

Differentiated evolution rather than revolution

Analyzing MBA education in Britain using New Institutionalism as a conceptual framework

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore the reform and development of the MBA within pre-1992 and post-1992 universities in the United Kingdom with reference to New Institutionalism and field theory.

Design/methodology/approach – The methodology adopted the approaches of Navarro (2008) and Kars-Unluoglu (2016) that involved a web-based review of those pre-1992 universities listed in the Financial Times “top-100” MBAs, as well as a review of a regional grouping of four post-1992 universities.

Findings – The findings echo the work of Wilkins and Huisman (2012) who argued that British business schools were stratified into distinct organisational fields, each catering for their own market. While the pre-1992 universities are able to offer a wide array of electives and pathways to enable personalisation and specialisation of the curriculum, post-1992 universities appear to offer a more constrained curriculum offer. The reform of the MBA should be seen as part of a wider agenda of professionalisation.

Research limitations/implications – Albeit following on other research that used this research strategy, this web-based review would have benefited from closer interrogation of curriculum content through interviews with Programme Leaders/Directors. Future research should involve a larger sample from the post-1992 sector.

Originality/value – This paper provides an up-to-date analysis of the direction taken by British universities. It shows that the MBA market is differentiated with an elite focussed more catering for an international market than the post-1992 universities who still exhibit a commitment to their local market.

Keyword Management competencies

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In their paper “Business schools in transition” (2012), Howard Thomas and Eric Cornuel contemplated some of the concerns relating to the work and utility of business schools, and suggested that:

Business schools are definitively in transition and at a turning point in their evolution and development [...]. The search for legitimacy may unwittingly create more homogeneity in the strategies of business schools and impact the development of alternative strategic choices about differentiating research and programmes and improving linkages with the management community (pp. 2-3).

Although this observation was made during the post-2008 global financial crisis, in which business schools sought to legitimise their role in society, this critique also pointed to more searching questions relating to the relevance of the business school curriculum, as well as its delivery. Spender (2017, p. 187) suggests that “those who find fault with what we are doing think more in terms [of] adjustment and refinement than of radical reconstruction” – is this view valid today? Have business schools responded to criticism and remodelled their curriculum to meet the needs of students and wider society? At the heart of many discussions relating to the work of business schools is the issue of the relevance and utility of the MBA as a



management qualification. Criticism of the MBA is not new and precedes the Great Financial Crisis. In recent years, however, this pre-eminent management qualification has been revised, redesigned and renewed in the United Kingdom (UK). This paper focuses on the degree of change in a range of British universities, one set drawn from an “elite” and a second that is representative of post-1992 institutions, and its possible implications for management education using a conceptual framework drawn from New Institutionalism field theory.

Literature review

Identifying the need to reform the Master of Business Administration

A number of concerns relating to the MBA have been discussed in the literature since the 1980s, most notably in the USA (US). In simple terms, these concerns can be traced to the core issues pertinent to any discussion of the curriculum: what is taught, and for what reasons, and to whom? [Pettigrew and Whip \(1991\)](#) identified a range of core managerial skills that business schools should focus in their curriculum delivery. This competency-driven approach was developed further by [Pfeffer and Fong \(2002\)](#) who expressed concerns as to the relevance of the curriculum, as well as [Rubin and Dierdorff \(2009\)](#) who called for the development of managerial competencies to be addressed more effectively in MBA education. Although [Rubin and Dierdorff \(2009\)](#) thought that competencies relating to decision-making, managing strategy and human resources were not addressed sufficiently. The importance of [Rubin and Dierdorff's \(2009\)](#) analysis is inescapable, as it inferred that the MBA was unfit for purpose as a qualification for senior management posts and required reform.

What should be taught in the Master of Business Administration curriculum?

This “curriculum gap” ([Costigan and Brink, 2015](#), p. 260) between course content and vocational relevance was, however, indicative of wider concerns relating to the MBA. These concerns can be reduced to four key themes. First, the relevance of the MBA curriculum and its lack of focus on leadership ([Almog-Bareket, 2011](#); [Mintzberg, 2004, 2013](#)). Second, the emphasis given to quantitative analysis at the expense of qualitative skills, and the lack of direct relevance of published research to business practice ([Bok, 1978](#); [Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009](#); [Blass and Weight, 2005a](#); [Spender, 2017](#)). Third, a short-fall in coverage of important societal issues such as equality of opportunity, corporate social responsibility, and cross-cultural awareness ([Ghoshal, 2005](#); [Kathawala et al., 2002](#); [Li-Hua and Lu, 2014](#); [Schlegelmilch and Thomas, 2011](#)). A fourth concern centred upon the development of relevant managerial skills that were deemed essential for the twenty-first century ([Louw et al., 2001](#); [Varela et al., 2013](#)). A number of researchers have sought to relate these concern in terms of “vocational training”, and within a wider discussion of what it means to be a manager in contemporary society. For [Buchholz \(2012\)](#), there is a need to redefine what it means to be a manager in terms of being a “true professional”, with a clear code of ethics and an awareness of the social context within which business operates. It is within this context that we should look to reform the MBA and look to develop management as a profession.

Closely tied to this perceived “curriculum gap” is a more profound “epistemological gap” ([Spender, 2017](#)) that reflects a fundamental problem for many business schools in how they conceive of themselves and their work. As early as 1967, Simon had identified an over-reliance on the delivery of theory and a lack of emphasis on practical aspects of management within the traditional MBA curriculum. For [Simon \(1967\)](#), this prioritisation of abstract theory over professional practice produced an imbalance within management education. For [Simon \(1967\)](#), the response required was for business schools to rebalance the MBA to achieve an “equilibrium condition”, in which theory and practice worked in unison. [Phillips et al. \(2016, p. 1\)](#) argue that “the b-schools have not responded adequately[. . .]. Schools and

curricula have not adapted". For [Datar et al. \(2011, p. 16\)](#), this failure to adapt to changing needs is even more profound post-2008 and necessitates:

Rebalancing MBA education towards "doing" and "being" aims to reduce the knowing-doing gap that results from these deficiencies in skills, attitudes and beliefs. Without "doing" skills, knowledge has little value. Without "being" skills, it is often hard to act ethically or professionally.

The challenge that confronts many business schools is how to contribute to a new process of professionalisation and skills development for the future managerial cadre, and the role of the MBA within this agenda. To evaluate the success of business schools in responding to change, an analysis of the balance between theory and practice within the MBA curriculum is required.

What should the Master of Business Administration curriculum aim to achieve?

To examine the relevance of the future MBA curriculum, we need to revisit our understanding of relevant professional knowledge in management. Historically, the MBA has been typified by an emphasis on the functional demarcation of the curriculum in terms of a relatively narrow subject content centred on marketing, finance, strategic planning and economic models of behaviour ([Datar et al., 2011](#); [Spender, 2017](#); [Thomas and Cornuel, 2012](#)). Although this curriculum model had come under scrutiny prior to the 2008 financial crisis, events since have accelerated a move to diversify the subject content and disciplinary nature of a number of MBA programmes. In particular, greater emphasis is now given to issues relating to corporate social responsibility, ethical business practice as well as managing outside the Anglo-American cultural "bubble". For [Jarvis and Logue \(2016, p. 2\)](#), the incorporation of business ethics within the curriculum has yet to achieve the same importance as other traditional subjects, as it "is treated in a celebratory positive light[. . .] and largely unproblematic". It remains to be seen, then, the degree to which the remodelled MBA has transformed the behaviours of managers.

To prepare MBA students for the future challenges of the twenty-first century, we would do well to revisit ancient conceptions of what constitutes valuable knowledge, and the values system that underpins such concepts. Although virtue business ethics is not without its critics ([Adkins, 2011](#); [Amann et al., 2011](#)), it does pose the question of how moral judgment interacts with human action. In offering the notion of "practical wisdom", Aristotle recognised the importance of practice as well as theory in human behaviour. [Flyvbjerg \(2001\)](#) has called for the business curriculum to be rebalanced, with the theoretically driven conception of knowledge (episteme) countered by context-dependent and professional skills (techne). For [Dunne \(1993, p. 228\)](#):

Phronesis as a form of knowledge is from deep involvement in concrete situations, where that involvement [. . .] only come from the character and disposition of the person, formed through that person's life history.

It is here in inculcating a code of professional ethics and behaviours where business education has the potential to make a meaningful impact on managerial action. For [Flyvbjerg \(2001\)](#), this could be realised in the classroom through discussions centered around the ethical context to decisions and the relevance of values in how we interpret and respond to problems. However, for [Kemmis \(2012, pp. 148-151\)](#), offering classroom-based discussions is inadequate, as "phronesis cannot be developed directly – and it is not something that can be taught; it can only be learned- and then be taught indirectly". To embed practical learning business schools must look beyond the classroom at how they may incorporate theory into daily practice (praxis). This move requires two significant steps for many business schools: first, to recognise that the

imbalance between theory and practice must be addressed, and second, to engage more directly with organisations in a new partnership of mutual learning.

Datar *et al.* (2011, p. 455) simplified this challenge for business schools in terms of a “two cultures problem”, where research and theory are valued more than direct engagement with business. Historically, post-1992 universities have claimed that they have developed closer and more fruitful relations with industry and commerce than older institutions. Take, for example, the development of sandwich degrees that combined a work placement with academic study in the former polytechnics. If there is a two cultures problem between the higher education sector and business, it has tended to be more pronounced in the older universities where the focus was on a theoretical rather than a “hands-on” approach to management. Although Schlegelmilch and Thomas (2011) recognise that progress has been made in the revision of the MBA curriculum model, they argue that “whether this is sufficient to circumvent the more fundamental need to reform management education as a whole remains doubtful”. Business schools are not static socio-political systems, but are arenas of struggle involving a range of stakeholders. In particular, academics in the “research-intensive” pre-1992 universities are generally driven by the need to publish, rather than meet the needs of practitioners. Indeed, for Spender (2017, p. 187), “few faculty members understand what goes on in firms”. So long as career advancement is determined by the drive to publish, then academics will prioritise their own specialist research interest.

This personal-professional driver is also reinforced by external pressures that inhibit a practice-orientation. This “tyranny” (Khurana, 2007) of ranking universities in terms of their academic reputation impacts on how institutional leaders identify their organisational goals for academics. In the United Kingdom (UK), for example, the periodic Research Excellence Framework emphasises the need to publish in high-ranking journals, with recruitment and promotion linked to an academic’s publication potential. Universities are also constrained by the need to be accredited by external bodies, such as the Association for the Advancement of Collegiate Business Schools (AACSB) or the Association of MBAs (AMBA). In particular, the structures associated with AACSB accreditation impose behaviours on how universities plan for the future and assess their students. Given these constraints, we should acknowledge the internal and external pressures that impact on a business school’s capacity, and indeed willingness, to engage in radical change of their MBA curriculum.

For whom should the Master of Business Administration be conceived?

Finally, with reference to whom should study for the MBA, we should re-appraise its target clientele. Historically, Higher Education in the UK has been stratified by a number of socio-economic and cultural conditioning factors which has impacted on choice of institution. In particular, the post-1992 universities have tended to cater for students in their local community rather than pitching their offer to international students. This market-orientation is changing as institutions look for more students from across the globe as they look to build their reputation. Whether the post-1992 universities possess a curriculum model to challenge the pre-eminence of the elite is an area of interest for this paper.

Managers are confronted by an increasingly volatile and uncertain environment in which adaptability and responsiveness are prized by business. In essence, we have moved from traditional managerial functions to those associated with change leadership, such as inspiring, communicating a vision and drafting strategic plans. This changing need has implications for the MBA curriculum. For a number of researchers (Almog-Bareket, 2011; Li-Hua and Lu, 2014), the MBA should, therefore, be concerned with the vocational preparation of organisational leaders, not business managers. However, the idea of demarcating the MBA as a senior executive qualification has limited appeal for many universities who recognise the lucrative

appeal of the MBA. The past two decades has witnessed the expansion of MBA programmes throughout the globe. This expansion of MBA brand has been associated with a move away from the traditional generic American model to more work-specific models, such as that in Educational Management, or culturally specific models, such as “European” (Thomas and Cornuel, 2012) or “Asian” (Shaw, 2017) variants. For Blass and Weight (2005b), there is a clear concern here: “the MBA is slipping from being the elite business qualification to a mass graduate conversion programme which is seen as a necessary stepping stone to the ranks of the junior rather than senior management”. How then should we envisage the future MBA – one for senior leadership figures, or for the massed ranks of supervisory management who may aspire to a leadership role? How well positioned universities are to respond to this challenge is central to this discussion of MBA education.

Theorising the development of the Master of Business Administration using new institutionalism as a conceptual framework. New institutionalism searches for explanations of how organisations interact with other organisations within a common field of activity. As Bockino (2017, p. 148) points out, “while ‘old’ institutionalism conceptualised the organisation as embedded in the local community, new institutionalism expands that conceptualisation outwards, envisioning the organisation on a field, sector, or society level”. This field was described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983, p. 148) in terms of a four determining characteristics:

An increase in the extent of interaction among organizations in the field; the emergence of sharply defined inter-organizational structures of domination and patterns of coalition; an increase in the information load with which organizations in a field must contend; and the development of a mutual awareness among participants in a set of organizations that they are involved in a common enterprise.

All these characteristics are apparent in the contemporary higher education market. Not only is there competition for students but also external structures established by professional bodies and regulatory regimes, such as the AMBA and AACSB, impinge on the behaviours available to institutions. For Wilkins and Huisman (2012, p. 2):

Business schools can be regarded as belonging to a distinct organisational field[. . .]. As a distinct organisational field, business schools arguably compete for largely the same resources and legitimacy, and operate under the same institutional framework in terms of laws, regulations, normative rules and cognitive belief systems.

One of the central tenets of DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) conceptualisation of organisational fields is that organisations should display a relatively high degree of commonality.

Perhaps the most important theoretical contribution from DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) work on New Institutional theory is the concept of institutional isomorphism and how it relates to organisational behaviours. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argued that to protect their market position, organisations were preoccupied with the maintenance of their reputation and legitimacy. As Thomas and Cornuel (2012, p. 3) describe, “the search for legitimacy may unwittingly create more homogeneity in the strategies of business schools and impact the development of alternative strategic choices about differentiating research and programmes”. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), there are three key processes that influence the behaviours of organisations towards commonality. The most conspicuous process is termed “coercive isomorphism”, where Government, or “other organisations upon which they are dependent” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p. 150), may dictate certain behaviours. One example of “coercive isomorphism” is the pressures brought to bear on universities in England through the periodic Research Assessment Exercise that measures the quality of a research outputs and ranks institutions accordingly. A second process

relates to “mimetic isomorphism”, where organisations model themselves on the market leader or follow others’ approaches when market conditions are uncertain. The third process is described as “normative isomorphism” and refers to the actions taken in responses to the demands made by professional bodies, such as those expectations required by AACSB to obtain accreditation. Although the concept of isomorphism is not without criticism – for example, in downplaying the degree of heterogeneity and competition within organisational fields, and its lack of focus on organisational political culture (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012) – it offers a conceptual framework within which to model organisational behaviours.

Research methodology

The aim of the research exercise was to explore a possible correspondence between two sets of British MBAs and the idealised curriculum identified by Navarro (2008). The approach taken was influenced by an analysis of American MBAs undertaken by Kars-Unluoglu (2016), Neelankavil (1994) and Navarro (2008), and contributions from Rubin and Dierdorff (2009) and Costigan and Brink (2015) in which they worked from the premise that the MBA curriculum is to some extent a “reflection of a [business] school’s strategy” (Segev *et al.*, 1999, p. 551). For Kars-Unluoglu (2016):

Syllabi reveal structure, content and perspective of the courses being taught, even if they do not reflect real-life instruction. They enumerate what topics the instructors will cover and what students will read[. . .]. Since the syllabi are shared by the instructors as an official position [and] [. . .] they are a reliable data source for what instructors consider to be important for students to learn.

There is, therefore, an established body of research (Kars-Unluoglu, 2016; Navarro, 2008; Segev *et al.*, 1999) that indicates that the nature of subject content, identified through their syllabi, and the manner through which an MBA is delivered are all indicative of the prevailing values-system within a business school, its expertise and student intake.

The list of leading British MBAs was taken from the (Financial Times [FT], 2017) ranking of top global MBAs, including those from the USA. This choice replicates the approach of Wilkins and Huisman (2012) who note that the FT ranking “is widely believed to be the most influential and prestigious” – as such we should regard the FT ranking as a part of the legitimisation mechanism that is tied to legitimisation. The decision to use the FT MBA ranking also mirrored the approach by Kars-Unluoglu (2016) and Navarro (2008), as it is predicated on the view that “the vast majority of schools in the top 50 has tended to remain relatively stable over the years” (Navarro, 2008, p. 111), and as such provides a credible source of information. However, whereas Navarro (2008) and Kars-Unluoglu (2016) focussed on the MBA curriculum at American universities, this paper is concerned with an exploration of the contemporary MBA at British universities. As a consequence, it was decided not to refer to American publications, such as US News and World Report and Business Week as Navarro (2008) and Kars-Unluoglu (2016) had done in their research.

In addition to the “top-10” MBAs, a second grouping of universities was reviewed. To test the argument put forward by Wilkins and Huisman (2012) that business schools in Britain are stratified into separate and clearly defined groups, four post-1992 universities in the north of England – Cumbria, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside – were reviewed using the same methodology and framework as the elite grouping. As a group, the four represent a range of ex-polytechnics, differing in size and ranging from the mid-to-lower positions in various league tables. There are three important considerations to be taken into account when comparing post-1992 business schools with the elite identified by the FT. First, the post-1992 sector has traditionally concentrated on undergraduate business

education more than postgraduate teaching, which has been dominated historically by pre-1992 institutions. Second, the “new” universities have tended until recently to focus their efforts on achieving high quality teaching rather than challenge the research power of older universities. Finally, we should note the point made by [Wilkins and Huisman \(2012, p. 9\)](#) that “business schools affiliated to post-1992 universities often contain claims of regional excellence, rather than national or international excellence[. . .]. Post-1992 universities, therefore, often operate in different markets and have different objectives from the ‘top’ universities”. Although there may be isomorphic drivers impacting on post-1992 business schools, we should recognise that they are on a different evolutionary path to many pre-1992 universities such as Cambridge, Oxford and Durham.

The web-based review of syllabi replicated the approach of [Navarro \(2008\)](#) and of [Kars-Unluoglu \(2016\)](#). British MBAs was primarily concerned with gathering data on the following: the number and diversity of MBA courses offered by business schools; the division between a core and peripheral elective subject content; the range of choice for students; and the opportunities for enrichment and skills development. The website of each business school was accessed and its curriculum recorded. This collection of data was expected to provide a deep insight into the MBA curriculum at each university, as well as informing a thematic analysis of the “British MBA” if, indeed, there is such a British variant of the American model. These data were then compared with the “idealised” MBA curriculum described by [Navarro \(2008\)](#) with 26 subject domains divided into five categories: functional and analytical; soft-skills; social responsibility; and global issues. These categories would serve as a convenient and logical thematic descriptors and contribute to the analysis of the MBA curriculum. The findings relate to direct reference to a subject domain, such as corporate finance or marketing, within the curriculum offer. There may, of course, be instances where a subject identified by [Navarro \(2008\)](#) is subsumed into another domain, as is the case with “general management” or “leadership”. In addition to the relevance of the idealised model proposed by [Navarro \(2008\)](#) a decade on from publication, this issue of nomenclature is an important limitation to this method of research. In addition to searching for correspondence with [Navarro’s \(2008\)](#) idealised MBA model, this review was also interested in ascertaining any particular weighting in favour subject domains, such as marketing or finance over others such as corporate social responsibility and global awareness as was reported by [Navarro \(2008\)](#) within British MBAs.

Findings

The FT “top” 10

The FT list of “top 100” international MBA degrees for 2017 includes 13 British universities, second only to the USA with 51 universities. Although a significant provider of high-quality MBA education, the UK has only two institutions (Cambridge 5th and the London Business School 6th) in the premier grouping of 15 identified by the FT. Only 13 of the top 100 MBAs are awarded by Asian universities, with China having five institutions and India four cited respectively. Despite the growth of the Chinese and Indian economies, it would appear that neither is yet able to challenge the dominance of the USA in high-quality MBA education. This ranking of international MBAs reinforces the traditional view of the MBA as being led by the values, goals and innovative capacity of American institutions ([Blass and Weight, 2005a](#); [Neelankavil, 1994](#); [Shaw, 2017](#)).

The findings generated by the web-based review suggest that there has been a significant movement to change the MBA in the UK in the past decade or so. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that elite business schools have refashioned the MBA curriculum and now cater for issues not envisaged by [Neelankavil \(1994\)](#) or [Navarro \(2008\)](#) in their work on an ideal MBA

curriculum. In this respect, the debate over the MBA has transcended the idealised version postulated by Navarro (2008). For example, British MBAs now include game theory and digital technology (Imperial, Oxford and Lancaster), as well as family business (Imperial and Cranfield) and boardroom experience (Durham). It is clear that the range of electives provides business schools with a curriculum that is both expansive and highly specialised. Table I provides data on the number of core modules and electives offered by the top 10 British MBAs. Of the 26 subject domains specified by Navarro (2008), the elite business schools offer between 10 and 16 as a whole, with an average of 12.7 across the sample. Although most of these subject domains identified by Navarro (2008) are included within the curriculum, there are a few exceptions, with “negotiation skills” and “leadership” not explicitly referred to by some. In such instances such as “career planning”, these may be catered for within the “hidden curriculum” and the networking opportunities available at institutions such as Cambridge.

The development of the MBA curriculum in Britain is also reflected in the variety of study programmes available to students. There appears to be significant provision for the customisation of the full-time MBA to meet the needs and aspirations of students. Customisation can be achieved in two ways. First, through formalised pathways that focus on a particular subject domain and professional development, as in the case of the Durham MBA that offers three pathways in entrepreneurship, consultancy and technology. This approach is designed to meet the needs of a specialist managerial cadre. Second, through the provision of electives – electives appear to be a pervasive means of enrichment for elite British MBAs and as such offer students a range of choice. For example, Oxbridge draws from its diverse intellectual resources to offer “perspectives from the humanities” (Oxford) and “philosophy in business” (Cambridge) as an alternative to the functionalist content in most MBA programmes. However, while some students may decide to study a broad range of electives, others may be attracted to a concentration in a particular subject area. For example, the curriculum offered both by the Cass Business School and Imperial include a significant number of electives aligned to finance. Given the geographical location of both to the City of London, such a concentration is comprehensible.

In addition to the provision of pathways and electives, personalised learning is supported through opportunities to undertake extra-curricular activities. In particular, the opportunity to undertake a work-based consultancy project enables students to apply their learning in a practical context, as in the example of Warwick with a 10-12 weeks’ placement. This shift towards a greater emphasis on praxis is a significant development in MBA education and it makes the MBA a far more purposeful qualification. The findings suggest that the “top-10” MBAs are able to offer significant variety in the student journey - for example, business simulations at Manchester and competitions at Lancaster - than was the case in the past. This incorporation of practice into teaching and learning is to be welcomed.

Post-1992 universities

The review of post-1992 northern universities validates the claim made by Wilkins and Huisman (2012) that there exists a range of expertise and research power in business schools that is reflected in their MBA curriculum offer. Of the 26 subject domains specified by Navarro (2008), the post-1992 institutions in the sample offer between 5 and 13, with an average of 9.75. In contrast to the numerous electives offered in elite institutions, choice is more restricted in post-1992 institutions. Indeed, some subject areas that would ordinarily correspond to the core curriculum in the elite group are absent, or subsumed under generalised headings, in some post-1992 universities. Take for example the absence of marketing at Cumbria and Teesside. Compared to the variety of electives offered at elite business schools, the range of choice at Cumbria and Teesside is minimal, as both appear to

Table I.
An overview of
subject content of
elite British MBA
aligned to Navarro
(2008)

Category	Cambridge Ranking: 5	LBS 6	Manchester 30	Oxford 33	Cass 37	Lancaster 42	Warwick 44	Imperial 45	Granfield 53	Durham 75
<i>Functional</i>										
Marketing	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Corporate finance	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Financial accounting	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Operations and supply chain management	/	/	/	/	x	/	/	/	/	/
Corporate strategy	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Managerial /cost accounting	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Management information systems	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	/
Operations research	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
<i>Analytical</i>										
Managerial economics	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	/	/	x
Quantitative analysis	/	/	/	x	x	x	x	x	x	/
Decision analysis	x	X	x	x	/	x	x	/	x	x
Soft skills										
Management communications	x	/	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Organisational behaviour	/	/	x	x	x	/	x	X	/	x
General management	x	x	x	x	/	/	x	x	x	x
Leadership	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Human Resource management	x	x	/	x	x	x	x	x	/	x
Organisational architecture and design	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Negotiations	/	/	x	/	x	x	x	/	x	x
Career planning	/	/	/	x	x	/	x	x	x	x
Entrepreneurship	/	/	x	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Social responsibility										
Corporate ethics / Social responsibility	/	/	x	/	x	x	x	/	x	/
Business and Government	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Business law	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	/	x
<i>Global</i>										
Macroeconomics	/	/	x	x	x	x	x	/	x	/
Global strategic management	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	x	/	/
International business	/	/	x	x	/	/	/	/	/	/
Total	16	25	11	11	10	12	10	14	14	14

Note: Key: “/” = referred to in curriculum offer, “x” not referred to in curriculum offer

offer a “one-size-fits-all” curriculum. In contrast, at Sunderland the facility to personalise the MBA through personalised degree pathways is provided by options in Marketing, Finance, Human Resource Management, Hospitality Management, Enterprise and Innovation, Supply Chain Management, Culture and Creative Industries, and Global-General Management through electives “bolted onto” a core curriculum. In addition to offering a traditional curriculum including accounting and finance, operations and supply chain management, and marketing, Northumbria offers a choice between a work-based management investigation and a consultancy project instead of a dissertation. Although post-1992 institutions tend to offer a limited curriculum range compared to elite business schools, they do offer some opportunities for the integration of theory with practice through individual project work that is set within a student’s own professional context. The findings do suggest, however, that the British MBA market is differentiated and stratified as claimed by [Wilkins and Huisman \(2012\)](#) (Table II).

Discussion

Although criticism of the MBA predates the Great Financial Crisis, the period after 2008 intensified concerns with the degree and accelerated calls for change. On one level, reform was engendered by a backlash against the behaviours of a managerial cadre who were held responsible for the crash. From this perspective, the MBA was symbolic of a failed elite with flawed goals. On another level, the reform of the MBA was driven by those within business who viewed it as being unfit for purpose in an increasingly globalised and increasingly diverse world. Finally, we should also recognise that a number of concerns had been raised that related to the way the MBA was taught and its lack of focus on developing managerial skills. Given these pressures for change, it may be anticipated that the degree has been transformed beyond recognition – but is this so?

To what extent are we changing our work as academics to accommodate change?

Pettigrew (2011) argued that “in the end real change will only occur by scholars changing their scholarly routines”, and in particular how academics value different forms of knowledge production. Pettigrew (2011) acknowledges that “management research and the way our fields of knowledge are themselves a product of wider pressures to change the character of knowledge and how it is produced”, and that “successive Research Assessment Exercise assessments right back to the mid-1980s have changed individual and institutional behaviour” (Pettigrew, 2011, pp. 347-348). In this respect, we need to acknowledge that the work of business schools and their prioritisation is conditioned not only by individual career aspirations on behalf of academic but also through the criteria established by government agencies that measure performance within higher education. [Pettigrew \(2012, p. 350\)](#) highlights the importance of understanding this complex relationship that influences the content, context and knowledge production process of management research. Although [Pettigrew \(2012\)](#) may be accused of providing an apologia for academe, his thesis is important in alluding to the key policy drivers that emanate from the state bureaucracy and that have prioritised research over practice. [Meagher \(2009\)](#) offered a more diverse set of categories to define impact beyond conventional instrumental measures that include developing the capacity to build networks that establish greater connectivity and collaboration and are more inclusive of potential stakeholders. To some degree, such calls to change is reflected in the new guidelines for the 2021 Research Excellence Framework Exercise that place greater emphasis on impact through real-world application in case studies. However, despite a shift in the way research outputs are valued, Business Schools still have some distance to travel before they all arrive at a balance

Category	Cumbria	Northumbria	Sunderland	Teesside
<i>Functional</i>				
Marketing	/	/	/	x
Corporate finance	/	/	/	x
Financial accounting	x	x	x	x
Operations and supply chain management	/	/	/	x
Corporate strategy	/	/	/	/
Managerial/cost accounting	x	/	/	x
Management information systems	x	x	x	x
Operations research	x	x	x	x
<i>Analytical</i>				
Managerial economics	x	x	x	x
Quantitative analysis	x	x	x	x
Decision analysis	x	/	x	x
<i>Soft skills</i>				
Management communications	x	x	x	x
Organisational behaviour	/	x	x	x
General management	/	/	/	/
Leadership	/	/	/	/
Human Resource management	x	/	/	/
Organisational architecture and design	x	x	/	x
Negotiations	x	x	x	/
Career planning	/	x	x	x
Entrepreneurship	x	/	/	x
<i>Social responsibility</i>				
Corporate ethics / Social responsibility	/	x	/	x
Business and Government	x	x	x	x
Business law	x	x	x	x
<i>Global</i>				
Macroeconomics	x	x	x	x
Global strategic management	x	/	/	x
International business	x	/	/	x
Total	9	12	13	5

Table II.
An overview of subject content of four post-1992 universities' British MBA aligned to Navarro (2008)

Note: Key: “/” = referred to in curriculum offer, “x” not referred to in curriculum offer

between a suitable research and professional practice, and re-evaluate what is the purpose of undertaking research.

The imposition of a research-driven assessment regime limits to degree of manoeuvre that academics enjoy, and therefore their capacity for change. Universities tend to be risk-averse and limit the potential for radical innovation. The reform of the “British MBA” suggests an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary response to the critique levied against the degree. It is clear that concerns raised by [Simon \(1967\)](#), as well as [Flyvbjerg \(2001\)](#), [Kemmis \(2012\)](#) and [Spender \(2017\)](#), are being addressed, but that this response varies. In all probability, given career structures and assessment regimes, many institutions will prioritise corporate strategic research areas over micro-projects with external clients and the production of applied knowledge. On a superficial level, there would appear to be some level of correspondence with Navarro’s idealised model of the MBA, with the elite closer to the ideal than post-1992 institutions. However, we should acknowledge that a uniform model of the degree is not desirable and could not hope to meet the needs of such a diverse student intake and their employers. The refashioned MBA in the elite business schools offers not only choice for

students over what they study but ownership over the learning journey. Moreover, the provision of extra-curricular enrichment activities facilitates a personalised curriculum that enables a much more student-centred conception of the MBA. Taken together, these developments would infer that change in clearly defined areas is taking place in the UK.

Re-professionalising management through a revised Master of Business Administration

In 2010, two seminal developments signalled a change in emphasis within academe in favour of greater recognition of the benefits of ethical practice both for individuals and organisations. First, [Tsui's \(2010\)](#) call for papers themed as “dare to care”, and second, [Walsh's \(2011, p. 225\)](#) presidential address at the 2010 Academy of Management meeting, in which he asked “what can we do as an Academy to embrace the cared and inspire and enable a better world”. This emphasis on the human dimension within organisations is for [Rynes et al. \(2012, p. 504\)](#) representative of a “paradigm shift [...] that emphasises neurological, psychological, and sociological bases of human interrelating that have other-interest as opposed to self-interest at their core”. At the heart of this shift is a recognition of [Frost's \(2003\)](#) work on organisational pain that reported that high-performance organisations are more likely to induce stress and toxicity ([Kanov et al. \(2017\)](#) and that “whatever its form or cause, suffering pervades organizational life and is likely costing organizations hundreds of billions of dollars annually” ([Kanov et al., 2017, p. 754](#)). [Kuechler and Stedham \(2017, p. 3\)](#) report on the integration of mindfulness into the MBA curriculum at Western University in the USA, but such a radical innovation is not replicated on the same scale in the UK, apart from Lancaster where two modules: “Mindful manager” and “Leading mindfully” are offered ([University of Lancaster, 2017](#)). Ethical practice is now included in UK MBA programmes, where it is often subsumed into leadership modules. However, ethics is not yet presented within the MBA curriculum as being on a par with core subject disciplines, such as marketing or finance. It remains to be seen how far mindfulness, as well as compassion, tolerance and forgiveness become embedded within organisations as [Fehr and Gelfand \(2012\)](#) advocate. Unless management education programmes, such as the MBA, are able to re-educate future senior leaders in relation to the benefits both for organisations and employees, the impact of this approach will be limited. One possible avenue to explore, at least in the short-term, is to revisit the idea of “organisational citizenship” ([Grant, 2012](#)) and promote a reflection on what obligations managers owe to colleagues beyond a legal interpretation of their duty of care, to one that is predicated on a duty of ethical practice and humanity.

This recognition of the importance of organisational citizenship is manifest in various forms in MBA programmes. [Punteney \(2016\)](#) reports on the development of intercultural competence ([Deardorff, 2009](#)) within the MBA curriculum at Middlebury Institute in California. The content of the MBA curriculum addressed managerial competencies that related to leading others from different linguistic or cultural backgrounds. For example, students are required to study at least 12 credits from a 62-credit MBA, that includes eight credits of language skills and further four credits linked to cultural awareness. In doing so, the Middlebury curriculum sought to address issues such as differing cultural paradigms and value systems that has been identified as a weakness of the MBA. While the Middlebury project has placed intercultural competence at the heart of its curriculum planning, this is not the case in British institutions where a different approach is adopted. Take, for example, the Cass Business School that offers an international consultancy week in Iceland and a range of electives that involve tours of China, Cuba, the Middle East and the USA. This approach is mirrored at Manchester where the module “Managing and leading in a global environment is described as: ‘this course will provide you with analytical tools to critically evaluate the globalised economy from a cultural, political and economic perspective. You will explore major management issues and develop an understanding of the social context of businesses” ([University of Manchester, 2017](#)). The

purpose of such activities is clearly to apply theory to practice rather than engage directly in an intercultural curriculum in the depth that Middlebury offers. At Edinburgh, two modules acknowledge the international context to MBA study, “Global strategy” and “International Business in Context”. This extract from the latter is typical of how the MBA approaches intercultural competence: “Businesses wishing to cultivate trading relationships with emerging countries need to set-aside their ‘developed world’ mentality and re-tool business models, products, and strategies if they are to be successful” (University of Edinburgh, 2017). In short, although important steps have been taken to raise cultural awareness, British MBAs still tend to focus on instrumental conceptions of how culture relates to business, and could do more to follow the example of Middlebury.

Commonality and diversity within the Master of Business Administration curriculum

The content of the MBA curriculum is undergoing change, with greater emphasis given to subjects such as innovation and cultural awareness, as well as ethical management practices. Although business innovation appears to be an increasingly popular subject within MBA programmes, there is no consensus on what constitutes a suitable body of knowledge for this relatively new subject domain that draws from a variety of disciplines. For Kars-Unluoglu (2016, p. 75), “there is little consensus on the topics taught in innovation courses. This might suggest the lack of a shared vision among the community of innovation scholars[. . .]. Innovation is a perfect example of a rapidly developing interdisciplinary fields growing in diverse directions”. So, while Imperial focuses on “Design thinking and innovative problem solving” and Warwick offers “Innovation and creativity” that emphasise creativity, Cranfield focuses on “Managing strategic innovation” and Sunderland offers “Managing innovation and technology transfer” that emphasise managerial processes. Where there may be some commonality in approach is to be found in the way innovation is taught, with “the teaching mode in leading business schools appears to be moving towards a mode that is more explorative in nature and collaborative in style” (Kars-Unluoglu, 2016, p. 89). This move towards constructivism and away from didactic teaching or case studies is mirrored across many business schools globally, as universities aim to personalise the learning experience through engagement and practice (Driscoll, 2000; Hindle, 2007; McCarthy and McCarthy, 2006; Sawyer, 2006).

Isomorphism is predicated not only on the presumption that an organisational field has a high level of commonality but also that there are regulated forms of behaviour within that field. In general, regulation is performed through international accreditation bodies such as the AACSB, EQUIS and AMBA (mimetic isomorphism) or more formally via government policy and legislation (coercive isomorphism). In practice, however, isomorphic pressures are less strong than this regulatory framework would infer and are limited by institutional differences. In their review of management education, Guillotin and Mangematin (2015, p. 8) report that “isomorphism is locally embedded” and that “business schools on each side of the Atlantic seem to structure themselves and operate differently”. This diversity in practice reflects differing institutional, cultural and economic contexts between the different models of MBA. As Antunes and Thomas (2007) note, while management education in the USA was characterised historically by coherence and leadership through innovative business schools such as Wharton and Harvard, in Europe, management education reflected the peculiar cultural and historical forces that pertain to each of the nation states. This view is applicable to the UK where the binary divide between pre- and post-1992 universities pervades higher education. So, although there may be some commonality between British MBAs, there are also variations in their curriculum content.

Conclusion

This paper has contributed to the body of work relating to the reform and reappraisal of the MBA as the premier international management qualification with reference to two sets of provider. In particular, this paper set out to explore “what is taught, and for what reasons, and to whom”. In doing so, the research sought to compare the subject content of British MBAs with the curriculum identified by Navarro (2008) as an idealised model for future students. The findings suggest that the idealised model proffered by Navarro (2008) has been superseded by a much more enriched and purposeful range of options for students, particularly at elite institutions. One qualification should be made at this point. As elite institutions, these business schools tend to possess more resources than the post-1992 universities who tend to appear lower in the league tables. As a result, the elite are more likely to innovate earlier and over a wider range of initiatives. These findings suggest that British universities are engaged in a transformation of MBA education to ensure that it is fit for purpose and is seen by their students as value for money. The curriculum is more student-centered and aims to integrate abstract theory with practical application. The subject content is varied, particularly in elite business schools and offers not only student choice but also the facility for specialisation. As such, the evolving British-style MBA anticipates the further professionalisation of the management cadre.

The evolution of the MBA in the UK infers that business schools recognise a need to re-orient management education to meet the demands of contemporary organisations in a changing world. Clearly, the way institutions approach the design and delivery of their curriculum reflects their view of the world and themselves, with pre- and post-1992 universities targeting different clientele and offering an MBA to suit their market. The call from critics (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Spender, 2017; Thomas and Cornuel, 2012) to re-design the MBA so it may become a tool for the re-professionalisation of the managerial cadre has generated change. The incorporation of ethics into the curriculum is a first step to a change in the values system and priorities associated with being a professional manager in the twenty-first century. As we move away from Taylorist notions of work that are redolent of a production-line mentality, towards a more humanist and creative interpretation of what the management of others involves, the need for an understanding of ethical practices becomes more evident. The reformed MBA also appears to have made some progress towards incorporating multicultural awareness into its content, albeit that this is often instrumental in nature.

In addition to the inclusion of ethics and cultural awareness into the curriculum, it is evident that a number of MBA programmes are now aligned to formal professional accreditation to recognise the importance of practice as well as theory. Take for example the MBA at Northumbria that is accredited by the Chartered Management Institute and which enables admission to member status as a result of a mapping exercise that identified common levels of attainment. As a result, Northumbria MBA graduates also qualify as chartered managers, an important hallmark of professional status in the UK. Although one may see the alignment between university curricula and professional bodies as the culmination of the competency-driven agenda identified by Pfeffer and Fong (2002), it is also part of a wider re-conceptualisation of what it means to be a professional manager. The reformed MBA is better attuned to the needs of contemporary society. It is a long-term project that predates the Great Financial Crisis and that is still in process. If there is one lesson to learn, it is that the MBA should be a dynamic and responsive study programme and not simply a qualification that provides a certain status within organisations.

Although there is a high degree of commonality within the core curriculum, isomorphic drivers are limited, as business schools prefer a unique brand offer. The common core built around marketing, strategy, finance and accounting, and operations management is

indicative of normative isomorphic pressures that reflect the expectations of students and employers. An MBA devoid of these subject domains would lack professional legitimacy for both students and employers. A second isomorphic driver is that of mimetic isomorphism – in that there is a convergence around more progressive forms of teaching and learning, and enrichment. The movement towards “practical wisdom”, combining theory with practice is provided through an array of learning opportunities ranging from competitions, simulations to individual projects. The provision of specialised pathways and electives means that we cannot think in terms of a uniform model of the British MBA. Some elite institutions prefer to differentiate their brand by the concentration in particular subject domains, as in the case of Imperial and the Cass Business School who offer a raft of finance-related modules, or Durham with their consultancy pathway. Others, particularly in the post-1992 grouping, do not offer such a diverse curriculum and may not deviate far from their core curriculum. In part, this may reflect the expertise of academics. In part, it may also mirror the nature of a predominantly regional and limited market as opposed to an international one for the elite. The evidence from this review suggests that the MBA continues to evolve in the UK as independent and competitive business schools respond to their particular market context.

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