

Voices of isolation and marginalisation– an investigation into the PhD experience in Tourism studies.

Abstract

This paper examines the challenges presented by the PhD journey in the internationalised environment of UK Higher Education and gives voice to the experiences of students. It focuses particularly on the issue of isolation and marginalisation. Through semi-structured interviews with students and supervisors at three institutions, it reveals that social interaction, lack of academic community and the individualised nature of the supervisory relationship are key factors in feelings of isolation. In addition, findings suggest that academic discourse and the maintenance of academic conventions and hierarchy exacerbate feelings of marginalisation. The paper offers important insights for universities regarding the management and support of doctoral students and suggestions to improve their experience, thereby enhancing the appeal of the UK doctorate.

Keywords

Doctorate; PhD; doctoral experience; isolation; marginalisation

1.0 Introduction

Many authors have conceptualised the PhD as an isolated journey with heavy baggage (Miller and Brimicombe, 2010) with some arguing that the milestones upon this journey can be described as stages in a rite of passage from a junior position to a senior academic (Delamont, Atkinson and Parry, 1997). Several authors have described the challenges of travelling the PhD journey and making multiple transitions in their social identity, from teacher to student, from native speaker to second language speaker (Fotovatian and Miller, 2014), from practitioner to student (Brydon and Fleming, 2011) or student to academic (Owler, 2010). Brydon and Fleming (2011:996) depict the PhD as *'a long journey fraught with twists and turns, with few defined signposts and the need to constantly adapt to unexpected events'* and Janta, Lugosi and Brown (2014:553) as *'the emotional and multi-faceted journey of becoming a scholar.'*

Owler (2010:298) describes the PhD process as *'an intense oscillation between excitement and fear'* during which students experience periods of self-doubt where they question their motivations for pursuing a PhD and the knowledge they have gained. Amran and Ibrahim (2011:531) echo this view, stating that many students experience moments of *'fear, inferiority, darkness and invisibility'*. They have to deal with these emotional challenges at the same time as juggling personal and professional responsibilities with often conflicting demands from families, institutions and sponsors. Alongside all these challenges, they are struggling to develop their skills and identities as researchers (Miller and Brimicombe, 2010). Brydon and Fleming (2011) contend that there is little literature which, from a student perspective, considers the challenges on this transitional journey.

This paper addresses the gap in research into the emotional and intellectual experiences of the doctoral journey (Amran and Ibrahim, 2011) in the contemporary internationalised climate of UK Higher Education. In response to Brydon and Fleming's (2011) contention that there is little literature which considers the challenges on this transitional journey from a student perspective, this paper gives particular voice to the student perceptions of this journey and the challenges it brings. It focuses in particular on understanding the issue of isolation and marginalisation. This is a particularly important piece of research as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2011) concluded that the quality of the research environment and contact with other researchers is vital to the doctoral experience and successful completion. In a changing higher education landscape where reduced completion times and dropouts are key measures of success, clarity about the factors influencing them is a priority (Greener, 2021). This paper aims to better inform the development, management and support of doctoral students in UK Business and Management Schools, thereby improving the student experience, increasing completion rates and, ultimately, making the UK an attractive proposition in a competitive marketplace.

2.0 Background

Owler (2010) acknowledges that, in the current higher education climate, there is little recognition of the passionate process involved in knowledge production. However, there are existing accounts of the process which suggest that the personal journey involved in the process are as important to candidates as obtaining their doctorate. Owler (2010) argues that this personal struggle has been '*an unwritten requirement of the doctorate*' which has not been formally recognised by universities but was nevertheless traditionally accepted by the academy as part of the '*mysterious rite of passage*' to the status of academic. However, under managerialism, this previous '*badge of honour*' has become regarded as a sign of mismanagement and, in order to overcome the difficulties in the doctoral process, students and supervisors are now being trained to handle their emotions more appropriately, leaving less scope for reflexivity regarding our identity and recognition of the impact of our embodied characteristics and personal journey on our research (Hall, 2004).

Research shows that a major issue for doctoral students is the social and academic isolation they experience and that postgraduate research is commonly perceived as rather a '*lone venture*' (Wisker, Robinson and Shacham, 2007) or '*lonely journey*' (Matthiesen and Binder, 2009). Miller and Brimicombe (2010:408-409) encapsulate the feelings of loneliness, isolation and confusion, stating '*The PhD journey, like foreign travel, involves the exploration of unknown territories and encounters with unfamiliar cultures ... For many PhD travellers, the journey is aided (and sometimes hampered) by the guidebooks they consult and by those fellow travellers and people they meet along the way.*' Owler (2010) found that the fact that the PhD is defined by the requirement for the student to produce independent original research leads to the lone or lonely experience. This can sometimes be enjoyed as an experience of autonomy but, on other occasions, leads to a difficult experience of loneliness. Moments of intimacy with one's books can rapidly become moments of confusion and insecurity.

Despite the widespread recognition that doctoral students, both home and international, are on a solitary intellectual journey (McCallin and Nayar, 2011) and cite intellectual and social

isolation as one of the main difficulties they encounter along the way (Deem and Brehony, 2000; Ryan and Viete, 2009), Janta, Lugosi and Brown (2014) contend that relatively little research has been done into the factors that contribute to feelings of isolation and the measures taken by both students and institutions to overcome them. The research that does exist tends to focus on the experience of international students, mainly at Masters level, with little focus on doctoral students or home students; any research that has been done cites the highly personalised nature of the doctoral journey as leading to a very solitary experience for students (Delamont *et al.*, 1997).

This is of particular concern to Business or Management Schools as students undertaking a conventional PhD in social sciences with a long thesis have, traditionally, rarely been part of a team and the traditional individualised relationship with one supervisor is, without doubt a contributory factor in the feelings of isolation (Deem and Brehony, 2000). Greener (2021) suggests that, due to the wide variety of methodologies and disciplines encountered in business research and lack of integrated academic research groups in Management Schools, students have less access to strong research communities of practice than in STEM disciplines. Chiang (2003) reminds us that in the social sciences, students do not work on the same projects as their supervisors and are regarded as learners, rather than full members of the research group. This highly personalised nature of the doctoral journey, can lead to a very solitary experience for students (Delamont *et al.*, 1997). McCray and Joseph-Richard (2021) go further than this and state that there is a culture of individual competition and a power differential between teaching and research staff which leads to a rejection of collaboration in Business Schools. They suggest that this environment means doctoral students in these Schools may feel isolated from the beginning of their journey. This lack of research community goes some way to explain the fact that business and management doctorates tend to produce longer completion times and lower completion rates than those in sciences and health sciences (Greener, 2021).

Whilst it is widely claimed that supervisors are vital in the PhD journey (Lee, 2008), the assumed centrality of the supervisory relationship has been questioned as research has found that even if students have a satisfactory relationship with their supervisor, a lack of social interaction with family and friends will make them unhappy (Jazvac-Martek *et al.*, 2011; Janta, Lugosi and Brown, 2014). This has been found to be a particular issue for part-time and international students for whom there can be a significant personal cost of pursuing a PhD. Family time is severely restricted and you can become estranged from family, who try to support what you are doing but do not really understand the journey and, although the PhD is a '*solo swim event*', you still need the people around you as fans (Brydon and Fleming, 2011:1008).

The role of peer interaction in doctoral students' experience has been widely acknowledged (Gardner, 2007; Hadjioannau *et al.*, 2007) and Janta, Lugosi and Brown (2014) support these findings, stating that both domestic and international students experience social isolation and may struggle to engage in meaningful relationships with fellow students. This lack of social interaction can lead to self-doubts (Matthiesen and Binder, 2009) and may have a detrimental effect upon both academic performance and timely completion (Hockey, 1991; Ali and Kohun, 2007). The isolated nature of the journey impairs the ability to think creatively and share

knowledge (Hockey, 1991) and contributes to the challenge in sustaining passion for the project (Brydon and Fleming, 2011).

Many authors, such as Deem and Brehony (2000) and Wisker *et al.* (2007) suggest that these feelings of isolation can be exacerbated for both international students, who are unused to the cultures and practices of UK Higher Education and part-time students, who are rare visitors to their department. The body of doctoral students in the UK includes a large number of international students and evidence shows that isolation has always been a key concern for international students and worries about homesickness and isolation and difficulties in mixing with UK students remain high during many students' whole experience (UKCISA, 2011). This evidence is reinforced by the data regularly gathered by the International Student Barometer which highlights the difficulties experienced by international students in mixing with UK students and other existing literature which suggests that the lack of contact between home and international students can leave international students feeling excluded and lonely (Marginson, Nyland, Sawir and Forbes-Mewett, 2010). Urban and Palmer (2014) found that international students' interactions with home students tend to be superficial and short-lived and do not contribute to their international perspectives. International doctoral students' feelings of marginality can be exacerbated by language and cultural differences, for example the physical attire of Muslim females (Amran and Ibrahim, 2011; Janta, Lugosi and Brown, 2014) and postgraduate international students can feel '*excluded, ignored, isolated, marginalized or simply distanced*' (Ryan and Viète, 2009:309). Percy (2014:3) supports this, suggesting that '*imposter syndrome*' or fear of being a fraud often prevents doctoral students being honest with themselves and seeking out honest and supportive relationships with other researchers.

Shiel (2008) highlights this sense of isolation experienced by international students and suggests that socialisation does not happen by chance. It is widely recognised that this socialisation is one of the most difficult issues for universities to address and none appear to have found a real solution. UK student culture tends to focus heavily around pub and club culture and many international students have no experience of this in their own cultures. Indeed, their religion may well preclude them from entering establishments serving alcohol or, for females, mixing with men in public. Amran and Ibrahim (2011) add that events and venues have to be appropriate to both home and international students to avoid the risk of marginalising certain groups and reinforcing feelings of isolation. Fotovatian and Miller (2014:291) recognise the importance of informal relationships and '*tea-room interactions*' for research students but accept that these interactions are often culturally loaded and linguistically challenging for international students and found that international students avoided social interactions for fear of '*saying something culturally or socially inappropriate*' (2014:287). The cultural journey (Stier, 2002) remains, for many, therefore, a difficult one.

With regard to this cultural journey, Deem and Brehony (2000) suggest that there are three cultures which are relevant to social science research students: the peer cultures of research students; the cultures of research student training and the cultures of academic disciplines and argue that home students, too, can feel excluded from these cultures. They define academic research cultures as including disciplinary values, expert knowledge and knowledge production, cultural practices and narrative, intellectual networks and learned societies. They suggest that the ability for research students to access these cultures depends largely on

chance and their supervisors. Becher and Trowler (1989), however, outline other ways students may access these cultures, such as research training, giving seminars, publishing and establishing academic networks. Deem and Brehony (2000) found that full-time students who were aspiring academics were most likely to gain access to these cultures. Both international and part-time students expressed concern that they were excluded because of factors such as lack of information and lack of confidence to join in and express themselves in English in a group situation. These findings are consistently supported by the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES, 2011; 2018; 2020) which highlights the feelings of isolation that postgraduate research students experience, with research culture being the area that postgraduate research students are least satisfied with. PRES (2011; 2018; 2020) findings illustrate opportunities for improvement in facilitating social contact with other research students, involving research students in the broader research culture and in providing good research seminar programmes.

However, Janta, Lugosi and Brown (2014) point out that it can be challenging for universities with a less-developed research culture to support such initiatives. This is borne out by research conducted by Kemp *et al* (2008) into 68 UK HE Institutions' policies in regard to international postgraduate research students. He found that only one university had a strategy which included in-course support for research students or mentioned improving the research students' experience. This is a concern for managers in higher education institutions and, in particular, in multi-disciplinary business schools as, if students' expectations of becoming part of a sociable, active research community are not met, they feel very disappointed and possibly misled (Janta, Lugosi and Brown, 2014).

3.0. Methods

Unlike many previous studies in which students have been the subject of the study and the research has been carried out on them, this research aimed to carry out the research with them. It used qualitative techniques to provide deeper understandings of the subjective, individualised experiences of PhD students, both home and international and, indeed, their supervisors. The study takes the view that each student is on an individual journey and that there is no 'truth' waiting to be discovered. Unlike reality oriented enquiry, it is based on the belief that multiple realities exist in a world which is socially constructed (Patton, 2015). A critical perspective is embedded in the work, by giving added weight to the views of doctoral students and thereby attempting to give voice to those who appear less empowered within the process (Weiss and Greene, 1992:145); as such, the interview quotations used are verbatim. The paper forms part of a wider study into the PhD experience and knowledge creation in Tourism and Hospitality studies, hence the interviewees were all doctoral students in these areas.

This study took a 'bricolage' or blended approach and drew upon approaches and used methods and techniques which appeared to be the most appropriate and effective in '*opening up new understandings*' (Patton, 2015:400). Naturalistic research calls for a willingness to respond to new issues which emerge during interviews and the inquiry began with some of the key themes from the literature but expanded as the fieldwork progressed. Through this

bricolage, it was possible to capture '*thick descriptions*' (Hollinshead, 2004). The research took place in two broad phases which are outlined below.

Phase One involved exploratory semi-structured interviews, with respondents based at the three UK Higher Education Institutions with the largest numbers of PhD students in tourism and hospitality studies.. As mentioned above, no attempt is made to generalise from these findings but this sample was selected purposefully as these respondents were considered to be 'information-rich cases.' The first phase of the research involved exploratory interviews with 9 students (7 international and 2 UK) and 4 supervisors within these institutions. The aim of these interviews was to investigate the factors influencing the PhD experience for both students and supervisors in tourism and hospitality studies in contemporary UK higher education and how internationalisation is impacting upon the experience. Themes that were explored in this phase included students' backgrounds, motivations for undertaking a PhD, career plans, supervisory relationship, research training, expectations of a PhD, interaction with other students and staff and highs and lows of the experience thus far.

The second phase of the research involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews with six full-time students (4 international and 2 UK) and six supervisors across the same three institutions and explored, in much more depth, some of the key issues that came to light in phase one, such as the effect of intense isolation on the PhD experience. Questions were asked around themes such as what makes a good supervisory relationship, types of interactions with peers and staff, extent to which there was a research community, personal issues throughout the journey, greatest challenges and positive experiences and the most valuable thing learned on the journey.

Belk *et al.* (1998) acknowledge that depth of understanding is far more important than sample size in social constructionist research. The sample of interviewees in this study is relatively small and was chosen purposefully in order to allow the PhD experience to be looked into and understood in depth (Patton 2015). It was important to have a cross-section of nationalities, including UK students, as the literature had highlighted both the importance of investigating the home student experience in an internationalised environment and the fact that international students should not be treated as a homogeneous other. The fact that there are fewer home students than international students is representative of the doctoral student body in Tourism Studies. As stated above, no effort is made to generalise from the findings but the participants were selected to give '*what is believed to be a representative sample*' (Gray, 2004:87) and '*to try to present a working picture of the broader social structure from which the observations are drawn*' (Henderson, 1991:132). In an effort to maintain anonymity, random pseudonyms were allocated to participants.

Interviews were chosen for the research as they are regarded as a powerful tool for eliciting highly personalised and rich data on people's attitudes and views and the meanings that underpin their lives and behaviour (Gray, 2014). In contrast to many studies on the doctoral experience, this study focusses on real people in real situations and the interviews do not just illuminate key issues, they are appealing and compelling because of their human character. The participants are the main players in the story which attempts to convey their thoughts and feelings (Holloway and Brown, 2016).

The interviews were recorded, with the agreement of the participants, and were then transcribed. The transcripts were then analysed by one researcher and, following Gillham (2005), analysis was approached in a reflective manner and viewed as another stage in the emergent process. Although each interview was unique in the sense that it is difficult to find commonality in each person's internal world (Gillham, 2005), the semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that, to some extent, boundaries were set and content analysis with coding and theming was possible. However, the identification of substantive statements and then categories was an iterative and largely inductive process, whereby patterns, themes and categories emerged from the transcripts, rather than data being analysed strictly according to an existing framework (Patton, 2015).

4.0. Results and discussion

The participants in this study agreed that the PhD is an isolated and challenging journey but it also became clear that this journey is a very personal one which is experienced in different ways by different people. The interviews revealed that various factors influenced the doctoral journey and the sense of both isolation and marginalisation experienced by PhD students.

4.1. Social isolation

The study found that international students experienced both loneliness at being separated from their families and pressure to provide for them. One student, Said, spoke of leaving his wife and two children and mother in his home country and he spoke of the emotional pressures and financial sacrifice of coming to the UK, saying:

It is very hard to leave your family behind. My children, my wife, my mother. And I need to make sure they are OK and have money to look after the children. It is hard, very hard.

Another talked of the pressure he felt under to complete his PhD and return home, for the sake of his family:

My mother keeps asking me on the phone – when you come home? My youngest daughter, she only meets her family a few times during holidays. I need to get home.

The findings regarding the loneliness of international students who are far from home are, perhaps, not surprising. There has been little research into the experiences of UK full-time PhD students who are susceptible to the same feelings of social and academic isolation as their international student peers (Janta, Lugosi and Brown, 2014).

In light of this, it is important to note that both the home and international students interviewed shared the view that the PhD was a very intense and isolated experience. The two British students amongst a cohort of international students spoke of the major contribution they feel this situation made to their feelings of isolation, which is an issue that has had little consideration in the literature (Clare, 2008; Janta *et al.*, 2014).

Ruby talks of 'loneliness' 'frustration', 'isolation' and 'stress':

What I found in the PhD is there's no one who's done the PhD who's around just to talk to you about the difficulties of dealing with the emotions that you feel and the loneliness and you know, the stress of all of that and that really used to get to me ...

Ruby goes on to describe her feelings of social isolation as she 'put her life on hold' to finish her PhD:

Oh extremely, extremely isolated because you cut yourself off from social groups, well not everyone does but the way that I did it, the way that I felt I had to do it, I felt isolated. I also felt like nobody really understood apart from the people around you who were doing the PhD.

Ruby's comments support the views of Brydon and Fleming (2011:1008) who state that family and friends try to support you in your 'solo swim event' but do not really understand the journey.

4.2. Interaction with other students

It is well documented in the literature that there is little integration between international and home students (Marginson *et al*, 2010) and it was fairly predictable that PhD students would experience this issue, especially considering the solitary academic life they tend to lead. During our exploratory conversations, the vast majority of students confirmed that they had little contact with other PhD students within their departments, either on an intellectual or social level. This supports findings from the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) that large numbers of postgraduate students do not feel integrated into their department's community.

The international student respondents were fairly unanimous in the fact that they had little contact with British people, other than occasionally through part-time jobs, and Kim Sun summed it up as follows:

But, for me, when you come for PhD, actually, everybody international and also, you don't really have kind of other class (...) so you have mostly no chance to meet the British people. At least if you are working, in British environment, you have chance, but I'm not.

The international students were very aware that language was a barrier to their communication with other students and, therefore, their feelings of marginality and isolation (Amran and Ibrahim, 2011). For example, Changsai commented:

But, sorry, about English, for PhD student, we only do reading and writing usually so I don't think my speaking ... we don't have a chance to speak ...it is very isolated.

It was clear from these interviews that students' confidence in their communication skills and the fact that English was not the language being spoken by the students around them were contributory factors to this isolation. As Maryam said:

When I was in America, people around you always used to talk. Here, we are all Arabic speakers. I am sometimes jealous of my friends on Masters courses going into classes and meeting people. I see my supervisor maybe once a month ... and that's it.

Unsurprisingly, interaction between home and international students was hampered by language skills. However, Ruby confirmed that these communication difficulties hindered any meaningful academic exchange with her international peers leading to feelings of isolation for home students too:

Because the problem is a lot of them are really struggling with English as you know, so if they're struggling with English, they can't have a conversation, quite often about epistemological stance. Oh well you know, they haven't, their English wasn't that great and so there wasn't that much of bouncing of ideas and stuff.

When asked about social integration, several students mentioned cultural differences as a difficulty, reinforcing the findings of Fotovatian and Miller (2014) who found that international students avoided social interactions for fear of making a cultural blunder. Theo, a Greek student, commented:

Well, no, I don't know why, maybe because I think there's a nucleus of Thai, Malaysian and they hang out together and maybe they have a different kind of lifestyle and ... I don't know.

Kim Sun expressed similar sentiments:

Other students, lot of them, they are Muslim and it is not appropriate to interact, especially if have family. Even, they are their own people, they are very attached by each other ... it's different culture.

The findings above indicate that it is not just a home-international student dichotomy that exists but that strong cultural communities, such as Arabic and South East Asian, exist on campus and other students are not able to penetrate these, confirming the findings of Urban and Palmer (2014) that international students form strong communities on campus and that cross-cultural contact does not happen easily. By recruiting large numbers of students from certain countries and not recognising that this causes issues, universities are not creating an inclusive environment - somewhat ironically, internationalisation is stifling internationalisation. These findings support the assertion that cross-cultural contact on campus does not happen automatically (Otten, 2003; Sawir, 2013) and, contrary to Middlehurst and Woodfield's (2007) recommendation, universities do not appear to be finding mechanisms to integrate students.

When asked about her interaction with British students and academics, Hye appears to have encountered difficulties, although she suggests that she has not had the same experiences outside of the university:

Some people are really nice and friendly but some of them are so ... kind of closed. But here, I tried to smile to everybody, kind of 'hello', they don't reply me back and I was kind of like 'aaah', I was shocked because they just kind of pass by and that was my ...er.. . first shock thing, but people said to me 'You are in academic environment so you can't, don't judge to British people as with the academic environment as with whole of the British.' After that, I just keep quiet, yeah ... It's alright, other people who I met outside seems alright.

This feeling that people within universities are less welcoming than those outside is concerning in the light of initiatives to internationalise universities and provide a welcoming environment in order to gain a competitive advantage over other English-speaking countries (Smith *et al.*, 2010).

This lack of integration was underlined by the obvious divide between full-time students, many of whom are international, and part-time students, most of whom are UK. Obviously, their lifestyles and working culture are different and this appeared to have produced a 'cultural rift', evoking strong emotions from Jo, a staff member who was pursuing his PhD part-time:

Cos it's very very difficult with the PhD students that we have in the department here because they are all full-time, that's all they do ... and I must say, I find our departmental PhD students intensely irritating.

It was evident from the interviews that language was a contributory factor not only to isolation but to marginalisation. Findings support Bilecen's (2013) argument that, although UK Higher Education, is deemed to be a multicultural and multilingual society, international doctoral students were still made 'the Other' based on language, a point that is often neglected in the literature.

All the British students talk of cultural barriers and appear to consider international students as an homogenous 'Other' in opposition to local students referring to them throughout as 'they.' Ruby uses a discourse of difference when she talks of the cultural barriers between herself and her international peers, using terms such as 'nobody really understood', 'they're all from different backgrounds to me', 'their priorities were very different to mine':

This supports Fotovatian and Miller's (2014) view that home PhD students stereotype international students and use the discourse of we and you, indicating that they perceive them as the Other. However, it appears from this research that this process of othering can in fact lead to feelings of marginalisation for local students themselves.

4.3. Academic community

Kemp *et al.* (2008) note that institutions, as well as supervisors, have a key role to play in creating an academic community for doctoral students. Generally, there seemed to be the feeling amongst both UK and international students that there was not a strong research community within departments and one UK student, Jo, spoke quite firmly on this:

Well, it's been very difficult ... in terms of the research community. I know that for the past six years, there hasn't been a research community

Katie noted that, in her institution, students are physically isolated from the academic staff who are 'behind closed doors':

I think it's the space that everybody's in. We're downstairs; the staff are upstairs behind closed doors. There's been a few times where I've walked past and had a look and then if there's nobody there, well that's alright, if there's people in there you think 'Shall I, shan't I?'

Dr Richards also spoke of this physical isolation and compared it to her own experiences as a PhD student:

I think that when I was doing it there wasn't a researcher's room. You were all within the same two corridors and so people knew that you were a research student. They sort of probably had a bit of an idea about what you were doing and you probably did a bit of teaching as well. I think that has changed completely and there's much less of it than there was and I think that's a really bad thing. I think the researcher's room has separated out the students completely.

Ruby also describes the divide between PhD students and staff. What is noteworthy here is that Ruby was, during her PhD, undertaking a large amount of teaching within the department but still appears to feel marginalised from the tribe of staff, again referring to staff as 'they' and students as 'we'. This seems to echo Fotovatian and Miller's (2014) view of the challenge that faces PhD students and academics in crossing power barriers and supports Percy's (2014:3) notion of 'imposter syndrome.' Ruby says:

There's not really much sort of mixing of the staff and the students. That's one thing that the PHD students always complained about, that the PHD staff were not mixing with the PHD students and I guess if you got them to mix more then those conversations might happen.

Dr Richards raises the issue that isolation does not only increase as a result of the physical space which is allocated to PhD students. There are also issues surrounding the increase of student numbers, fewer group activities such as research seminars and less integration with the wider department as fewer PhD students teach within departments.

But I think when we were doing it, when we were sort of the School there were less students, you were located within the teaching environment. You did a little bit of teaching as well. Plus, we used to have research seminars where either you would present for 15/20 minutes on your project and everybody sort of attended that so everybody knew what everybody else was doing and now I think that it's much more disparate that you don't really know what's going on.

Dr Price talked about the value of a Research Methods course in terms of students getting to know each other:

But, more importantly than me knowing what they're doing, they all know what each other's doing, which I think is brilliant. . So I think just getting them physically together and talking ... I quite enjoyed doing that – and I think they enjoyed it. I think it's as much about the community as much as what they learn. I mean one international student, he was happy to contribute but a lot of the others last year, they wouldn't say much, I couldn't get much out of them, it was hard.

Once again, a clear distinction is drawn here between home and international. This repeated 'othering' of international students appears to lend weight to Fotovatian and Miller's (2014) view that universities are creating two distinct identity groups and magnifying the social, cultural and physical space between the two groups.

Indeed, strategies to overcome this isolation are not embedded within university cultures and appear to depend on the motivation of individuals. For example, few supervisors mentioned the issue of cultural, social and academic isolation for their students and only one, Professor Gelling, spoke of a deliberate strategy to address such issues:

Erm, I was Director of Research before I took over this role and I sort of brought to the system very much more cohorts of research students. So, previously, they would come in at different times of the year and, at one point, they were described as Phantom of the Opera because you would see them at odd hours in the corridors and there was no community and so I sort of brought in more of a cohort approach where we had more fixed events like seminars and social events and things. And that worked very well.

As mentioned earlier, this appears to support research which has found that, despite the recognition that a vibrant research community is vital to a successful experience and completion; few universities have strategies in place to support this (Kemp *et al*, 2008; Janta, Lugosi and Brown, 2014). In fact, the fact that culturally bound communities have taken shape on campus seems to actively work against the development of a vibrant, intercultural research community.

4.4. Supervisory relationship

It became apparent that the lack of academic community could be exacerbated by the traditional one-to-one supervisory relationship in Business and Management. Despite the fact

that there is a general consensus in the literature that the supervisory relationship is a key factor in the PhD experience, it is also recognised that it is under-researched (Wisker, 2005; Halse and Malfroy, 2010). This, coupled with the recognition that supervisors' experiences are rarely exposed to critical examination (Trahar and Hyland, 2011), led to an exploration of this relationship in some depth and it was commonly agreed by both students and supervisors that the relationship was of great importance.

However, the review of literature also highlighted the current debate regarding the extent of the role of the supervisor in this personal journey and the lack of research into the expectations of doctoral students and supervisors with regard to emotional and pastoral care (Janta *et al.*, 2014). McCallin and Naylor (2012) suggest that supervisors have become both teachers of research and responsible for the pastoral management of students.

During the interviews, it became clear that the supervisory relationship was highly individualised with little consistency of approach. Kim Sun highlighted this inconsistency:

So, it depends on what the supervisor wants from the relations with the student. If they want only official relationship, they will have only official. But, it depends on the supervisor. Some supervisors, they want to have more than official, they go out more regular some kind of dinner or lunch, so they're meeting some different place and it's quite friendly.

Most of the respondents mentioned interpersonal or communication skills as important in forming a good relationship with their supervisor, thus corroborating findings in the literature on cross-cultural supervision that effective communication is essential to good student-supervisor relationships (Adams and Cargill, 2003; Deuchar, 2008). Theo praised the communication skills of his supervisor:

I like the fact that he doesn't like, he is Mr International Tourism and he is very down-to earth and he chats like a friend and a normal person. I really like that.

Natalie referred specifically to the cross-cultural understanding that one of her supervisors showed:

He knows international students' difficulties and he care about his students. ... I think he know our culture as well ...he know international students' national culture and he know how to supervise based on a student's personality.

However, a significant number of students also mentioned that they would rather their supervisors were more explicit and direct about their expectations regarding basic matters such as how to address them and more complex issues such as boundaries in their relationship. This appears to support the view of authors such as Burns *et al* (1999) and Lee (2008) who highlight the importance of discussion regarding roles and expectations with the supervisory relationship in order to minimise a mismatch in expectations.

Despite the increasing numbers of research students and the pressure for timely completions and '*fast supervision for fast times*' (Green and Usher, 2003:44), the majority of supervisors were categorical in their assertion that they benefited hugely from the PhD supervision process and enjoyed the personal relationships involved. Most cited it as an '*enjoyable part of the job*' and spoke of the '*huge gains*' in terms of '*intense interaction*', '*real immersion in the subject*' and '*intellectual proximity*' to people. One supervisor described it as '*challenging and stimulating*' and spoke of '*investing time*' in the relationship.

Despite the debates in the literature regarding the one-to-one relationship (Deem and Brehony, 2000), supervisors, in the main, highlighted this personal relationship with the student as one of the most important ingredients for successful supervision. Dr Butcher went as far as to say that it was necessary in order for the process to reach a successful outcome, echoing Brydon and Fleming's (2011) view that valuable supervision is brought about by forming an effective working relationship:

If you don't have that relationship, then it's not going to work because it is an emotional experience for both parties, so you have to build that sort of background up ...

Interviews disclosed that supervisors are aware of the personal challenges facing students but have mixed views as to the extent to which they should offer pastoral support. For example, Professor Howells acknowledges that supervisors need to be trusted to understand the personal challenges along a student's journey:

And, I suppose trust on the part of the student that the supervisor knows what they're talking about and is listening to what they have to say and understand the issues and problems, not only relating to the research itself but also their personal issues that might be affecting them and all the rest of it.

However, Dr Richards appears to view herself as having less of a pastoral role:

Some of the, in terms of what happens outside their research, some students will tell you about external issues that they've got going on and that's fine and you deal with them. And I don't know as a supervisor, unless there is something that is going to really impact on their studies, like a bout of ill health or something like that, I don't know whether I want to know about other things that are going on.

Whilst several academics acknowledged the isolated nature of the PhD journey and were supportive of the students, they appeared to offer no strategies to alleviate the isolation supporting Deuchar's (2008) findings that supervisors did not always understand which type of support was required at which stage of the process. For example, Professor Howells talked of '*sharing*' the lonely experience but appeared to offer no solution to the issue:

I think it's difficult also sharing with the students their very very lonely experience ... I think it's a very lonely experience for students, so I find that quite

emotionally kind of, you know, there's a bit of an emotional aspect to that, that you can't avoid feeling empathy with.

However, contrary to findings in the literature, several students acknowledged the importance of their supervisor in easing their feelings of isolation. Changsai had family problems which affected his concentration and he became very lonely. He describes his feelings of relief when he told his supervisor:

He was very kind, very supportive. He made me feel much less alone.

Several students commented on the difficulties they had experienced in communicating with their supervisors and attributed these to the fact that weaknesses in their English were leading to misunderstandings and a heightened feeling of nervousness. One student, Kim Sun, mentioned that this, in turn, was inhibiting her and limiting the amount and scope of discussion:

Initially, I was in struggle to have good relations ...I don't know what good relations is ... maybe difficulty of communication in my English and somehow, they take in wrong way, my expression of English. So, um ... and I don't know, I'm kind of nervous, I don't really express much as I want and ...

The interviewees were aware of their weak language skills which hindered communication between students and their supervisors and led, in some cases, to 'an intense loss of self-esteem and identity' (Ryan and Viète, 2009:307). As Hye commented:

I can't really talk in front of him [supervisor], I feel nervous, shy, so kind of for me, it's really difficult to communicate in meetings.

It was apparent that even UK students need support to overcome the isolation and Ruby acknowledges the role of the supervisor in mitigating these feelings, echoing findings in the literature that the supervisory role has expanded and now includes the pastoral management of students (McCallin and Nayar, 2012). Ruby refers to one of her supervisors as being very 'emotionally supportive':

She would pop into my room because I would only be across the road and she would pop in just to see how I was doing and I'm the sort of person who really values little things like that and so I really valued all that sort of stuff.

Katie also talks of the importance of her supervisory team in supporting her throughout the journey:

I have also been given personal support for various things, you know some confidence building ...Yeah because you sit, don't know whether it's a PHD thing or a personal thing, again it's probably a mixture, you kind of sit there stewing over what you're reading and what you've found out and you're thinking about what am I, what am I doing, what do I believe in? And you just

need someone to tell you, 'Well this has happened to other people' or 'that's right' or you know 'don't worry about it'.

On another level, there is the issue of academic discourse, for all PhD students, and the extent to which different students master this discourse and the consequences this has for their doctoral experience. The interviews unveiled the importance of language as a mechanism of power within universities and more particularly, as a difficult obligatory passage point or hurdle to overcome (Tribe, 2010) for researchers within the doctoral process. The findings demonstrated that some students were aware of the need to conform to academic language conventions and, when unable to do so, felt excluded from the academic tribe and its discourse as language can be used to *'claim and reject identities, to signal relationships and to display memberships'* (Lo Bianco, Liddicoat and Crozet, 1999:50).

Maryam voiced her frustrations in this respect:

Everybody in Oman used to say I was a good writer. I don't know but that's what they used to say. Here I don't always know how to use the words – I feel depressed and frustrated about it.

This kind of comment appears to substantiate the findings in the literature that international students are battling to overcome language and cultural barriers in order to find their voice and avoid losing their self-esteem and identity. (Ryan and Viète, 2009; Fotovatian and Miller, 2014).

However, it became apparent that these language constraints were not only a concern for international students. Perry, a British student, alluded to *'academese'* and pointed out that there was an accepted academic discourse and that writing for your doctorate was about *'knowing how to speak the language,'* supporting Hall's (2004:142) view that academic language is used as a partially hidden mechanism of power in tourism studies which influences what *'is acceptable or unacceptable in being represented as tourism knowledge'.*

Katie talked about the inaccessibility of academic discourse and seemed to doubt her own ability to write at the required level to make the transition of identity to an academic, stating *'I don't understand and I need to understand it', 'I don't know if I can aspire to that' and 'I can't achieve that kind of level.'*

This is recognised by Dr Butcher who acknowledges the difficulties experienced by several students, both home and international, in engaging in the accepted academic discourse:

... a PhD has a language of its own. I mean, academese or whatever you want to call it ... that is a whole language, a whole way of being and that's part of what students get. ... so yeah, language is a problem generally in the PhD process but for some of the overseas students, it's more of a challenge than others...

These comments appeared to evidence an awareness from both supervisors and students that academic discourse was a specific type of language and that the acquisition of this

discourse was necessary in order to gain acceptance from gatekeepers such as supervisors and external examiners, to gain a doctorate and become part of the academic tribe (Becher and Trowler, 2001). However, supervisors, rather than supporting their students, seemed happy to accept this as part of the rite of passage, meaning that the dominant groups are able to impose constraints on who has access to the powerful subject positions of higher education and PhD students remain locked in their marginalised position in the academic hierarchy (Davies and Harre, 1990).

5.0. Conclusions

A key finding to be noted is that home and international students share many of the same feelings during their journeys, despite the ‘othering’ and discourse of deficit surrounding international students. Interviews revealed intense feelings of both mental and physical isolation experienced by both home and international students and both are isolated, interestingly, by each other and the system. This can be brought about by both the physical spaces they are allocated which are often away from the academic staff, a lack of peer interaction and lack of an active research culture, increasing feelings of marginalisation. In addition, supervisors, often regarded as key to a successful experience, are restricted by competing demands on their time and pressure to bring about timely completions and undertake all their other academic commitments.

There is little attention given to hidden power in universities, especially in the doctoral experience. This study exposes some of the power structures which exist in the academic community. It particularly focuses on the othering of international students and the importance of language as a mechanism of power. It highlights the extent to which academic discourse and conventions present a major hurdle to entering the academic tribe, thereby leading to feelings of marginalisation for both home and international students. By giving voice to a variety of students, this study has attempted to ‘*speak truth of power and facilitate the speech of the powerless*’ (Tribe, 2006:376).

This study has implications for UK Higher Education Institutions and Management Schools in particular, if they are to continue to attract PhD students in an increasingly competitive marketplace. In a Higher Education landscape which is driven by performativity and completion rates, improving the doctoral student experience needs to be a priority and there are certain initiatives they need to consider.

Firstly, universities should facilitate spaces for interaction to take place. These might include re-thinking the location of doctoral students, attempting to avoid ghettoization of PhD students and thereby according them a higher status within the academic hierarchy. Spaces for informal conversations between staff and students should also be created. This is particularly important in Schools of Management where a wide range of disciplines are housed, researchers tend to work alone and designated spaces could help build subject-based research communities.

Secondly, more vibrant, active research communities are needed within universities in attempt to improve both peer interaction and staff and student interaction. It is vital that initiatives such as internal conferences, seminars, discussions and informal gatherings are

encouraged. However, they need to be framed in a way (and at a time) that will encourage full-time students, academic staff and part-time students (who may also be staff members) to attend. In addition, universities should actively seek to provide teaching opportunities for PhD students and supervisors should encourage students to engage with these opportunities, even if they are unpaid. This would lead to a new identity and an increase in status for the students and, even if temporary, membership of a new tribe.

Universities should re-visit their strategies for providing both pastoral and language support for PhD students. Currently, there is a heavy focus on providing academic support for international undergraduates in many institutions. However, PhD students are a significant cohort who are treading a very lonely path beset with hurdles and would benefit from opportunities for social contact in addition to the practical support that could be provided. This might include clubs or societies that were supported by the universities.

Finally, it has been noted that many supervisors do not lack the will but are prevented from *'intellectual meanderings'* (Green and Usher, 2003:44) with students by the increased demands upon their time. This study recommends that the time allocation for supervisors is increased and that we should encourage a move away from fast supervision. This does not mean that feedback and responses to emails should not be prompt but supervisors and students should have thinking spaces or intellectual spaces for knowledge exchange to take place.

6.0 Limitations and suggestions for further research

A limitation of this study is that it only included the doctoral experience of students in Tourism and Hospitality. An opportunity for further research would be to widen the study examine the doctoral experience of students and supervisors in other areas of Schools of Management. It would be interesting to explore the extent to which it is possible to maintain distinct subject communities in an era where disciplines such as Tourism and Hospitality are often marginalised by being absorbed into larger Schools of Management or Business Schools.

Further research is also needed into the experiences of part-time students, who are also members of staff. These constitute an under-researched but significant body of students. Our research suggests that they share some of the same experiences as other students but this is a very important group to understand because, as academics and students, they occupy a unique and sometimes conflicted position and can give key insights into the PhD process. In particular, research is needed into the supervisory relationship between these academics who are part-time students and their supervisors, who are also their colleagues. Our findings revealed that this relationship could bring complex issues and difficulties which are rarely discussed in existing literature but are worthy of further research.

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