A Perception Based Analysis of Internationalization at Malaysian Private Universities

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine whether the Malaysian private universities' international efforts adhere to the general approach to internationalization and to explore the degree of perceived importance and perceived implementation those efforts at institutional level. By integrating several models and frameworks proposed by scholars in internationalization domain such as Knight and Zha, the paper presents a conceptual framework comprising preliminary factors, strategy factors and process factors of internationalization at universities. Instrument developed for these factors were tested on 204 academics from 10 Malaysian private universities to analyze their perceived importance and perceived implementation. Based on an overview of all factors, it is found that the average mean values of factors that perceived as important are higher than the values accounted for the perceived degree of implementation of internationalization at Malaysian private universities. The study extends the scope of the internationalization literature on an emerging market context and probably one of the first to conduct empirical tests/structured questionnaire in assessing internationalization issues in the context of the Malaysian private university sector. The study traced internationalization efforts of Malaysian private universities which provide practitioners with more evidence of the value of internationalization. The conceptual framework exemplified in this study is considered the most significant contribution of this research work in terms of providing measurement tools for evaluation and assessment of internationalization efforts in the higher education domain.

Keywords: Internationalization, Private universities, Malaysia

1. Introduction

Globalization and internationalization have changed the structure of higher education system worldwide. International activities of most universities in terms of international students' recruitment, faculty mobility, twinning programs, foreign branch campuses have expended tremendously. Internationalization has gained the attention of many scholars (Knight, 2004, 2006; Zha, 2003; Bartell, 2003; Marginson, 2004, 2006; Altbach and Knight, 2006; Mok, 2007; Ayoubi and Massoud, 2007; Ahmad S, 2007; Chan and Dimmock, 2008; Childress, 2009) and international organizations such as UNESCO, World Bank, OECD and UNDP.

Internationalization simply means that the practices or processes of an activity in one nation is being mixed up

with those from other parts of the world as this process may perhaps be a device towards an individual's, organization's or a country's goal achievement. The concept of internationalization of higher education seems to cover a wide range of methods and approaches. Although the approaches of internationalization appear in multiple forms (Zha, 2003; Irene, 2003; Knight, 2004; Ayoubu and Massoud, 2007) and different across authors, most studies have reflected the term internationalization using almost similar key words or phrases. Knight (1997) defines internationalization as the process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service of an institution. As the future of higher education is neither simple nor straightforward (Altbach & Peterson, 1999), many scholars in the 21st century have discovered the need to construct a broader or generalized definition of internationalization. Consequently, Knight (2004) introduced a new definition of internationalization in accordance to the need to ensure that the definition does not specify the rationales, benefits, outcomes, actors, activities, and stakeholders of internationalization, as they vary enormously across nations and also from institution to institution. Knight defined internationalization as the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education. Zha (2003) has described internationalization as one of the ways a country responds to the impact of globalization, yet at the same time respects the individuality of the nation. Bartell (2003) referred to internationalization as an organizational adaptation which requires its articulation by the leadership while simultaneously institutionalizing a strategic planning process that is representative and participative in that it recognizes and utilizes the power of the culture within which it occurs.

Many countries perceived internationalization as crucial in achieving international academic standards (Knight, 2004). As for many universities in developed countries, internationalizing their campuses can help students acquire knowledge, skills, and experiences to be able to compete in the global economy and become productive members of a diverse world society (Bendriss, 2007). This rationale is found to have an impact on institutional assessment systems at the international as well as at the national level (Jang, 2009). The vast adaptation of internationalization among higher education providers world-wide triggered by globalization and the lack of uniformity in terms of ranking systems have caused many institutions of higher learning across the globe to claim either that they have the plan to become a world-class university by a certain date or that they have already achieved this status (Birnbaum, 2007). In this juncture, the issue of the absence of a comprehensive set of indicators and data sources for evaluating the extent of an institution's internationalization is always the primary obstacle for researchers (Haywards, 2000 cited in Horn et al, 2007). Internationalization of higher education models developed by Zha (2003), Knight (2004), Ayoubi & Massoud (2007) and Horn et al (2007) have contributed wide knowledge to many scholars as well as recommendations to further extend the existing frameworks and methodologies to be applicable in an emerging market context. The great diversity of contexts, perceptions, rationales and priorities affecting institutional views and practices tend to limit those models in examining the perceived importance and the level of implementation of internationalization at the institutional level in different contexts (Courts, 2004; Childress, 2009).

As for developing countries including Malaysia, internationalization has changed the landscape of higher education system in terms of student and faculty composition, program and curriculum mobility and the diversity of higher education providers (Ziguras, 2001; Mok, 2007; Morshidi, 2007; Yonezawa, 2007; Akiba, 2008; Tham & Kham, 2009). In the context of Malaysian higher education, there are six pertinent issues to be addressed pertaining to internationalization efforts.

1) There is a greater demand to address the issue of the absence of a unified cum transparent performance assessment system for the whole university sector (World Bank, 2007).
2) Currently private universities in Malaysia holds a bigger portion of higher education sector (MOHE, 2008) and thus their efficiency in integrating the internationalization dimension has a greater impact on the nation's endeavor to become a regional hub of education.
3) However, there is lack of exposure and participation of local private universities in local (*Malaysian Business*, January, 2003; *The Star Education*, June, 2008), Asian or world rankings.
4) There is no exclusive model or framework provided as to guide the private university sector, which is a fairly new and competitive sector (*Malaysian Business*, January, 2003), largely driven by global needs (UNESCO: Gill, 2005) and will probably remain the main site for growth in international education (OECD: Marginson & McBurnie, 2004; Akiba, 2008).
5) Thus, there is also a greater demand to address the issue of the internationalization performance assessment especially in the emerging private university sector (Tan, 2002; Sivalingam, 2006; Akiba, 2008; Ramanathan and Halimah, 2009; Ramanathan and Raman, 2009; MOHE, 2007-2009).

6) The scope of the internationalization-performance assessment literature needs to be extended with a more empirical investigation with appropriate indicators particularly to be applicable in the emerging private university sector.

This study is an attempt to contribute, given these gaps in the body of the internationalization of higher education literature, focusing specifically on Malaysian private universities (MPUs) by examining whether the international efforts adhere to the general approach to internationalization at the institutional level based on the framework comprises the preliminary internal and external policy factors, strategies factors, and process factors of internationalization. Secondly is to explore the perceived level of importance and the perceived degree of implementation of internationalization factors at institutional level.

Based on the review of literature (Fielden, 1996; Elango, 1998; Manning, 1998; Bourke, 2000; Welle-Strand, 2002; Irene, 2003; Anderson, 2004; Courts, 2004; Enders, 2004; Knight, 2004; Navarro, 2004; Reedstrom, 2005; Thune and Welle-Strand, 2005; Ahmad, 2007; Bentkowska, 2007; Weerawardena et al, 2007; Welch, 2007; Casillas et al, 2008; Kafouros et al, 2008; Tuppura et al, 2008; Wang et al, 2008; Brennan and Garvey, 2009; Dewey and Duff, 2009; Horta, 2009; Zeng et al, 2009; Radakrishnan and Ramanathan, 2010) there are many factors that have been identified as contributing towards successful or progressive internationalization. These factors seem to fall across various groups or categories such as preliminary policies, strategies and processes as exemplified by the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1.

2. Methodology

A survey questionnaire was administered to investigate the perception of faculty in private universities in Malaysia on the general aspects such as their personal details and institution's demographic characteristics as well as specific issues on internationalization efforts perceived as important and implemented in the respondent's institution. This study adopted a three stage sampling strategy or technique proposed by Mohayidin et al (2007). In the first stage, all the degree-awarding private universities in Peninsular Malaysia with either a university or university college status were selected. Since the presence of international students and scholars is an important indicator of an internationalized campus (Irene, 2003), the institutions selected for current study were all having international students and staff on campus. The above criteria were developed for sampling selection to ensure the set of universities and respondents are comparable to each other. Based on the list of local private universities consisted of 36 institutions as of 2008 produced by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), 30 universities were found to have the criteria developed for sample selection in current study. From 22 institutions which had responded to the first and second invitation by the researcher, 10 institutions agreed to participate in current study. In the second stage, from each university which agreed to participate, a number of academic departments were chosen and they represented both the hard sciences and the social sciences. In the final stage, academics who served as respondents were selected randomly. A total of 400 sets of questionnaires were distributed directly to the academics, 40 in each university of which 204 were completed and used for analysis.

Five-point Likert scale was applied to measure the respondent's perceived level of importance and implementation of internationalization attributes (total of 31 attributes) at their institution. This scale was found to be commonly used by researchers in measuring knowledge management practices (Chong, 2007). The five-point importance scale starts at 1 as 'not important', 2 as 'minor important', 3 as 'moderately important', 4 as 'important' and 5 as 'highly important'. The five-point implementation scale starts at 1 as 'not implemented', 2 as 'little implemented', 3 as 'moderately implemented', 4 as 'implemented' and 5 as 'extensively implemented'.

In terms of data analysis methods used to analyze the data obtained through the survey, descriptive and factor analysis were the major approaches. The descriptive findings include individual profiling, institutional profiling and perceived importance and perceived implementation of internationalization factors. Factor analysis was conducted to identify the separate dimensions of the structure, and then determine the extent to which each variable is explained by the various dimensions (Coakes and Steed, 2007; Chua, 2009).

Factor analysis has been regarded as one of the most powerful methods to test construct validity (Kerlinger, 1986 cited in Khoo, 2006). Thus, factor analysis was conducted and the percentage of the total variance explained for perceived importance: preliminary factor was 75.56%, strategy factor was 79.88% and internationalization process was 77.47%. The percentage of the total variance explained for perceived implementation: preliminary factor was 75.58%, strategy factor was 74.84% and internationalization process was 71.36%. The most common test for inter item consistency is the Cronbach's Alpha which is appropriate for a multi point scaled item (Richardson et al, 2005) and regarded as the most commonly used for estimating the reliability of a measure. An alpha coefficient above 0.7 signifies a high reliability (Chua, 2009). The Cronbach Alpha estimated for perceived

importance: government policy (0.91), institutional policy and structure (0.837), leadership and governance (0.926), organizational support (0.939), human resources (0.870) and technology integration (0.943). The Cronbach Alpha estimated for perceived implementation: government policy (0.932), institutional policy and structure (0.82), leadership and governance (0.904), organizational support (0.898), human resources (0.811) and technology integration (0.903). The value of Cronbach Alpha were all higher than 0.7, the constructs were therefore deemed to have adequate reliability.

3. Results and discussion

As shown in Table 1, the respondents equally represent the two gender groups consisting of males (51%) and females (49%). In the context of years of working experience with respective institutions, the highest group of respondents is those with 3 - 4 years of working experience. Nearly 32% of respondents have between 5 - 6 years experience followed by 13% for 7 - 8 years. A low 10% of the respondents have been working with their respective institution for more than 9 years. Approximately 16 percent of the respondents are Professors followed by 19 percent from the group consisting of deans, assistant or deputy deans and heads of department. The majority of the respondents are senior lecturers (21.1%) and lecturers (44.1%). As for academic qualification, respondents with master's degree constituted 67.6% while the rest were with a PhD qualification (32.4%). It was found that the respondents with the above qualifications represented the major two fields of study comprising the hard sciences (44.6%) and the social sciences (55.4%).

In order to analyze the perceived importance and implementation of internationalization, descriptive statistics for 3 groups of internationalization elements (preliminary factors, strategy factors and process factors) were calculated. The descriptive aggregate data in terms of mean, standard deviation and group mean scores for preliminary factors, strategies and processes are shown in Table 2, 3 and 4 respectively.

As indicated in Table 2, the respondents view government policy as the most critical factor towards internationalization (m=4.22) compared to institutional policy and structure (m=4.02). On the implementation side, government policy scored slightly higher (m=3.4) compared to institutional policy and structure (m=3.23). These preliminary factors are perceived as highly important, but when it comes to implementation, the perceived level is moderate.

As shown in Table 3, there are four constructs and eighteen attributes or items with their mean and standard deviation values respectively. The respondents view technology integration, leadership and governance, and organizational support as the most important factors with mean values of 4.35, 4.18 and 4.01 respectively followed by human resource with 3.95 which is slightly lower than the above mean values. As shown in Table 3, on the implementation side, the mean values of all four factors are lower compared to those under importance. The respondents view implementation of technology integration (m=3.61) and leadership cum governance (m=3.42) higher compared to organizational support (m=2.96) and human resources (m=2.86). Thus, it can be concluded that the four factors of internationalization strategies are perceived highly as important, but the implementation of these factors are between the lower (organizational support and human resources) and moderate stage (technology integration and leadership and governance).

As indicated in Table 4, the respondents' perception on both international ethos and innovativeness are obviously higher in terms of the degree of importance compared to the degree of implementation. As for perceived importance, the mean scores for the above factors are 4.24 and 4.12 respectively. This narrow gap indicates that the respondents view international ethos and innovativeness as equally important under the internationalization process. As for perceived implementation, both factors of internationalization process highlighted above scored 3.66 and 3.03 respectively. Thus, it can be concluded that internationalization processes constituting international ethos and innovativeness are perceived as highly important, but implementation of these factors are moderate.

As a conclusion for the descriptive analysis above, Table 5 shows an overview of all the factors associated with the importance and implementation perspectives in order to compare the mean value of the individual factor with the overall mean value for the independent variables. As indicated in Table 5, the average mean values of factors from the importance perspective is 4.14 which is higher than 3.27, the value accounted for the degree of implementation. In terms of perceived importance, there are four factors which scored above the average mean values of all factors (4.14). These are government policy, leadership and governance, technology integration, and international ethos. As for perceived implementation, although the individual scores are lower compared with those under importance, but within the implementation domain, they scored above the average mean values of all factors (3.27). Factors that scored below the average mean values of all factors under both the importance and implementation perspectives are institutional policy, organization support, human resources and innovativeness respectively.

4. Conclusion

Throughout this study, various internationalization approaches were integrated and analyzed in order to gain the description and understanding of the extent of importance perceived versus implementation of internationalization dimensions by respondents' institutions. Based on an overview of all dimensions and attributes, the perceived degree of importance is higher than the perceived degree of implementation of internationalization by academics at Malaysian private universities. Government policy, leadership and governance, technology integration, and international ethos are among the factors scored above the average mean values of all factors from both perceived importance and implementation perspectives. Factors that scored below the average mean values of all factors from both perceived importance and implementation perspectives are institutional policy, organization support, human resources and innovativeness respectively. The overall finding reflects the private universities in Malaysia as all other universities around the world recognize internationalization policies, strategies and processes. However, the perceived implementation levels indicates that the private universities still have long way to go in grasping the international standards which is possible by ensuring their status as a 'university' is comparable with other universities in Malaysia and also other countries. This means, the internationalization practitioners are recommended to integrate the international dimension on all three core activities of a university, namely, teaching, research and services. Besides focusing on foreign students and staffs recruitment (international ethos), strategies on organizational support and human resource cum recognition as well as innovativeness as a process are also equally important in ensuring the institution's sustainability and competitiveness in international marketplace. This direction, in long term, may drive them to strive towards a progressive and successful internationalization in order to reach international academic standards.

This study extends the scope of the internationalization literature on an emerging market context and probably one of the first to conduct empirical tests/structured questionnaire in assessing internationalization issues in the context of the Malaysian private university sector. The study traced internationalization efforts of Malaysian private universities which provide practitioners with more evidence of the value of internationalization. The conceptual framework exemplified in this study is considered the most significant contribution of this research work in terms of providing measurement tools for evaluation and assessment of internationalization efforts in the higher education domain. However, the study was carried out using a moderate sample size which is due to the fact that only 10 Malaysian private universities agreed to contribute or participate in this study.

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Table 1. The profiles of respondents

Demographic	Demographic details	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	51
	Female	49
Length of service (years)	3 – 4 years	45.1
	5 – 6 years	31.9
	7 – 8 years	13.2
	≥ 9 years	9.8
Job category	Professor/Assistant Professor/Associate Professor	15.7
	Dean/Deputy/Assistant Dean	4.9
	Head of department	14.2
	Senior lecturer	21.1
	Lecturer	44.1
Qualification	Masters Degree	67.6
	PhD	32.4
Department	Hard Science	44.6
	Social Science	55.4
Respondent's knowledge on internationalization in the context of higher education	Very poor	0
	Poor	0.5
	Fair	47.5
	Good	44.6
	Very good	7.4

Table 2. Construct and Items of Internationalization Preliminary Factors

Constructs and Items	Perceived Importance		Perceived Implementation	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Institutional Policy and Structure				
Restructuring of institution efforts that are streamlined with global needs & expectation	4.01	0.800	3.20	0.912
Assuring programs offered are in accordance to Malaysian as well as international higher education standards & requirements	4.27	0.709	3.54	0.873
A flexible structure which able to adapt to environmental change	4.00	0.702	3.05	0.774
Adhere to both centralized and decentralized methods of decision making	3.93	0.769	3.13	0.867
Group Mean Score	*4.05*	*0.7*	*3.23*	*0.9*
Government Policy				
Government policy of encouraging the establishment of private universities	4.27	0.723	3.51	0.833
Government policy of encouraging internationalization efforts among private universities	4.19	0.799	3.40	0.851
Government policy of providing support & opportunities for private universities (grants/funds/tax exemption, etc.)	4.20	0.866	3.29	0.958
Group Mean Score	*4.22*	*0.8*	*3.4*	*0.9*

Table 3. Constructs and Items of Internationalization Strategy Factors

Constructs and Items	Perceived Importance		Perceived implementation	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Leadership and Governance				
Top management creating awareness on institution's competitive position internationally	4.19	0.765	3.36	0.917
Top management leadership and commitment towards internationalization	4.25	0.744	3.53	0.856
Mission statement which relates to the quest for internationalization	4.12	0.729	3.37	0.869
Formulating strategic plans related to internationalization	4.17	0.763	3.42	0.876
Group Mean Score	*4.18*	*0.8*	*3.42*	*0.9*
Organizational Support				
Enhance faculty knowledge & understanding on the internationalization process	3.91	0.783	2.84	0.946
A specific department/division for coordinating internationalization activities	4.03	0.964	3.02	1.136
Skilled and experienced staff to lead & guide internationalization efforts	4.07	0.934	2.94	0.985
Access to reliable & comprehensive information on international events and contacts	3.97	0.850	2.92	0.989
Access to internationalized teaching materials and library resources with international references	4.12	0.775	3.16	1.024
Budgeting and funding to support internationalization policy/strategy	4.06	0.816	2.99	0.909
Reformulation of financial practices that obstruct the internationalization policy/strategy	3.93	0.812	2.87	0.987
Group Mean Score	*4.01*	*0.8*	*2.96*	*1.00*
Human Resources				
Sponsoring faculty to participate in international conferences & publication	4.17	0.807	3.29	1.079
Release time from teaching for internationalization efforts	3.81	1.016	2.74	1.067
Rewarding faculty participation in internationalization efforts (salary increases, promotion, etc.)	3.86	1.060	2.58	1.152
Providing opportunities for faculty to study abroad	3.94	0.976	2.83	1.145
Group Mean Score	*3.95*	*0.965*	*2.86*	*1.111*
Technology Integration				
Up-to-date Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)	4.28	0.726	3.46	0.911
Access to ICT in management & administration (Internet, Intranet, email, etc)	4.40	0.662	3.76	0.852
Access to ICT in teaching, learning & research (Internet, Intranet, email, video conferencing, etc)	4.37	0.734	3.61	0.883
Group Mean Score	*4.35*	*0.707*	*3.61*	*0.873*

Table 4. Constructs and Items of Internationalization Process Factors

Constructs and Items	Perceived Importance		Perceived implementation	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
International Ethos				
Acceptance of faculty employment from various foreign institutions of higher learning	4.10	0.763	3.30	1.052
Welcomes the enrollment of students from all over the world	4.39	0.646	4.02	0.821
Group Mean Score	*4.24*	*0.7*	*3.66*	*0.9*
Innovativeness				
Creating opportunities & linkages for students to engage in international and inter-cultural curricular activities	4.11	0.805	3.19	1.071
Collaborate with foreign partners or universities through e-learning or distance education	4.11	0.814	3.13	1.080
Engage in joint-research projects with foreign partners or universities	4.13	0.890	3.00	0.995
Co-organize international symposia or conference with foreign partners or universities	4.12	0.874	2.80	1.212
Group Mean Score	*4.12*	*0.8*	*3.03*	*1.1*

Table 5. Mean Scores for Internationalization Factors

Factor	Perceived Importance		Perceived implementation	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. Institutional Policy	4.05	0.7	3.23	0.9
2. Government Policy	4.22	0.8	3.40	0.9
3. Leadership and Governance	4.18	0.8	3.42	0.9
4. Organizational Support	4.01	0.8	2.96	1.00
5. Human Resources	3.95	0.97	2.86	1.11
6. Technology Integration	4.35	0.71	3.61	0.87
7. International Ethos	4.24	0.70	3.66	0.9
8. Innovativeness	4.12	0.8	3.03	1.1
Average Mean Score of Factor	*4.14*	*0.8*	*3.27*	*0.96*

Highly important

Extensively implemented

Perceived Importance

Perceived Implementation

Internationalization factors

Preliminary Factors
Institutional Policy and Structure
Government Policy

Strategy Factors
Leadership & Governance
Organizational Support
Human Resources
Technology integration

Internationalization Process
International Ethos
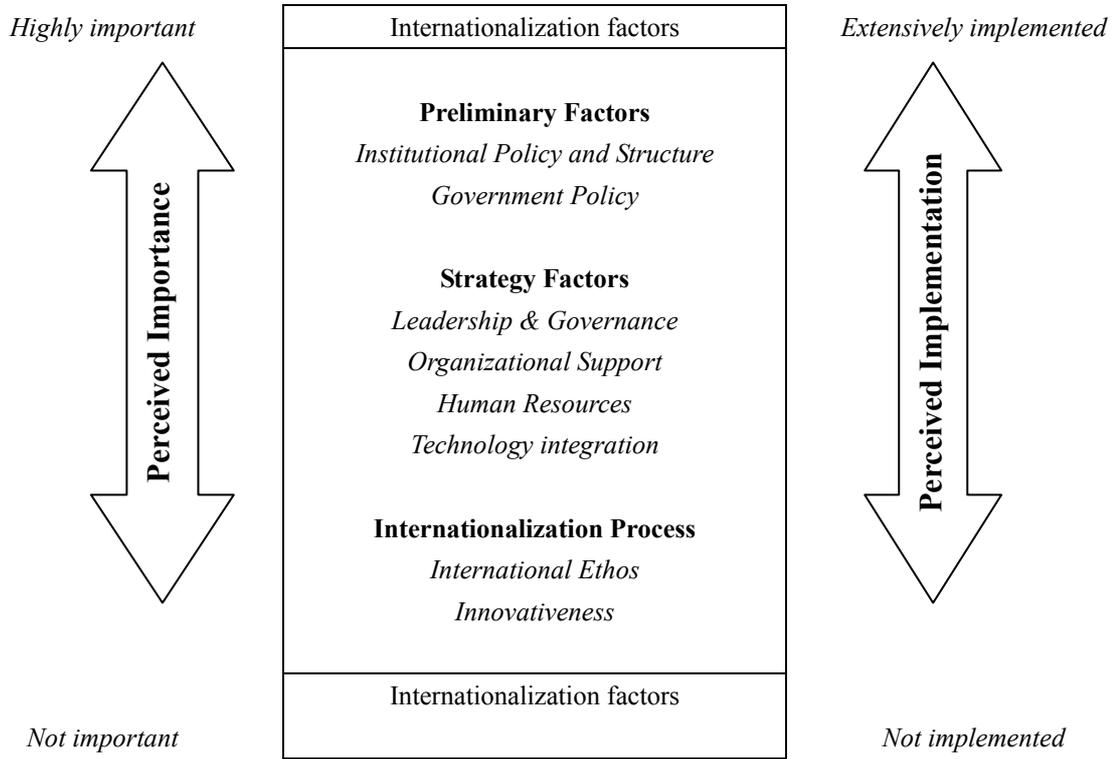*Innovativeness*

Internationalization factors

Not important

Not implemented

Figure 1. Conceptual framework