Professional Doctorate Curriculum Design: A Resource-Dependency analysis of DBA Stakeholders

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Background

Interest in Professional Doctorates (ProfDs), including the Doctorate in Business Administration (DBA) programme, has increased significantly over recent years (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016). Wildly et al (2015:p762) suggest that this is because globally, there is interest in research degrees which are '…more relevant, field-based doctoral studies incorporating applied rather than pure research…'. In comparison to a PhD, a Professional Doctorate adopts a more structured approach to learning and typically attracts industry professionals who wish to investigate a work-based problem through doctoral level research (Costley and Lester, 2012; Chiteng Kot and Hendel, 2011). Furthermore, according to Lester (2004:p767) ProfDs aim to be '…academically robust and directly relevant to professional practitioners who are concerned with leading practice and initiating change rather than being researchers.' The DBA in particular has proven to be a popular Professional Doctorate, representing a natural progression from the MBA.

The DBA which forms the case in this study is a well-established part-time degree within the Institution attracting students in senior management positions from across the globe working in a range of industries. The degree has used the same mode of delivery and curriculum design since its inception. As a result of a number of internal and external factors, such as changing market conditions, accreditation demands and resource implications, the programme was redesigned and revalidated. Like many Professional Doctorates, the DBA has a number of stakeholders involved in its delivery, many of which are different to those typically involved in other undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. It is the nature and complexity of the stakeholders' involvement in the revalidation and redesign of this DBA programme which forms the focus of this study. Analysing the contributions of these constituents using a resource dependency framework provides useful insights to those involved and interested in the design and delivery of doctoral degrees which have applied research as a focus. The study's findings also contribute to academic knowledge through undertaking resource dependency analysis in a new context, that is the curriculum design and management of a DBA research degree.

Literature context

Stakeholder Theory, as developed by Freeman (1984:46) holds, 'A stakeholder in an organization is (by definition) any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives'. Freeman (1994:416) elaborated arguing that stakeholders, 'must be free to enter agreements that create value for themselves and solidarity is realised by the recognition of the mutuality of stakeholder interests'. Debate continued as to how stakeholders can be defined, with Philipps (2003) adding that individuals can be considered as stakeholders provided they join organisations to realise specified aims and goals, that members can exit freely and the attraction to the organisation is a based on a mutual interest in furthering the organisation. Such arguments have proved persuasive leading many to conclude that it is appropriate to apply Stakeholder Theory in any context where the interests of the parties in that organisation are affected by decisions made (Hasnas, 2012). Increasing globalisation, however, has resulted in organisations becoming more complex and the environment in which they operate more uncertain. This, it has been argued, has changed power relations and have once again raised questions over what is a 'stake' and 'who are stakeholders'? (Jensen and Sandstorm, 2011).

Resource Dependency Analysis (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) is a method of identifying the range of stakeholders (or constituencies), both external and internal, upon which an organisation might depend and which, at any given point in time, might wield the most power (Watson, 2012). Power is defined as, 'the ability to get things done the way one wants them to be done' (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977:4). Identifying who holds the power, or put another way, who has the ability to reduce strategic uncertainty, is central to enabling the organisation to adapt to the ever-changing demands of the environment in which it operates. For those operating in the higher education market there are a number of external drivers that create the need for such adaptation namely; public policy with respect to strengthening ties with industry and the need for universities to strengthen their reputations to succeed in the increasingly competitive market (Van Vught, 2008). This study is designed to explore the way in which a Higher Education Institute responded to such pressures by adopting a stakeholder and resource dependency approach to the re-design and re-launch of their DBA programme. The research questions that guided this study are:

- Who are the stakeholders associated with the management of a DBA?

- How can a stakeholder approach to the redesign and revalidation process of a DBA programme be implemented?
- To what extent does resource dependency analysis in DBA curriculum redesign enable power relations to be identified and changes to this doctoral degree to be effected?
- What lessons can be learnt for doctoral degree change initiatives in HE institutions?
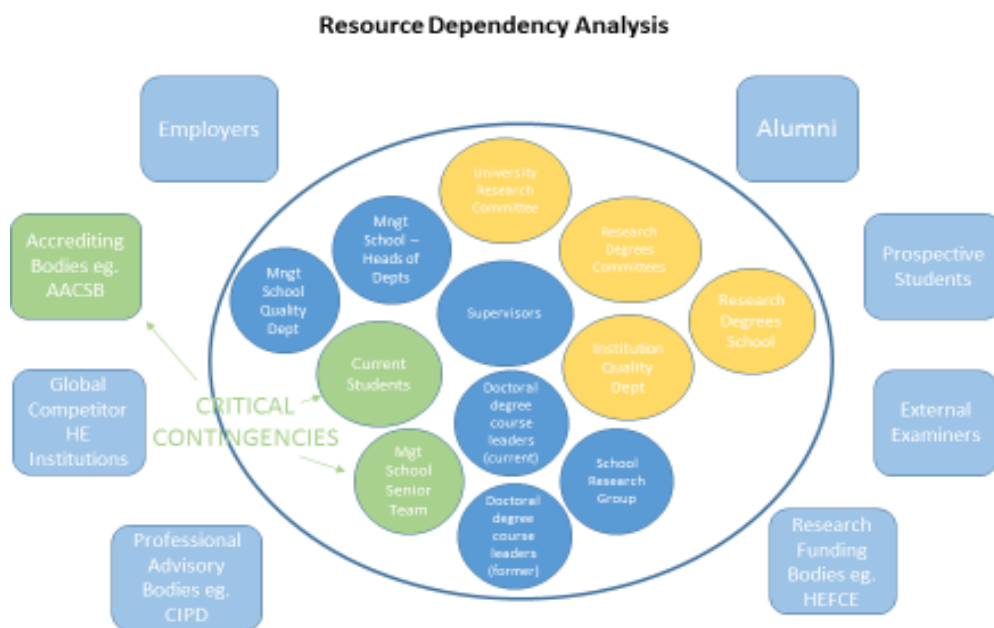
Research Design

The study adopts a longitudinal qualitative case study approach as it facilitates the analysis of a contemporary issue whilst considering its real-life organisational and environmental context (Yin, 2013). A DBA programme delivered by a UK University provides the 'case' and in particular the redesign and revalidation process of this course over an 18 month period. The case draws upon documentary evidence produced during this period and includes minutes of team meetings, course, school and University level committees as well as staff briefing events, student feedback, accreditation events, external examiner reports and benchmarking exercises. Some of this data was for public consumption and where any internal documents were used, these were anonymised to ensure confidentiality. Template analysis was applied to the documentary materials to identify pertinent themes across the different stakeholder groups whilst still taking account of the specific course and institutional context (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; King, 2004).

Preliminary Findings

As Salancik and Pfeffer (1977:10) noted, 'A university offers an excellent site for studying power'. This, they assert, is because although it is composed of departments with 'nominally equal power' each department has 'its own sources of prestige and resources'. Indeed, taking this notion further, it can be argued that specific members within these university departments may also hold greater power than others in the same department. Preliminary analysis of the case material in this study suggests that this is indeed true as there was a complex picture of stakeholder involvement from different departments and individuals in the management and redesign of this DBA. Stakeholders had individual interest/involvement, such as members of senior management, course leaders and supervisors, whilst others operated on the basis of group interests, such as those interested in gaining accreditation and students. Stakeholders were both internal and external such as alumni, DBA advisory bodies who included global competitors and central university functions. In some cases, individuals represented multiple stakeholder groups, for example, supervisors and workshop tutors who were also DBA alumni. Of particular interest, the nature of the stakeholder involvement reflected the fact that the

DBA is a hybrid in that it is part taught and part 'traditional' research degree. This meant that the degree was governed by both the Management School (reflecting the discipline of the DBA) and the Research Degree School (the Faculty responsible for all the Institution's research degree students). Initial analysis also indicates that the level of involvement and influence of the stakeholders shifted, with some stakeholders initially hostile to the redesign and the 'marketisation' of a research degree but later becoming more accepting and supporting of the curriculum changes.

The following diagram draws upon Resource Dependency Theory to identify the stakeholders and which can be said to be 'critical contingencies' (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977) influencing the redesign of this institution's DBA. The green represents the most critical stakeholders in the process and the yellow the institutional level stakeholders. The dark blue represents those stakeholders at faculty level and the lighter blue those regarded as external groups.

Resource Dependency Analysis

- Insert figure 1 about here -

Concluding comments

The key to success in restructuring and relaunching this DBA was obtaining as much stakeholder participation as possible. By identifying the key constituencies, the course management team was able to involve all interested parties in discussions about the design and content of the new course. The challenge was then to attempt to reconcile these often divergent interests and reach a consensus

without more powerful stakeholders dominating the decision process. A more developed version of this paper will be presented at the conference outlining how this was achieved, in addition to the implications this study has for practice (the management of a doctoral degree) and theory (stakeholder analysis and resource-dependency theory).

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