

Case Rebecca Piekkari: Analysing a unique case with mixed methods

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Introduction

This is a single-case study focusing on a unique scholar, Professor Rebecca Piekkari. We aim at describing and analysing her academic career, particularly from the viewpoint of her publication activities. Our analysis demonstrates that her research output is wide-ranging, versatile, and continuously growing. We found that her career is unique, particularly in terms of internationalization and collaboration. She displays an open-minded, resourceful, and collaborative approach as an international scholar who has made an indelible imprint on the International Business discipline. We would like to congratulate her warmly for such an achievement!

Case studies are the most popular qualitative research strategy in International Business research (Piekkari et al. 2009). They provide a rich, contextual description that enables a better understanding of the phenomenon in question (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The case in this study is Professor Rebecca Piekkari, and our aim is to describe and analyse her academic career, particularly from the viewpoint of her publication activities. A case study approach allows creation of the more thorough contextual description that is needed to understand the process

by which she has become the notable scholar in International Business that she definitely is today.

This is a holistic case, in which we have applied purposeful sampling to study a special case (cf. Fletcher & Plakoyiannaki 2011). Among International Business scholars, Rebecca Piekkari is unique in many ways, which supports the choice of a single-case setting instead of a comparative one (cf. Siggelkow 2007). From the viewpoint of internationalization and collaboration, she is certainly an Early Starter (cf. Johanson & Mattsson 1988). She has been collaborating with international colleagues for more than 20 years and started at a time when the academic community was very much inward-oriented, seeking credentials in the home country. Her work—and her *way* of working—have been an inspiration for dozens of scholars, making her impact on the community of International Business scholars both notable and permanent. A single-case approach helps us to understand the uniqueness of this case in its entirety (cf. Stake 1995).

In terms of theorizing, we aim at interpretive sense-making with our case study (cf. Welch et al. 2011), meaning we aim at a comprehensive description of our case, avoiding generalization. Sometimes, the case itself is interesting enough to justify the research, as with intrinsic cases discussed by, for example, Stake (1995). The outcome is a very subjective, experience-based interpretation from the authors—thus, we are by no means neutral observers, but rather are part of the context of our own sense-making.

Our analytical approach

In order to identify the unique features of our case, we applied a flexible methodological approach (cf. Eisenhardt 1989) without any strict theoretical

lenses. Given the authors' background, it is unsurprising that a mixed-method research strategy was ultimately selected. It refers to the collection and/or analysis of quantitative and/or qualitative data in a single study in which the data are collected concurrently or sequentially and are combined at one or more stages in the research process (Hurmerinta-Peltomäki & Nummela 2006). Researchers who apply a mixed-method research strategy should address three key questions before data is collected. These are, specifically, the order, role, and purpose of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis (Hurmerinta-Peltomäki & Nummela 2004). Thus, a decision had to be made regarding how to methodologically approach this unique case.

Although we had some prior understanding of the long and productive history of the case, we considered it necessary to deepen our understanding by collecting secondary data. The data comprised of documentary information (CV, list of publications) but also observations of the authors longitudinally over a number of years. The research progressed in stages. First, in order to secure a comprehensive view of the case, a qualitative approach was adopted. In the qualitative analysis of the data, particular attention was paid to the application of the particular process (e.g. the temporal bracketing strategy [Langley 1999]). By analysing the subject's CV and list of publications, this strategy allowed the authors to monitor the development of this unique case over time. Emphasis was placed on the analysis of the qualitative interpretation, in line with the aims of theorizing. The first round of analysis provided a good overview as well as highlighting the dimensions of internationalization and collaboration of our case. This observation led to the next phase of analysis, which was more in-depth scrutiny of how internationalization and collaboration have framed the subject's academic career. The qualitative analysis was followed by a quantitative phase

in which we quantitatively analysed the publication data that had been collected, a total of 35 peer-reviewed journal articles at the time of this study. To sum up, this study utilized both a qualitative and a quantitative approach to data collection and analysis.

Findings

Our process analysis confirmed our prior understanding of the case as a career marked by early internationalization with appearances in multiple arenas (Figure 1). The list of publications revealed that Rebecca began her academic career overseas as a researcher at the University of Sheffield and as a lecturer at the University of Bath, and further, that she has held several visiting appointments in foreign universities from the very onset of her career. On this solid international basis, it has been easy to later build the extraordinary leverage power which shows in her publication activities. Our analysis portrays an open-minded, resourceful, and collaborative scholar with an abiding interest in the development of her field of research. However, we found this generic overview unsatisfactory and decided to delve deeper into the case from the viewpoint of content. Our focus was on the launch and dissemination of the research products. As the upper portion of Figure 1 illustrates, the product assortment is broad, ranging from multinationals, languages and communication, international human resource management, and gender to qualitative research methods. It should be noted that none of the introduced product categories have ceased to exist; on the contrary, all of them still prevail today. Each new product has been built on an existing profound shared knowledge base. The result is an honourable 35 journal articles in 28 different journals. There are three journals in which Rebecca has published more than one article, with the maximum being five articles in

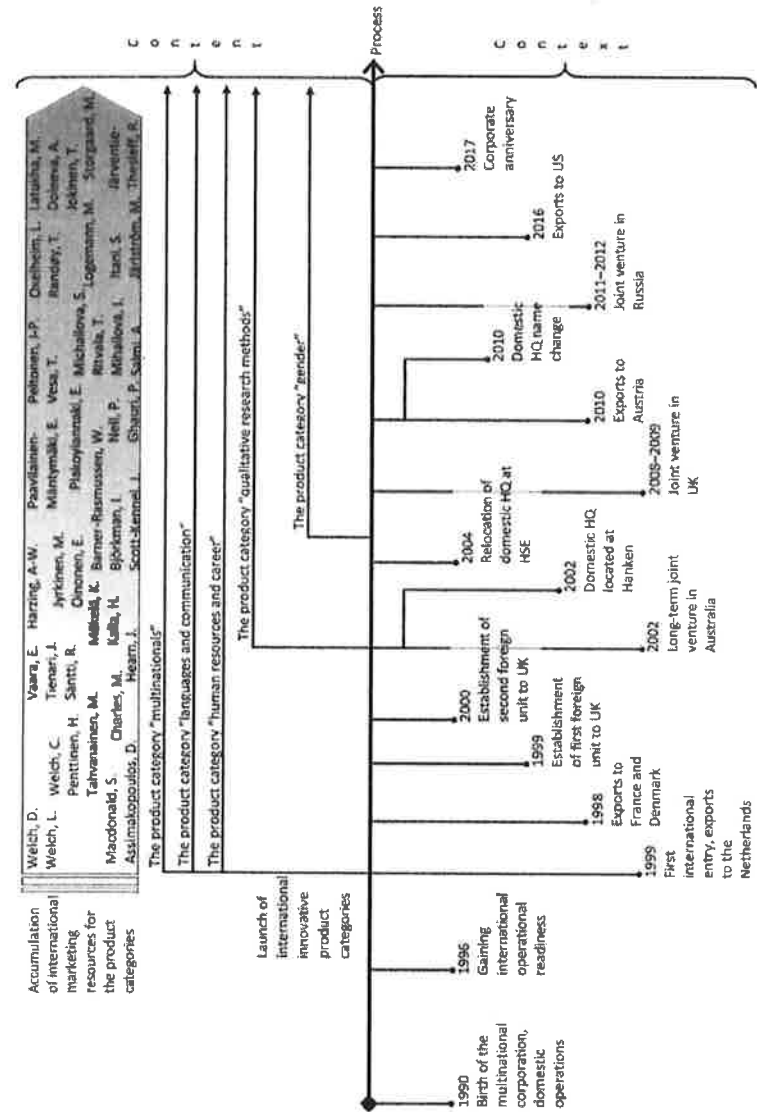


Figure 1. The process approach to our unique case

International Business Review since 1999. Thus, not only has she been innovative and creative in producing research output, but her output has been widely disseminated in the academic community.

The number of articles published per year has varied throughout her academic career, reflecting the long and winding road towards publication in A journals as well as the patience and perseverance of an experienced researcher—critical traits for academic success (Figure 2). After all, it is well known that the ‘market’ is sometimes not yet ready to adopt a new product until more R&D is conducted. In other cases, it is simply a matter of timing; a piece of work must be submitted to the right place at the right time. Consequently, it is natural to observe both peaks and troughs in the number of publications.

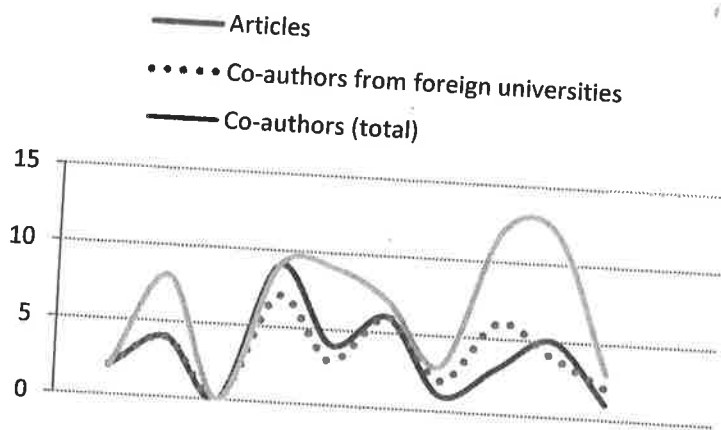


Figure 2: Articles and co-authors (frequencies) during the academic career

Our data reveals that the successful academic career of our case relies strongly on research collaboration, which has increased cumulatively with the number of articles published. Our analysis of the 35 journal articles indicates that since her

seminal 1999 article, Rebecca has co-authored with 41 different researchers. This is a clear indicator that innovative, successful research output is based on international research teams. However, innovation literature indicates that the productiveness of teams often diminishes over time (e.g. Sutton 2002), and therefore, the individual members that make up a team should be replaced from time to time. Our case analysis shows that one solution to this problem is an efficient collaboration strategy, as follows: (a) long-lasting, continual research collaboration, even since the beginning of the academic career; (b) periodic intensive collaboration (related to research projects); and (c) new openings for collaboration, the number of which has increased over time in this case (Figure 3). This strategy has ensured efficient use of existing knowledge, enabled its cumulative growth, and allowed simultaneous openness to new ideas and perspectives. It is evident that Rebecca has good collaborative and networking competences and is able to utilize them efficiently.

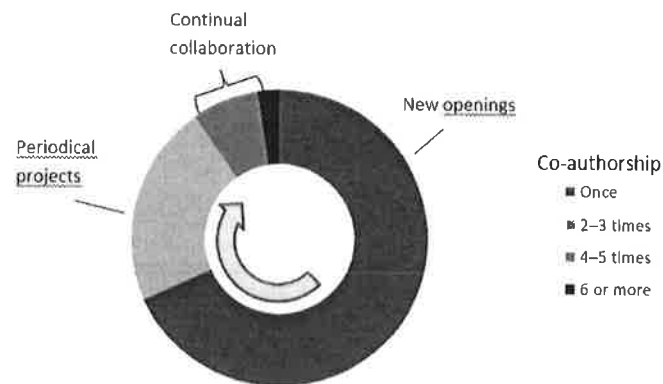


Figure 3: Rates of co-authorship of our subject

In Rebecca's case, collaboration is clearly about long-term relationships and trust; when she has found a good research partner, the relationship has continued for many years. A good example of well-functioning, long-term collaboration is her work with the Welch family that has lasted from her early career until the present. In various combinations, she has contributed to 14 journal articles out of the 35 included in our analysis with members of the Welch family, 10 of which were with Catherine Welch.

Her international collaboration is not limited to the Welch family. On the contrary, she has internationalized herself in many ways, not least by spending several years in academic positions at different universities abroad. She has further expanded her international reach by establishing collaborative efforts with a number of researchers from different foreign universities (16 in total) alongside those at universities and schools in her home country. These international collaboration efforts have been widely dispersed, covering eight countries altogether (Figure 4).

In practice, many of these international joint research products have been developed at Aalto School of Business (formerly Helsinki School of Economics) while her co-authors were visiting there, or when Rebecca has been a visitor at other universities. Notably, these collaborations have continued after the visit—indicating a personalized research collaboration rather than an institutionalized one. Thus, although context is important, the decisive factor is the unique person and her competences.

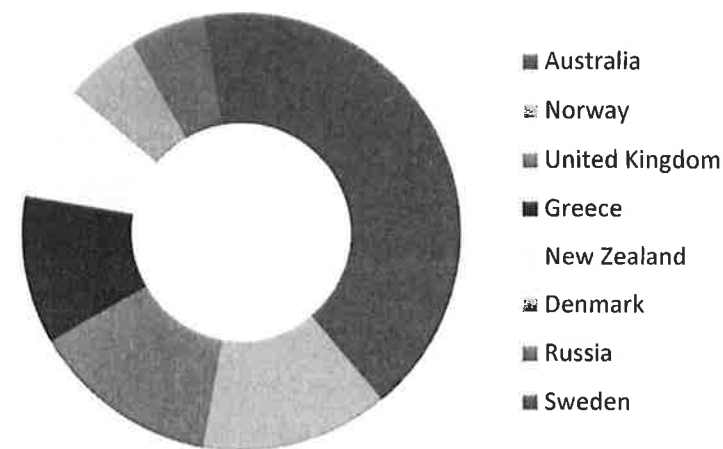


Figure 4: International collaborations of subject by co-authors' home university country

Discussion

The described unique academic career and its features are all related to the subject's early internationalization along with her collaborative efforts throughout many years. Decisive drivers for such a successful path seem to be (a) availability for new research openings related to the existing personal knowledge base, (b) a clear publication strategy, (c) an extraordinarily wide research network in terms of both number of actors and internationalization, and finally, (d) a personalized, proactive strategy for research collaboration.

Sometimes, a person's prior knowledge can create a 'knowledge corridor' that restricts recognition of new opportunities (see e.g. Ronstadt 1988). In this case, the continual interaction between her knowledge base and her international

academic network has led to a high awareness of new research avenues that fit the corridor (Ardichvili, Cardozo, & Ray 2003) and that produce new product innovations. Furthermore, a successful academic career evidently requires a person who has special skills for initiating, developing, and maintaining relationships with other researchers and creating a dynamic research network around herself. We have observed that she is often invited to collaborate, and people appear to appreciate her competences and welcome her as a partner.

As mentioned earlier, we had no intention of generalizing our findings but, rather, would focus on this particular unique case. Nevertheless, we believe that the characteristics identified in our case could be key points of focus for a junior scholar aiming at an international academic career.

We are aware that a limitation of this study is the narrow focus on only journal publications without taking into account other academic activities. A broader view of this case, however, would have made the study more exhaustive than our available resources could cover. Therefore, although we claim to have captured part of the uniqueness of the case, a more holistic analysis would have been appropriate. Perhaps in future studies, other scholars can present additional points of view and provide a more contextualized explanation (see Figure 1; Welch et al. 2011). We also admit that it is impossible to eliminate the potential influence of co-authors (in particular Catherine Welch) in the raw data, and this may have created some bias in the findings. However, because the uniqueness of a case frequently stimulates and furthers collaboration opportunities, a conclusion could be drawn that the wide-ranging, multiple international collaborations are a result of the uniqueness of the case itself. This is confirmed by Ferdman (1995), who states that the collaboration can contribute to and form

an essential part of one's individual uniqueness. This is also a relevant conclusion in our case.

In conclusion, the best strategy for an academic pioneer like Rebecca is to keep innovating (cf. Cahill 1996). What we can do is not so much imitate her as learn from her example of how to make a successful academic career and enjoy it with others in the internationalizing research community.

On your special day, cheers, Rebecca!

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