

224

Improving the research culture: the case of PhD Suites

Imran Akhtar

University of Bolton, Bolton, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

The challenges of pursuing a Doctorate are clear and while there is a greater degree of acknowledgement in this domain, the discourse has often remained within the inner circles, i.e., PhD suites, the supervision forums and sometimes this notion has been made to the internal newsletters' headlines (Gibney, 2013). A similar phenomenon has been echoed by Aydemir and Ulusu (2020), however, the discussion, as with the former, has been contained to a particular time period. The aim of this paper, with the overarching aim, is to bring to the fore, the notion of informality in the PhD suites where the PhD students, their supervisors and the wider academic community can interact in an informal setting. This paper will use a case study approach of a relatively small business school in Northwest England. The PhD Suite in the Business School, in 6 months, has witnessed a transformational change.

Full paper

Given the increasing student numbers and the global demand for higher education, in particular, in the world post-pandemic where after the re-opening of the border and easing of travel restrictions, there is an indication that the international student number will see a rise of almost 50% by the year 2026, rising from 144,000 in the year 2022 to 208,500 in the year 2026 (THE, 2022). It is evident that following such a drastic increase, in not only international but also

the local enrolment into the Higher Education, there will be an increasing demand to have the Doctoral-Level qualified teaching and research-active faculty to facilitate the teaching and learning on one and battling for research ranking on the other. While the need to increase Doctoral-level qualified workforce is ever more on the rise, the actual number of Graduates at the Doctoral level has stagnated (Eurostat, 2022). In this report, while there is some negative but mainly positive movement in the number of graduates at Doctoral-level qualified in different EU (including the UK before Brexit), the overall number has remained at the exact same level as that of 2013. According to the data presented by Eurostat (2022), for Graduates at the doctoral level per 1000 of the population in 2013 (t1) was 1.9 and in the year 2020 (t2) was the same, 1.9. This is clearly a concerning call as to how to compete against other countries and continents that are attracting a large number of international students. For example, The UK is not only facing competition from other English-speaking destinations, but new hubs have emerged in East Asia and the Pacific as well as Central and Eastern Europe (UUK, 2022) with a large number of English universities offering higher education provision in UAE (British Council, 2022) .

In order to cater for ever-increasing demand, it is important to note that the Doctoral Candidature should be sustainable with efforts made to attract a larger number. However, catering for such an increase in demand has its own costs, i.e., attracting students to study for a Doctorate and then facilitating their research endeavours. For the latter, there are some challenges, that this paper has sought to highlight and make some tentative recommendations as to how to improve the foster the research culture as a means to retain and increase the Doctorate Candidature. While there is some scholarly debate about the challenges facing the Doctoral Community, the research has remained minimum. Taking note from Tress et al (2009), where they have proposed the need for a “social contact in an informal atmosphere” to be used as a scaffolding approach to improve and enhance the research culture. This work-in-progress empirical/data-based study is aimed at presenting a compelling background and a theoretical overview of the issues and challenges

faced within the PhD Suites. It is envisaged that the paper will make an attempt at presenting some initial findings using close-scale longitudinal data highlighting the shift that has taken place in a Business School in Northwest of England.

Listening to the plight of the Doctoral Community, and voicing their concerns about the lack of research culture and the absence of their research dissemination platform, an initiative was taken to enhance, foster and strengthen the research culture. Following small interventions, the PhD suite witnessed a transformational change with the PhD ICE (Informal Coffee Event) launched. The events were held on a monthly basis, bringing together the Doctoral and the academic community, the latter group sharing their experiences of “one being a Doctoral candidate themselves” and how they swam through the “channel” to reach the “shore”, Taking a case study approaching by sounding these stories, both from the academic community and the Doctoral candidates, an interesting point was noted that the utility of these PhD ICE sessions has been two-way, i.e., not only the PhD students benefit from the inspiring stories of their supervised students but also the senior academics also benefited from a variety of fresh perspectives, opening the doors for improved research culture, collaborative research projects and the emergence of small-scale and internally-funded research clusters. It was noted, in an interesting turn, that the PhD students were an inspiration to the senior academic community in a number of ways, such as the identification and discovery of new novel research areas, collaborative writing project and many more useful initiatives. The research outcomes will be of interest to the wider audience, i.e., PhD students, supervisory teams, the research and knowledge exchange manager and the associate dean for research.

References

Aydemir, D. & Ulusu, N.N. 2020, "Commentary: Challenges for PhD students during COVID-19 pandemic: Turning crisis into an opportunity", *Biochemistry and molecular biology education*, vol. 48,

no. 5, pp. 428-429.

British Council (2022) Studying for a UK degree in the United Arab Emirates [online] Available from: <https://study-uk.britishcouncil.org/find/study-options/studying-uk-degree-outside-uk/uae> [Accessed on 10 June 2022]

Eurostat (2022) Graduates at doctoral level by sex and age groups - per 1000 of population aged 25-34. [online] Available from: <https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do> . [Accessed 11 June 2022]

Falk, L.L., Augustin, H., Torén, K., Magnusson, M., 2019, "Doctoral students' perceived working environment, obstacles and opportunities at a Swedish medical faculty: a qualitative study", BMC medical education, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 250-250.

Gibney, E. 2013, "Alienation effects: How part-time PhD students view research culture: News", The Times higher education supplement, no. 2119, pp. 9.

THE (2022) International student numbers could rise 50% over five years [online] Available from: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/international-student-numbers-could-rise-50-over-five-years-z3l9lwjl0#:~:text=Ucas%20forecasts%20that%20the%20volume,autu> [Accessed 11 June 2022]

Tress, B., Tress, G. & Fry, G. 2009, "Integrative research on environmental and landscape change: PhD students' motivations and challenges", Journal of environmental management, vol. 90, no. 9, pp. 2921-2929

UUKI (2021) International student recruitment: Why aren't we second? Part 1 [online] Available from: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/universities-uk-international/insights-and-publications/uuki-blog/international-student-recruitment-why> [Accessed 9 June 2022]