problem and putting together a research design (Ssegawa and Rwelamila 2009).

There is also the problem of resourcing supervisors sufficiently so they have enough skill and time to supervise the students (Rowley and Slack 2004). Dialogue between students and supervisors is

essential for the development of the skills and to plan and execute their research effectively (Greenbank and Penketh 2009; Sarja and Janhonen 2009). However, Brown (2007) notes that there is often a conflict of interest between institutions seeking higher income and not providing the necessary resources to support supervisors and students during their research (Brown 2007).

There are potentially many issues that the students could comment on when they reflect on their research experience. The literature discusses a number of elements of the research process. For example, authors note the diversity of research methods modules that exist which focus on different elements of research (e.g. qualitative and quantitative techniques and whether to use virtual environments or not) (Morris 2006). There are also a considerable variety of approaches to assessment of undergraduate dissertations (Pathirage *et al.* 2007). This is almost certainly true of postgraduate dissertations as well because there is a wide variety of postgraduate research module designs (Morris 2006). In addition, literature notes the significance of rapid expansion of information technology and sources that students can access and this presents a key research skill challenge (Prebor 2007). Some argue that much work needs to be done to help students in this area (Chu and Law 2005).

This research addresses key elements for enriching the learning experience of international business and management postgraduate students who do research. It should inform different stakeholders involved in the process and provide further insights to add to the current literature in the field.

4. Reflective case methodology

The researcher carried out a reflective case study methodology. The case study context and methods of primary data collection are described and justified below.

4.1 Postgraduate department of international business school

The research took place in a postgraduate department within an international business school in the centre of London. The business school was less than twenty years old and the postgraduate department constituted approximately 80 students per annum from across the world from approximately 29 different countries.

Within this department students took a one year Masters course in Management over three semesters of approximately 3 months duration. In the first semester students took 5 core modules for the programme before focusing on more specialised modules in the second semester. In the second semester it was compulsory for all students to take the research skills module, and the third and final semester focused on the dissertation project. Based on feedback from previous years, milestones were used for the first time in the dissertation period.

The research skills module focused on developing a suitable research question and adopted a skills-based approach where students were encouraged to learn by doing. It also included a milestone structure and formative assessment based around three main areas:

1. Critical Literature Review
2. Presentation on Research Design
3. Research Proposal

There were various participants in this research who had different roles in the programme: Their roles are given in Table 1 below.

Role in this Research Project	**Role in Postgraduate Programme**
Researcher and Author	Module Leader of Research Skills Module and Dissertation Project Module
Members of Focus Group	Research Supervisors
Individual Interviewees	Students

Table 1: Roles in postgraduate programme of participants in this research.

The research supervisors were primarily involved in assisting students during the third semester during the dissertation project phase.

4.2 Methods of primary data collection

There were three approaches to collecting primary data from the experiences of those involved in the case. The focus for this paper is provided by the two broad categories of 'challenges' and 'learning'. This paper acknowledges in the case of the latter that there are various ways this concept may be perceived (see 2.3). These two categories are applied to three forms of primary data collected in the period of January 2008 to June 2009. Table 2 below illustrates the means by which the three forms of primary data were collected.

Primary Data Source	**Source and Type of Data Collected**	**When the Data was Recorded**	**Means of Recording**
1	8 Interviews with Students.	After students had completed their dissertations and they had been marked (December 2008 and November 2011).	• DVD recordings of Interviews. • Written transcriptions of the interviews. • Handwritten notes during the interviews.
2	Researcher Reflection.	The researcher wrote a reflective account approximately once a month during the entire life of a postgraduate research teaching and supervision programme (January 2008 to December 2008).	Written journal.
3	Focus Group with Research Supervisors.	After cohort of students finished and during the supervision of the next cohort (1st June 2009).	Notes written during the workshop.

Table 2: Three sources of primary data.

There are several further things to note about the sources of primary data. When the author wrote a reflective account for his reflective journal, he took between ten and thirty minutes. The focus of this reflection was what challenged him and what he learnt each week in his job role. He did this, partly as an aide memoire, partly to improve his approach in his job role, and partly for his own personal reflection. At the time, he did not complete this reflection specifically with this research project in mind. As part of the methodology for *this* project, the researcher reviewed the reflective accounts and tabulated challenges and things learnt in the context of the student research programme.

The author interviewed eight students from a variety of different countries that reflected a significant segment of the student body in the 2007-2008 cohort and two students from 2010-2011 cohort from different parts of the world. They constituted students who were British; Indian (residing in Kuwait); Indian; Russian; Algerian French; German and American. All these students were between 22 and 26 years old. They were all asked the same questions. Before the interview began they were informed that that their dissertation had been marked and that the interviewer had not marked it. This was to ensure as far as possible that the feedback obtained from the students would not be influenced by perceptions that their responses may influence their results. However, the author accepts that students may have had personal loyalty to him which may have influenced their responses. However, arguably if there was any such loyalty, it may have led to more candid and frank responses. Arguably, this provides greater weight to the research. Although each student was asked 9 questions, only answers to two questions relevant to this research project were analysed for this paper (see Table 3).

Primary Data Source	**Relevant Questions from Questionnaire**
Interviews with students.	Question 2. What did you find to be the most challenging thing about doing a Masters level dissertation?

	Question 3. Can you please tell me what you have found to be the biggest thing you have learnt about conducting research?
Focus Group with Supervisors	Question 2. What did you find to be the most challenging thing about supervising Masters level dissertations? Question 3. Can you please tell me what you have found to be the biggest thing you have learnt about supervising research among international postgraduate students?

Table 3: Questions relevant for this project.

Six months later, four supervisors were selected as representative of the supervisor team for the postgraduate students. These formed a focus group who discussed a number of areas relating to the research experience of postgraduates. The author chaired the focus group and invited comments on two questions relevant to this research project (see Table 3).

Different stakeholders in the research experience may have different challenges and learn different things. However, this research project is designed to elicit the challenges and learning from different angles and see if there is any common ground whilst appreciating the different roles and possibly different priorities participants may have. This methodology was designed to see if there are any patterns that can be discerned from the different data sources and then see whether a synthesis of patterns may be discerned.

5. Findings

Each of the three sets of primary data will be summarised and analysed individually before any patterns can be discerned across the three sets of data.

5.1 Interviews with students

The transcripts and notes from the interviews with each student were reviewed and a summary note was made of their challenges and things learnt (see Table 4)

Interview No. and Nationality	**Summary of Most Challenging thing(s) (Question 2)**	**Summary of Biggest thing(s) Learnt about conducting research**
1. British (female)	Found it "hard to focus on research question."	• Need to "know exactly what you are doing" • "Sorting out focus of research question".
2. Indian resident of Kuwait (male)	• First dissertation on his own topic • Obtaining first hand data. People did not turn up to focus group. • Obtaining online data	Doing an online survey.
3. Algerian French (female)	• Obtaining primary data (getting interviews). • Staying in London.	• Organising the research (in particular the methodology) was new. • First time had done a dissertation project and important to do a topic that personally interests you.
4. German (female)	"Keeping a focus and getting on with it."	Start research early.
5. Indian (male)	"To get the right research question".	"Everything I believe is not true". Lots of facts and figures that have changed the way he wants to do business with colleagues in the future.
6. Russian (female)	• Understanding how to write a dissertation according to Masters criteria. • Biggest challenge: "Getting people	Learnt a lot about: • Sources of data at the British Library. • The topic.

	to agree to do interviews on the topic."	• Writing reports: "Feel confident to write business papers now."
7. Indian (male)	• "Since I am an international student and my thesis was based in the UK…the most difficult part for me was to collect primary data…" • Fixing interviews and obtaining primary data. • Referred to not having contacts that may have helped to get interviews arranged.	Learnt so much because being an international student this was the first time he had done a dissertation. Specific things he referred to were that he learnt about: • Writing the dissertation. • Process of conducting research. • Techniques of research. • Conducting interviews. • Conducting surveys. • "How to look for the right path to go ahead with."
8. United States of America (female)	• "Finding academic sources"	Biggest things learnt for her were: • Making references. • How not to plagiarise. • Documenting her work. • Note-taking.

Table 4: Summary of challenge(s) and learning(s) that students identified.

The most challenging things students identified ranged across the life span of a piece of research. Only two challenges were referred to more than once: the challenge of developing a suitable research question/focus and the challenge of obtaining primary data. The former was mentioned at least twice and the latter four times. The students mentioned an even wider range of things that they learnt. Few mentioned the same things. The only things that were mentioned more than once (twice in each case) were research question, writing the dissertation and conducting surveys.

5.2 Researcher reflection

The researcher's reflective accounts were reviewed for the period January 2008 through to December 2008. Reviewing these reflective accounts at a distance of over 4 years gave the author of the reflective account a more forensic view on the experience which could be presented and analysed in this paper. For each account a note was taken of any particular challenges or things learnt regarding helping students learn to do their research. This included elements of support for supervisors managed in the process. A summary of these notes was compiled in a table (see Table 6).

Through this period of reflection there was a repeated concern about the resource of supervisors for the students. The author was academic manager of the supervisors in the programme and the trends in the reflection reveal his concern to ensure the resource of supervisors was adequate for students and appropriately trained to understand the programme and do their job professionally (e.g. *inter alia* understand and use marking criteria appropriately). It is also notable that in teaching research methods there was a recurrence of the challenge of helping students with their research questions and dealing with individual queries.

What was learnt is hard to differentiate from challenges. However, they reiterate the value of having a team of supervisors that the academic manager is happy with, the need for sufficient time to work with fellow lecturers, the importance of time given to detailed preparation of training sessions, and the need to train staff.

In terms of most challenging things students identified, there is a recurrent theme of challenges: doing a well-focused research question and obtaining primary data. In terms of the biggest things learnt about conducting research, there are no clear patterns from the data. However, several interviewees imply the need to understand the structure and requirements of the research criteria, methodology and dissertation report. Again, it seems difficult to differentiate challenges from what is learnt.

Date of reflective account	Summary of Challenge(s) noted	Summary of Learning(s) noted
4th January 2008	• Addressed issue of disputes between two students and their supervisors. • Guided supervisors about applying marking criteria professionally. • Concern at not having achieved objective of completing preparation of the dissertation handbook and dissertation supervisors guide. • Concern about whether a supervisor will resolve contractual differences before students begin work with her.	
27th March 2008	• Taught research methods and noted that there were 'normal' struggles with research questions.	Learnt the value of having a preferred supervisor team in place before allocating supervisors to students.
18th April 2008	• Taught research skills to prepare students for research proposals and presentations. • Marked critical literature reviews. • Ran workshop with dissertation supervisors. Supervisor workshop attendance was low due to illness and a lack of clarity of contractual issues. Continued concern about supervisors who had not agreed contractual terms.	Author was teaching the research methods module with another lecturer and noted that it is harder to share teaching when rushed and large quantity of work to do. He learnt that when he was busy he found it hard to share teaching in the *way* that he would like (i.e. spending time with other lecturer before the session to team teach more joined up way).
22nd August 2008	• Answered individual student enquiries regarding their research projects. • Continued concerns of supervisors not agreeing contractual terms. Facilitated, where possible, agreement of terms. • Devised teaching material for research methods course. • Ensured feedback on dissertation milestones given back to students according to new design of programme. • Resolved dispute on marking of a dissertation on a resubmission.	
10th December 2008	• Noted that it would be nice to have more supervisors to reduce the number who have about 10 supervisees each. • Concern about morale among some staff due to more work and no more resources provided. • Concern about new supervisors who need to understand the structure and design of the programme they are working in.	• Reflected that research and dissertation workshops went well, having learnt that a high level of attention to detail and care in planning and execution of the teaching plan is important. Also learnt that good dissertation results (100% of students passed with higher grades than previous year) were due, in part, to milestone structure and hard work of author and supervisors in this helpful structure. • Learnt that new staff need to be trained to understand the structure and design of the research programme and the context within which it fits.

Table 5: Summary of notes from the reflective journal; in the intervening months, nothing of relevance was noted for this research project.

5.3 Focus group with supervisors

A summary of the challenges and things learnt by supervisors supervising the students in their research was compiled (see Table 6).

Focus Group member	**Summary of Most Challenging thing(s) supervising international students (Question 2)**	**Summary of Biggest thing(s) Learnt about supervising research during this period**
1. English male resident in Hong Kong	Noted the things students find most challenging: • Project management. • Level of English and linguistic issues limit understanding of framework issues.	Learnt that milestones have a systematic effect on students but criteria for individual milestones is a difficulty. Noted he is always learning as a supervisor.
2. Swedish male resident in London	Noted that he believes there is no way international students can be categorised. Generally he finds students: • Are not organised. • Struggle with the research question.	There needs to be a good match between what interests the student and their research question.
3. Irish female resident in London	Noted that students find taking ownership of the project most challenging.	Learnt about milestones but noted a potential danger in using them. If they are marked, there is a question about how the overall mark is achieved at the end.
4. English male resident in Essex	Noted that students find the following the most challenging: • Refining research question and keeping focused. • Producing a dissertation that follows logically and links up well. • Producing a dissertation that reflects what they have found and in which they reflect. Often don't leave sufficient time to do this.	The students need to: • Stay focused. • Have a clear plan. • Have a system of knowing where they are in their research journey, and to diarise it to help them during the research process.

Table 6: Summary of challenge(s) and learning(s) that supervisors identified.

In terms of the most challenging things identified by supervisors in supervising international students, there are no clear themes except for the challenge of developing a research question. They also refer to other challenges: project management; linguistic issues; working independently; logical well-linked dissertation reports; articulation of research; reflection; and time management. In terms of biggest things learnt, several supervisors noted the value of milestones (or clear system for students to know where they are in the research process) but noted potential dangers if milestones are marked. One noted the importance of developing a research question that really interests the students to help them keep motivated.

5.4 Synthesis and discussion

All three sources of primary data point to a common challenge in the research process: the development of the research question. In terms of common themes relating to what was learnt, there seems to be common ground around the need to have a clear understanding of the structure of the research process and what is required from students and supervisors. The students noted in particular, the challenge of collecting primary data.

Also, the feedback illustrates the close link between challenges and what is learnt by participants. This because there is a transformative experience that occurs when challenges are addressed and this experience normally involves 'learning', whichever theory of learning is adopted (see 2.2 and 2.3).

In terms of challenges identified in the research process, the data touches on virtually all the areas identified in the literature except for colonial factors and critical thinking skills. Also, this case demonstrates a mixture of approaches to learning which reflect elements of the behaviourist, cognitive and constructivist views. For example, the author noted high dissertation results [100% of students passed and with pattern of grades approximately 5% up on average from previous academic year] as a measure of change and improvement in response to the stimuli of a new milestone structure (see Table 4, 10th December 2008). This reflects a cognitive view: active change in the teaching environment introduced based on how a problem was perceived. However, there was also a behaviourist approach in terms of assessing learning in terms of change (better dissertation results) to stimuli (the new milestone structure). In no case were students or supervisors assumed to have no pre-installed knowledge. However, from a research point of view the research methods course was implemented on the assumption that students may have had no previous research experience. Therefore the research methods course was based on an assumption that reflects the constructivist view. In light of feedback from some students (see Table 5) this seems a valid assumption for international postgraduates. Also the fact that students develop their own research question and route of enquiry in research, suggests that it is one of the most obvious ways in higher education students 'construct' their own outcome with the help of other participants. On a practical level, the diversity of this constructive process requires sensitivity to time and resources that can be devoted to assist students in this area.

This research project was conducted with a limited number of students and staff and within the context of one case study context. This research could be widened to other departments within the same context and extended to other comparable HEIs. These constitute future areas for research. Also, the complexity of the issues from the different viewpoints of management, research methods tutors, supervisors and students could be explored further in future research.

This paper has approached the topic from a number of angles but sought to take a student-focused approach. To achieve a more detailed understanding of the student focused approach to learning in this sphere it may be helpful to conduct research which entails reviewing a series of reflective accounts that students produced during the life cycle of their research experience. This could be collected in blogs or reflective accounts that are compared with other students who do the same thing. This approach may provide a deeper understanding from the students' perspective. This could be done with the participation of a range of students with different cultural backgrounds to obtain data from a culturally diverse group. This may help to identify in more depth patterns relating to cultural differences. Potentially, if participants provide their consent, this material could be used to help guide future students in their research. The technology available within HEIs provides opportunities to be innovative in how such data could be collected and shared but arguably must be applied to challenges in research that may be unrelated to technology, like most of the challenges identified in this study.

6. Conclusion

There are a wide variety of challenges for participants involved in the learning experience of international postgraduate students who do research in business and management studies. This research highlights the variety of these challenges and illustrates how they are closely connected with what is learnt in the process – whatever theory of learning is used. This research also shows that the challenge of the development of the student's research question is one of the most common difficulties in the research process. Also, there is a need to understand the structure of the process and then manage it effectively. This applies to both students and staff. Connected with these issues is a complex network of management and learning challenges that require more research, reflection, and consequentially, improvements that change HEIs and make them increasingly suitable for their profession. To understand this field appropriately a student-centred approach is vital. This research adopts an approach that focuses on this angle. Future research, potentially using new technologies to record data, could provide more in-depth insight needed to help develop the provision of a better service in this area.

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