

# Rethinking Master's degrees in business and management: a more diverse offering?

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## A short history

Since the 1960s there has been a proliferation of business degrees in the UK and abroad. The early degrees were based on American models from institutions such as Harvard Business School and Sloan School of Management at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The Americans have dominated the field and all other schools are compared to the Americans in the ranking lists (e.g. *Financial Times*, UK).

In the UK, the London and Manchester business schools were founded specially to improve competitiveness. London was based on the Harvard case study model (although it now offers a Sloan Fellowship program) and Manchester followed the MIT Sloan model.

In Europe there has been a growth in business schools with the French INSEAD in the lead. Other European business schools tend towards promoting themselves as having international faculty. Three universities offer a joint program internationally – New York University Stern, London School of Economics and HEC School of Management, Paris. Some of the newer ones (e.g. in The Netherlands) also have partnership deals with UK universities. And some UK business universities such as Middlesex and Nottingham have campuses in Malaysia, which have a business component. *The Economist* newspaper has advertisements from leading and aspiring business schools every week. The standard offering is an MBA that is validated by membership of the International Association of MBAs. There may be a good deal of self-interest in self-regulation, but most providers will aspire to membership of the elite club.

## Differences on approach

The European and American MBAs are somewhat differently aimed. The American degree is a cross-functional introduction to business intended for young people at the start of their career – in effect, initial training. The European MBAs tend to be aimed at professionals moving into their mid-career and they are usually funded by employers rather than individuals. In some case they are offered in-house but are mostly cross-functional rather than specialist.

MBAs have historically been offered by universities (unlike Europe where they have generally been independent and financed by industry). In the UK the most well-known private business schools are Ashridge and Henley (the latter now amalgamating with Reading University). The private business schools have always been closer to business and industry than the university schools. Roffey Park, for instance, has stayed resolutely under the control of its sponsoring businesses.

### A particular UK difference

In the UK there used to be a difference between business degrees and management degrees but the distinction has been lost in the passage of time – without serious thought as to why. The difference used to be that “business” was concerned with structural functions (finance, marketing, manufacturing technology, etc.) while “management” was the more general role functions of people in charge and controlling performance – organization development (OD), leadership, strategic thinking. The international popularity of MBAs with their aura of “hard skills” (scientific management) overshadowed the soft skills of managing people and organizations. It is probably time to resurrect the differentiation in terminology if only to rescue the term “leadership” from its current imprecision.

In the UK, there have always been a number of business degrees at master's level that are not designated as MBAs. Lancaster has long had management degrees in management learning. Leeds started with a MA in Organization Studies in the late 1960s, and Bath had a series of master's degrees in the transitional and leadership aspects of management in the early 1970s. Salford ran an MSc in Strategic Leadership from 1990 to 2006. There have also been several degrees in the financial and accounting fields such as the Bangor degree in association with the Manchester Business School.

### Some questions

There are some questions about whether the current abundance of MBAs is appropriate to business needs. As an initial training experience for young aspirants to managerial careers, MBAs are probably useful as they provide broad intern experience and offer training in procedures. But most middle and senior managers do not need broad specialism having already gained a professional qualification (accountancy, technology, marketing, etc.) and gained departmental experience within their employment – many on a graduate apprenticeship of some sort.

One of the great benefits of the top international MBAs is that the learning community is international. Many others offer mixed experience as the students come from a variety of sectors let alone businesses. In many ways the learning value of a master's degrees is not in the formal teaching, but in the interactions among students. The Revans approach to action learning was based on this variety even in its in-house programs. Where students come from the same company, new experiences and approaches become difficult to introduce and the program lacks the readily available experience resource for proper inter-organizational comparisons.

### Importance of learning modes

One of the outstanding characteristics of management degrees (more even than business degrees) has been the way in which they have adopted experiential approaches to learning. Probably more experimentation and development in modes of learning have been adopted in management education than anywhere else.

The case study approach (Harvard) was quite different from the formal instruction approach of many university courses. The influence of the Unit for Management Learning financed by ICI at Lancaster University at its foundation was a leader in experiential approaches to learning. Reg Revans developed a widely adopted approach to learning in his Action Learning Approach. OD was infused with the approach to social psychology in the USA at Bethel Main. Early management development in the UK was led by the phenomenological approaches of the Glacier Metals project and the Tavistock Institute – themselves

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emanating from War Office officer development during the Second World War. Models of independent learning have also infused approaches to developing managers from the NE London Polytechnic's approach to independent learning to forms of leadership development like Ian Cunningham's Self-managed Learning.

The important characteristic of both business and management education is that it should be designed to facilitate the learning of practical and mental skills – that is, learning how to behave appropriately in organizational contexts. It should also be designed in to build coherently on experience. The processes of learning employed should be the same processes that managers have to engage in when they act as managers – which is essentially problem solving and strategic thinking with and through others.

On the whole, middle and senior managers are these days not so well disposed to MBAs as such, but are attracted to more specialist programs, especially when they are experiential and closely related to their own working situations. In these days of multi-national and global organizations, managers are particularly keen to be able to work with others from around the world so that national and international comparisons can be made.

It is time to review and reassess the way management education is provided worldwide. There will be fresh prizes for the institutions that make the next step changes in the provision of learning experience and qualifications for senior managers in our new global business context.

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