



EDITORS' CHOICE

## The "Americanization" of Management Education in Britain

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*At first sight, Britain appears to have built its business and management education system firmly on American lines. Without any real provision in 1945, the country now has about 120 business schools and a big output of MBAs. Yet closer inspection reveals a more complicated picture, full of ebbs and flows, and sharp controversies. This article looks in detail at Britain's trajectory and then examines its dynamics, focusing on the key players that shaped events, from governments to students. It argues that the evolution of the British system had little to do with rational debate about the merits of U.S. practice and instead often reflected the politics of prejudice and self-interest*

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At first sight, it appears that Britain, more than anywhere else, has taken the American business and management education gospel fully to heart. The United Kingdom currently produces nearly 11,000 MBAs per year; there are a plethora of similar and related programs (EMBAs, degrees, diplomas, etc.), and undergraduate provision is also strong, with more British students studying business and management at this level than any other subject. Little wonder that, for many commentators, in this instance at least, the epithet "Americanization" seems wholly appropriate.

However, on closer inspection, the situation here, as with so many other aspects of the alleged "special relationship," is less straightforward than it seems. For although Britain ended up by adopting American forms, this outcome was perhaps less of a foregone and consensual conclusion than might be imagined. The development of provision was initially rather slow. There were many arguments—occasionally bit-

ter arguments. Business and the universities remained skeptical. Real progress only finally began to be made in the 1980s and 1990s. However, even then, periods of impressive growth were followed by troughs of depression and recrimination. If Britain is to be characterized, then, the appropriate image is of a late-comer, and a somewhat reluctant one at that. The objective of what follows is to delimit this rather unusual trajectory more precisely, and uncover the dynamics that gave it shape.

### THE EARLY YEARS

In the decades before 1945, business and management education provision in Britain remained "small and undeveloped" (Keeble, 1992, p. 93). Four or five universities and colleges offered management subjects as part of B. Comm degrees, some professional societies ran their own diverse courses in manage-

ment, sometimes in conjunction with academics, and more often than not as part of a system of internal qualification, however, that was about all (Fauri, 1998; Keeble, 1992). In fact, the climate of opinion in boardrooms and on the shop floor alike continued to be resolutely anti-intellectual, with one insider reporting,

The business world in this country is rather sharply divided between those who have taken a keen interest in management research and problems of organisation generally (a small but distinguished minority) and those who would not have an organisation chart in their offices at any price, and to whom the many first-rate books on management are unknown. (Roskill, 1945, p. 69)

However, after 1945, there was increasing and substantial pressure for change. The incoming Attlee government and American "missionaries," primarily from the technical assistance branch of the Marshall Aid program, agreed that British productivity needed to be improved, and this, in turn, quickly led to a focus on management quality. Those who ran British industry, it was agreed, were simply far too often not up to the job—overauthoritarian, underskilled, and frequently lacking in ambition. The contrast with the professionalism and dynamism of their American equivalents was obvious. In this situation, the palliatives largely suggested themselves. What the United Kingdom needed was what the United States already had, namely, a system for turning out properly qualified managers, all the way from a "British Harvard" downward (Tiratsoo & Tomlinson, 1993). During the following 20 years, much was done to try to turn this objective into a reality, first by U.K. and U.S. government agencies, most prominently the Anglo-American Council on Productivity (AACP), and then by a host of allies and surrogates, for example, the British Productivity Council, the European Productivity Agency (EPA), and the Ford Foundation (Boel, 2003; Tiratsoo & Tomlinson, 1998).

The individual initiatives ranged across a broad spectrum. It was believed that firsthand exposure to U.S. institutions would be revelatory, and so study visits were one enduring feature. The tone was set in 1951, when a high profile AACP team toured the United States and concluded emphatically that education for management and high productivity were "closely related" (Anglo-American Council on Productivity, 1951, p. 20). Thereafter, many key individuals—for example, university vice chancel-

lors, lecturers, and interested politicians—crossed the Atlantic and made similar observations. More straightforward, there were generous grants, sometimes worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, for projects that were judged worthwhile, with individual beneficiaries including universities, particular faculties, networks, and organizations promoting conference series. In addition, alongside all this was a constant stream of exhortation—that Britain had to change and should expand its business and management education facilities forthwith.

### AMERICANIZATION?

The American measures produced some immediate and obvious results. Technical assistance money helped launch management studies at Loughborough College (later Loughborough University) during the late 1950s (Lester, 1970). Ford Foundation grants were crucial to the creation of the London Business School in 1965 and the Warwick Business School a few years later and even bought management studies a foothold at Cambridge, despite some internal dissension (Barnes, 1989; Bull, 1967; Ford Foundation, n.d.). The U.S. imprint could also be seen at Cranfield, as the journalist Bull described in 1963:

Two years ago, R. G. Boland—a chartered accountant with experience in consulting work—was sent . . . to the Harvard Business School to attend the International Teachers' Programme. . . . Last year, he came home with a great deal of enthusiasm, a thorough knowledge of Harvard methods and attitudes, and a hefty load of case study material. As an upshot, the new Cranfield residential nine-month course starting in October will be based on Harvard Business School methods. (p. 267)

Finally, networks of all kinds benefited, too. Thus, having met on EPA courses during the mid-1950s, one group of practitioners went on to found the Association of Teachers of Management, an organization that, in turn, then did much to raise professional standards (Henderson, 1972).

Moreover, the Americans also appeared to have made a critical difference in the longer term. British attitudes to business and management education certainly changed. There was an enormous enlargement of provision. The number of business schools increased from two in the mid-1960s to more than 100 in the mid-1990s (Crainer, 1998), while during the

same period, the number of students taking business studies and associated subjects at undergraduate level grew from about 1,000 to 156,000 (Baty, 1997). More significant, most of this expansion was straightforward emulation. British business schools almost all used the case study method, and, to some extent, American textbooks (Smith, 1977, 1987). The large majority opted for that most quintessential of transatlantic emblems, the MBA—indeed, the total of students gaining such a qualification jumped from 776 in 1975 to 10,889 in 2000 (Business Schools Advisory Group, 2002). Little wonder, then, that when commentators reflected on how British business education had evolved in the second half of the 20th century, many were struck by just how important U.S. influence had been. The academic Brown's (1991) judgment at the beginning of the 1990s was typical: "To a greater or lesser degree, most UK university business schools have adopted the American model" (p. 147).

However, although such assessments are broadly correct, it is important to stress that they also require careful qualification. Two points are pertinent. First, the British uptake of American ideas was never a smooth process but, in fact, waxed and waned considerably. Progress was initially rather slow, developments at places such as Loughborough notwithstanding, and even in 1963, the British Institute of Management (BIM; 1963) could regret, "As a nation we have not yet started on the task of providing trained and capable managers in sufficient numbers at the right time" (p. 2). Then, when growth occurred, there were considerable swings of fortune. A frenzy of activity in the 1960s, which produced the first dedicated business schools in London and Manchester, was followed by a considerable downturn. Commenting on the situation in mid-1971, the journal *Management Decision* observed that "The great euphoria with which management education was ushered on to the British tertiary education scene has faded" (Anonymous, 1971, p.108). Four years later, according to a correspondent in the *Director*, the business schools were still going through "a period of circumspection, not to say acute introspection" (Simmons, 1974, p. 507). The 1990s were equally tumultuous. The number of MBAs awarded each year more than doubled over the course of the decade (Business Schools Advisory Group, 2002). However, in 1993, the situation had been thought so dispiriting that a *Management Today* survey began with the strapline (headline) "MBA. Chic in the '80s, Sick in the '90s" (Oliver, 1993).

Second, and related to this, it is notable that the pursuit of the American model in Britain was always to some extent controversial. Practitioners frequently squabbled over precise ends and means—about everything from who was the target market to how they should be taught. Institutions jostled for space and offered a bewildering and rather unstructured array of slightly different qualifications (Tiratsoo, 1998). At times, the atmosphere grew almost hysterical, with strongly worded and sometimes vitriolic manifestos being launched in quick succession. Press coverage amplified the divisions (Robertson, 1970; Silver, 1991). In addition, there were continual and more disturbing allegations about standards, with many fearing what one authority referred to as the "'depreciation of the currency' of the MBA" (Forrester, 1986, p. 2). Business schools and other university providers of management courses were shown to differ considerably in their competencies (Higher Education Funding Council for England and Wales, 1994). Some institutions, for example the London Business School, were beyond reproach and enjoyed an enviable international standing, however, others, as a survey of 1988 put it, were simply "no more than marking—or killing—time" (Rogers, 1988, p. 2). Critics pointed to the poor quality of some courses; the lack of rigor in admission policies and final grading (Ascher, 1984); the low number of faculty members doing research (Business Schools Advisory Group, 2002); the indifference of their output (Commission on Management Research, 1994); and the high incidence of unfortunate internal altercations and scandals (e.g., Baty, 2000). When the government's Quality Assurance Agency finally issued new and tighter guidelines in 2002, it was predicted that "scores" of MBA courses would soon be forced to close (Baty, 2002). Finally, the way that the accreditation of business education was administered provoked comment. Two or three rival agencies policed the field but could not agree on a single classificatory scheme. The result was a degree of confusion, and a belief in some quarters that the process had become more about promoting image and exclusivity than improving standards. More significant, even in 2002, a majority of courses remained unrated (Beckett, 2002; Crainer & Dearlove, 1998). Viewed in its entirety, therefore, this was hardly a sector that appeared at ease, either with itself or with its surroundings. The constant stream of "what are we doing, where are we going?" type laments from business school luminaries throughout the period spoke for itself.

## RETARDANTS

How can this pattern be explained? The first puzzle to untangle is why the American onslaught at first produced only relatively modest results. From the AACSB report of 1951, it was approximately 15 years before Britain had its first business school and a further 15 years before the country's annual output of MBAs passed the 1,000 mark. What explains this rather curious time lag?

Supply-side weaknesses in Britain were part of the problem. The country had no management movement as such, and so no organically rooted coordinating body to push for reforms (Tiratsoo, 1998). In addition, government policy was not necessarily as effective as it might have been. The postwar Attlee administration, as has been suggested, was fully behind the American plans, however, its Conservative successors were far less positive. The Tories did not, of course, want to offend Washington, the senior partner in the Western Alliance, however, they also were ideologically antipathetic to extending the state's role in industry. Thus, their stance tended to be polite but essentially noncommittal. Some dynamism only returned at the beginning of the 1960s with the emergence of a national debate about Britain's apparent slide down the international growth league tables. The decision to create the new business schools was testament to the changing mood. However, even at this high point of interest, it was notable that official policy still remained rather restrained and tentative, perhaps most sensitive to the fact that those outside government should not feel dragooned. Some reforms were judged possible, others dismissed. If the development of business education during these years appeared rather chaotic and unplanned, the reluctance of government to provide firm leadership was a large part of the explanation (Tiratsoo & Tomlinson, 1993, 1998). Finally, on the supply side, it is notable that some features of the higher education sector also inhibited change. The universities greatly valued their traditions and were highly cautious about introducing new syllabi. Staff members in long-established subject areas such as the humanities tended to resent more vocationally orientated courses, believing that they would, in the end, corrupt free inquiry (Thompson, 1970). In this environment, it is not surprising to find that some nascent business and management faculties were treated as largely inferior entities, unwelcome adjuncts that had to be tolerated, rather than cocreators to the common good—a situation that,

in turn, diminished their self-confidence and effectiveness.

However, there is no doubt that the major impediments were on the demand side. To begin with, much of business was distinctly unimpressed with the American prescriptions. The "peak" organizations, particularly the Federation of British Industries (FBI), had been deeply angered by Labour's nationalization program after the war and remained suspicious of any government attempt to lead industry, no matter how benign. Management education itself anyway raised hackles. Some employers feared that, if managers were "professionalized," they might become too independent, a "third force" standing between capital and labor, rather than a faithful body of functionaries. More generally, most disliked the idea of allowing academics and "theorists" even the slightest degree of influence in their affairs. The universities, it was believed, had historically looked down on industry. Worse still, they apparently favored kinds of knowledge that were largely impractical. All told, therefore, for employers, the American proposals were unwelcome, even something of a threat (Tiratsoo & Tomlinson, 1993, 1998).

Ordinary managers were little more enthusiastic. Quite a few reacted negatively because they were tinged by anti-Americanism. There was a widely shared belief that though Washington mouthed platitudes about aiding a valued friend, its real aim was to help U.S. industry capture British trade. In addition, some had serious doubts about aspects of the American corporate model. Books such as Riesman, Denney, and Glazer's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956) appeared to expose a worrying pathology, a world of overmaterialistic executives who had surrendered their own personalities for the sake of the firm. At an extreme, it was believed that the United States stood on the brink of a collapse into militant totalitarianism—with big corporations then set to dictate every aspect of Western life.

More fundamental, much of what the Americans were recommending clashed with some basic tenets of British corporate culture. A core belief in Britain was that management essentially boiled down to the leadership of people. In fact, managers tended to see themselves as akin to military generals, having constantly to cajole and inspire. Accordingly, they valued character, charisma, a "good brain," and decisiveness above all else. By comparison, much less emphasis was placed on technical competencies. Only junior grades, it was believed, really needed to know about specific



procedures or functions. Indeed, the ascent of the management ladder was popularly viewed as a movement away from the mundane world of specialisms. Such assumptions and understandings inevitably colored attitudes to management education. The key point for most was that the required dispositions could not be imparted by formal management training. "Character" was most probably innate, though some were prepared to admit that it might be honed at a good private school or Oxbridge. However, almost everything else was best picked up at work, in the folk idiom, "sitting at Nellie's knee" or "attending the school of hard knocks." The key to learning, therefore, was immersion in real problems, not abstract study, as a contributor to one of the leading business journals underlined in 1954:

[Charles Dickens's] Mr. Squeers at Dootheboys Hall taught his boys both the theory and practice of cleaning windows because he had windows available on the premises, but he was not good on the imponderables, and it is upon those that academic teaching comes adrift. The businessman knows that the imponderables emerge on the job, and not in the schools. (Anonymous, 1954, p. 870)

From this perspective, needless to say, creating an elaborate system of management education appeared to be nothing more than a waste of time, with MBAs dismissed as "Masters of Bugger All" (Oliver, 1993).

Finally, students, too, tended to be lukewarm about the new courses and qualifications. Several influences shaped opinions. Reports that appeared in Britain about the leading American business schools were rarely fully complementary. The pioneers who studied at Harvard and Stanford wrote home about the crowded classrooms, indifferent faculty, poor quality textbooks, and overcompetitive atmosphere (Cunningham, 1963; Platt, 1960). Moreover, the fact that U.K. employers were known to be so dubious about "bookish" learning of any kind inevitably acted as a further strong disincentive (Taylor, 1969). Broader anxieties about the nature of business were also at play. One study discovered that Cambridge undergraduates judged industry to be "brutal and degraded" (Sofer, 1966, p. 5). A more systematic inquiry at the end of the 1960s came to largely similar conclusions. Asked about "features found in industry" that made it "an unattractive career," high numbers cited "involvement in the rat race," "loss of identity," the "unattractive political environment," and health hazards (Cambridge University Management

Group, 1969, p. 10). Of course, those outside the elite could ill-afford to be so judgmental. However, that granted, it was observed that even in the humbler of institutions students' views of business were by no means always rosy (Hornsby-Smith, 1970).

## ACCELERATORS

Which factors caused the situation to change in the 1980s and 1990s? There were important developments on the supply side. First, government policy once again became encouraging. The Thatcher administrations were more energetically probusiness than any of their immediate predecessors and from the mid-1980s onward did much to extend training, in general, and the advancement of managerial competency, in particular. The period was notable for a series of official and semiofficial reports on the state of British management (e.g., Cannon Working Party, 1994; Constable & McCormick, 1987; Handy, Gordon, Gow, Randlesome, & Moloney, 1987), as well as a number of concrete initiatives, often created in partnership with organizations like the BIM, the Confederation of British Industry (successor to the FBI), and the Training Agency (Silver, 1991). One important departure was the creation of the Management Charter Initiative (MCI), a dedicated lead body to advance a system of vocational qualifications for management (Tiratsoo, 1998). What made all this activity so significant, needless to say, was not that it benefited business schools per se, but rather that it altered the climate, provoking firms to take the issue of management development much more seriously.

Change among the universities was even more pronounced. The catalyst was the government's determination, from the mid-1970s onward, to gradually restrain public funding, which persuaded many vice chancellors to pursue other income flows (Shattock, 1994; Shattock & Rigby, 1983; Williams, 1992). Some dabbled with science and technology parks, others developed conference facilities, however, all began to take a far more hard-headed approach to the question of program provision. In this re-evaluation, business and management studies seemed to be particularly attractive options. Although the Ministry of Education and the university funding body (first the University Grants Committee, and later the Higher Education Funding Council for England and Wales) closely regulated fee levels in most subject areas and ensured that these were virtually standard across the system,

they appeared to be far more relaxed about the pricing of MBAs, spurning artificial restraints and any insistence on uniformity. As a consequence, it was not long before university administrators up and down the country were beginning to perceive that expanding this area might be a relatively straightforward way of generating extra income.

In turn, business schools grew more commercially minded. Some of the early pioneers were largely uninterested in financial performance, in line with the universities' tradition of high-mindedness. Few tried to develop the market. Thus, though it was well known that women were loath to apply for places on MBA programs, and in fact made up only about 3% of graduates from British business schools between 1966 and 1976, little corrective action was taken (Clarke, 1977). However, from the early 1980s onward, a more professional approach permeated almost every level. Writing in 1990, after interviewing a group of MBA directors, Miller and Money commented,

A decade of change has coincided with a decade of Thatcherism in which British business schools have focussed increasingly on their *raison d'être* and have come to the conclusion . . . that they have to go out to meet more clearly defined market needs. What this has meant is that the new focus has transformed the whole mentality of business schools so that short and long courses have to be seen to be profitable. (p. 1)

Demand now began to be seen as something that could be actively shaped. Advertising budgets increased, recruitment fairs and ever more glamorous prospectuses proliferated. There were continuing attempts to draw in previously neglected market segments. Great attention was lavished on overseas students because they were often willing to pay premium rates—perhaps twice as much as their British peers (Rogers, 1998). In addition, considerable efforts were made to expand the corporate client base, by tailoring programs to the needs of individual firms, consortia, or particular management grades (Crainer & Dearlove, 1998). Some argued that the marketing of programs still left much to be desired (Al-Sarraf, 1988; Gibson & Tynan, 1992; Palihawadana, 1992). Yet the fact that nearly three fourths of all the full-time British MBAs in 2002 came from abroad demonstrated that business schools were now more entrepreneurial than ever before (Business Schools Advisory Group, 2002; Crainer & Dearlove, 1998).

Finally, as regards the supply side, a miscellany of pressure groups also contributed to the process of change. The key players varied over time, encompassing the long established, for example, *Association Internationale des Etudiants en Sciences Economiques et Commerciales* (AIESEC) and the Foundation for Management Education, and the more recent, for example, the Business Graduates Association (BGA), the Association of Business Schools (ABS), and the Association of MBAs. However, their cumulative effect was impressive. For what they did, albeit in slightly different ways, was to promote the general idea that business education was “a good thing” and provide practical help for those who wanted to make it happen. Thus, to give a couple of examples from either end of the period, the BGA produced the first guides to British business schools in the 1970s and introduced a scheme, in partnership with the banks, to help students finance their studies (Thom, 1978), and the ABS's periodic serial, *Pillars of the Economy*, launched in the 1990s, did much to popularize the idea that business education made an important contribution to the nation's general well-being (Association of Business Schools, 1997-2003).

Turning to the demand side, there is no doubt that changes here, too, were of considerable significance. Corporate attitudes to business education unarguably became more positive. Older antipathies, of course, did not disappear overnight. A study of 1999 discovered that ordinary managers still viewed “[s]hort courses, books, theories and university masters programmes” with “caution” (Watson & Harris, 1999, p. 114). Some companies and even sectors remained unwilling to employ MBAs (Mayhead & Ambler, 2002). However, the doubters and critics were increasingly in the minority (Mabey & Thompson, 2000). The Thatcher government's admonitions regarding training were one important positive influence. In addition, broader factors played their part. The 1980s and 1990s were notable for the rise of financial service providers and consultants in the United Kingdom, and both quickly gained a reputation for recruiting MBAs. Reporting in 1990, the executive search specialists Saxton Bampfylde International noted that the qualification formed “a better fit” in such firms than in “mainstream business, manufacturing in particular,” and explained, “[their] cultures are attuned to the more individualistic ethos and ‘deal-making’ expectations of elite graduate schools” (p. 7). The subsequent growth of interest in entrepreneurs and entrepreneur-

ship acted in the same direction, particularly because the business schools were by now so attuned to market signals that they were able to respond quickly with their own specially adapted programs.

Meanwhile, student attitudes were also mutating. Thatcherism, again, seems to have been important because it encouraged a much more favorable view of money and profit. At any rate, from the mid-1980s onward, pollsters began to notice a "sea change" in this cohort's feelings about business, with a study of 1985, for example, concluding, "One of the pleasant surprises was the good image which industry now has among University and Polytechnic students and the enthusiasm which many of them show to go into [it]" (Opinion Research and Communication, 1985, p. 2). More specific, the reputation of the MBA, too, improved dramatically. Detailed research suggested that those who had gained the qualification were usually happy with their courses (Forrester, 1986) and subsequently enjoyed substantially better salaries (Berry, 1987; Oliver 1993), and such findings rapidly percolated into the popular press. Indeed, by the late 1980s, the MBA had come to be touted as the essential key to a better lifestyle, in one revealing jibe, "the yuppie's union card." Against this background, demand for business and management courses of all types surged. One estimate suggested that the ratio of applications to places at undergraduate level in the 1990s was about 2 to 1 (Association of Business Schools, 1997-2003). Some courses at the top business schools were even more oversubscribed. For example, it was reported that, in 1990 to 1991, Strathclyde took only about 1 in 10 of those who applied for its full-time master's program (Palihawadana, 1992).

### AFTERWORD

Britain's response to the American business and management education model was, therefore, far from straightforward, with ebbs and flows, and a variety of factors driving outcomes at different times. Rational debate and assessment were conspicuous by their absence. Few asked whether copying the U.S. system would actually benefit U.K. corporate performance. On the other hand, prejudice and self-interest were often crucial. In the end, the development that probably proved most pivotal was the universities' gradual recognition that new courses such as the MBA could provide a financial lifeline. In this sense, it might be argued that the American model only finally tri-

umphed in Britain because of the public expenditure cuts of the 1970s and 1980s—proof, if ever it was needed, that history frequently works in the most unexpected of ways.

Given this trajectory, it is unsurprising to find that as the country approached and then entered the new millennium, and faced up to a whole raft of fresh global and national challenges, management education once again appeared to be in a state of flux. Market pressures persuaded business schools to offer a wider and wider spectrum of courses (Bradshaw, 1999). The MBA was increasingly taught part-time and at a distance. A growing number of students enrolled on more narrowly specialized 1-year MSc or MA programs, in subjects such as investment strategies and marketing, not least because of their relatively low fees (Davies, 2003). The project to complete a competence-based system of vocational qualifications for management, to be acquired largely outside the academy, gained fresh momentum, with the Management Standards Centre taking forward the work pioneered by the MCI (Management Standards Centre, 2002). Several large companies believed that the time was right for them to go it alone and launched "corporate universities" (Craimer & Dearlove, 1998). Concurrently, public controversy continued to swirl and eddy. Some argued that the business schools were "cuckoos in the nest" and that the very idea of the liberal university now stood threatened (Bolton, 2001; Evans, 2002). Others returned to the question of relevance and asked whether what was being taught and researched in the schools had any real use outside the classroom (e.g., Starkey & Madan, 2001). The research finding that "There is no real evidence that education leading specifically to qualifications in business and management has a causal link with superior performance of the individual or the organisation" (Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership, 2002, p. 42) inevitably fueled the debate. All in all, the sector as a whole seemed set for yet another bout of reassessment and accompanying turbulence.

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