NOTTINGHAM TRENT UNIVERSITY

Constructing Magic:

An Interpretivist Study of MBA Directors

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Overview

- Context and failures
- Methodological issues
- Vignettes and storytelling examples
  - Management knowledge
  - Branding
  - Accreditation
- Outcomes
  - Constructing localised and locally conditioned responses
  - Power, pressure & arch self consciousness

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Context

- Little has been written on how MBA directors see and enact their role.
- The interpretivist study described here provides some insight into this influential Business School role and how it serves to create and reinforce the MBA knowledge space.
- Tensions facing the Directors are realised in the stories they tell, across areas including management knowledge, accreditation and internationalisation.
- Revealing a highly developed ability to understand and re-present these to privileged agencies and consumers of that education.

AC 3 NTU

Background

- The data was collected in a series of in depth interviews carried out with directors of UK MBA programmmes, spanning the post 1992 divide, carried out as part of a DBA award.

'Business schools are one of the great educational success stories of the last century, perhaps the great story. They have emerged to cover the world, apparently from nowhere'.

(Fleck , 2008 p3)

"In the last thirty years, the management profession has changed significantly, but management education has not."

(Podolny, 2007 p36)

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First Pass Themes

The purpose of business schools - what value do they add?
Normative and functional approaches vs. critical approaches to Management & Management Education
Rigorous vs. relevance
Single discipline or inter-disciplinary
Narrative of social science and a professional school narrative
Internationalisation of the curricula & International students
Which voices are heard in designing curricula?
Managerialism, values & beliefs

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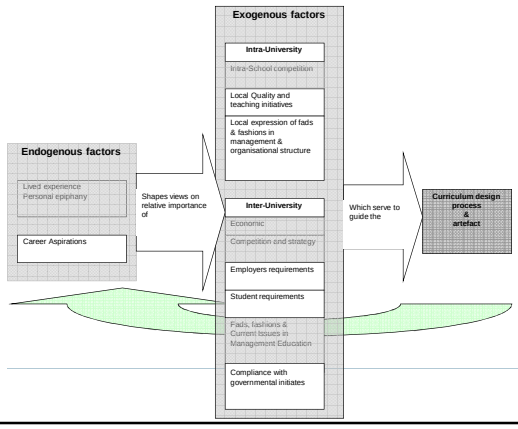
First pass conceptual model



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Limitations of the conceptual model

- **Dominant narratives** - The model omits explicit consideration of political roles in decision making e.g. the extent to which interpretation of external stakeholders requirements (accrediting bodies, QAA) holds sway, raise further questions of such complex social interactions and how 'influence' is operationalised in their genesis and revision.
- **Temporality** - which 'force(s)' may be dominant at one time or how their contributory power fluctuates over time
- The **epistemological conditions** under which a 'force' construct has explanatory power may not be met in an interpretivist study
- ***Contra* Occam** - the simplicity of such models whilst ostensibly attractive in revealing cause and effect relations, may serve to mask complexity of social situations (Easterby-Smith, 1992).

AC 7

Instrumentalism - Management Knowledge via jobs

- **Instability**: In a more unstable and less predictable jobs market the possession of management knowledge is prized as a mechanism to preserve status and to facilitate career moves. Up to date business knowledge is therefore privileged.
- **Form:** The nature of the work that informs and is informed by management education is also changing. Careers characterised by loyalty to a single firm or organization are becomingly increasingly rare, as the likelihood of having a single, as opposed to a 'portfolio' suite of careers decreases.
- **ROI:** Sophisticated consumers of business education, from corporate clients to ambitious executives are expecting increasingly sophisticated educational 'products' and are canny in identifying differences between competitors in the way that they can offer value for money, or return on investment. (Welsh & Dehler, 2007)

'…knowledge as a means to improve managerial practice, rather than offering a critical and self-reflexive 'intellectually challenging curriculum'

(Reynolds, 1999 p.174)

AC 8

What do you see the purpose of management education to be?

Resp Um, I think there's a dilemma, there's the potential dilemma in the purpose of management education from the perspective of the manager and the teacher. […] But I also recognise that for some of the students, the purpose is to gain a qualification that enables them to progress their career based upon the attainment of the qualification rather than necessarily the skills that you would hope would develop with a qualification.

I don't see the two things being contradictory. I think it is possible to develop a brand through giving the experience. However, if I had to make a choice, I would prefer the student to have a valuable developmental experience rather than necessarily limit that experience to develop the brand.

AC 9

The BS brand and its enduring value

- The 'brand composition' - what the Business School is felt to represent is not limited to a high quality education provider.
- The Directors recognise directly that post-study possibilities, potentially unrelated to knowledge and skills, are increasingly prized.
- Examples:
  - The chance to impress at interview by name dropping a prestige academic as one of your MBA professors
  - Knowing that your potential recruiter will have attended the same BS
  - The chance to meet like minded keen and ambitious fellow students set to offer Masonic-like forms of support throughout a managerial career, typically played out in the senior echelons of a large corporation.
- Keen brand awareness conditions Directors responses to internal and external pressures and to 'institutional logic'.

AC 10

Institutional Logic (values pursued through HE)	**Educational Professionalism: Education as a social Good**	**Education as Business: Education as Private Good**
Teaching	• Faculty driven • Key relationship 'teacher and student'	• Administration driven • Key relationship 'producer & consumer'
Research	• Emphasis on basic research • Research questions emerge from discipline	• Emphasis on translational research • Research questions emerge form outside the discipline
Associated practices	• D-M decentralised, pluralist model • Curricular content & quality of instruction controlled by faculty	• D-M centralised, managerial model • Commodification: Programs managed as product lines, not educational programs • Hegemony of ranking systems

AC 11

Adapted from Welsh & Dehler (2007)

Research, skills and demand

Should Universities education and research be demand led?

Resp Well, if you mean that because there may not be a demand for 19th century French literature therefore there won't be any research done in it because it's not sexy in enrolments and so forth, then yes that's probably true.

Int: But that isn't a problem [in BS's] because the demand is what's important?

Resp To me, well it's […]…this is reality, and if anything I'm a pragmatist, and I deal with reality, and the reality is that there are skills needed, not just knowledge. **I don't want a literate taxi driver driving me round**…I mean I actually want… I'm sorry I don't care about that**.** There is a reality, and the reality is that there is a demand for certain decisional skills and technical skills that are necessary and **I think that it is the role of universities to service that demand.**

AC 12

Skills vs. Criticality

Resp American hegemony on business education has been proven to be the joke that it is, by virtue of the fact that they've actually stuffed up the financial system by chasing… by focusing on skills… I don't even think they are very good skills. I think it's, um, a superficial reliance on positivist, on positivism and positivist answers – simple steps, as if those simple steps represent an actual coherent position. And the truth is somehow defined by reaching step 5 rather than recognising the problem. I think that this is a superficial style of education and I think that that's going to be called in question.

AC 13

'Silo' Teaching

Resp With the MBA, […], the fact that for younger managers, the provision of functional knowledge of various sorts being essential, it seems to me inevitable that the – those functional silos have to be delivered in a coherent way. I think that's necessary, and even if I didn't think it was necessary, it would be impossible for me to persuade my functional colleagues to do it in any significantly different way.

Resp You know, for example, I've got finance professors who say to me they don't understand the difference between teaching and learning, so getting them to collaborate with people from OB or so on, would be a nightmare.

AC 14

Re-presenting management knowledge

Discussing a new thematic structure for the MBA.

Resp But again, to be honest, in my view this is rather packaging, more than it is any reality. For instance we've got managing relationships, which I think includes HRM and I think the economic environment. We've got…

Int (laughs) But it looks good!

Resp Well, we've got managing strategically which includes you know, the module on strategy and one or two other things. We've got managing knowledge which includes accounting and research methods**. Now, you could drive a coach and horses through this, but to the sort of uncritical glance it looks the sort of thing.** You know, oh well, it's 12 modules, but they're all connected through the five themes.

AC 15

Knowledge as differentiator

Resp On top of that, we also have our competitors, who are constantly innovating and creative as well. And considering that my programme, personally, is the XXX most expensive MBA programme - full time MBA programme - in Europe, I have to justify that cost. And one way of justifying it, is to say that we're leading edge, contact-wise, but leading edge learning process-wise.

Int Sure.

Resp Our little analogy, is to say that in two or three years time, I can phone a programme member up that I had on my programme – and may have taught them (probably didn't!) – and they'll still go on about a great deal of what they did on their MBA course. **Unlike our competitors who essentially cram in lots of knowledge.** You forget it when you leave and you probably don't use it much.

AC 16

Knowledge, differentiation & autonomy

Int …So it's fair to say that the difference hinges around your autonomy and also the extent to which you're also responsible.

Resp So, for example, the autonomy I have is to approach anybody who I want to teach on the programme and to contract with them to teach for me. So if I want Michael Porter teaching strategy, and I can convince him to come and teach for me, and pay him a huge fee – what he'd expect – I can have him on the programme

[..]I have ultimate responsibility on the design of the programme, in terms of when it starts, when it finishes, the duration of it - within some boundaries – regulation ones to do with the accreditation.

AC 17

Internationalism, brand, and managerial knowledge

- Increasingly universities are looking to the revenue from international students for whom a British education has high value and which in response universities can command a premium.
- If international students are seeking an introduction to and experience of 'Western' ways of managing then in this sense they are ceding in power to the dominant authority along with legitimisation of a particular form of knowledge and concomitant ideology (typically managerialism).
- The decisions around location of study are directly enmeshed with post study utility.
- Business school applicants (and their sponsors) will be aware of the sense that what happens to them post study in terms of valued opportunities will be affected not only by the knowledge and skills gained but by importantly the networks, alumni amongst them, that they will join.

AC 18

Internationalization, recruitment and power

Int One of the problems we've had with some of the implications of having large numbers of Chinese students, is that the Chinese students turn up and say 'Well, look, you know, if I'd have known that there'd be so many Chinese students, and I want an international experience, I would have stayed in Beijing.

Resp Exactly.

Int So how do you manage diversity?

Resp With great difficulty.

Int Do you choose – do you - you personally as programme director have decisions – do you have the autonomy to make decisions about to let people in or not? Or is that done centrally?

resp I, well, I can state this very simply. I control the admissions process with […]close colleagues in the MBA office, but my dean expects me to meet my budget. And if I become too particular about the diversity objective, I may not meet my targets, and the dean will cut my balls off!

As business schools expand into India, Asia and beyond, we need to have better shared understanding of their purpose if we are to maximise their impact. Until we identify the purpose of business schools we are, metaphorically at least, building them on sand.

Hay (2008 p.372)

AC 19

Accreditation

Discussing the role of accreditation agencies in BS selection

Resp […]what I mean, they've been influenced by their seniors and society about what should be constituted in business education and of course there is an obsession about rankings – and rankings and accreditation are essentially standardisation processes.

Int Mm, hmm

Resp And um, so EFMD or AACSB and AMBA and I'm sure you know places in the UK are chasing these sorts of accreditations…

Int They are indeed!

Resp …are essentially about 'let's have everybody doing exactly the same thing, and isn't it wonderful that we're all doing, you know, quality education', which is, you know, this is almost laughable, because what you get is no innovation and no difference, and again, America rules. So, um, yeah, I don't think the students are at fault in that, they're just, they're um, they've been influenced and it's unfortunate that it has happened that way, that they're influenced in that way.

AC 20

AMBA

Discussing the role of AMBA in curriculum development

Resp Does that actually help someone to be a better manager? Erm, I mean I'm not saying it does or doesn't but there are certain things that are, are a requirement of the accreditation process.

Int Why do you think they are? Why, do you think those things are imposed, from the type of assessment to the content?

Resp Because it makes the assessment simpler from the assessor's perspective.

Int The AMBA assessors have a clearer set of criteria?

Resp Yes, yeah.

Int So from them –

Resp Yes – absolutely!

Int - so the content of what we're delivering to the 21st century managers, is driven, you're saying in part, by the need to make these guys jobs a little bit easier.

Resp Yes, absolutely.

Int That's an extraordinary claim.

Resp But I believe it fundamentally.

AC 21

EQUIS

Resp Well, they didn't really talk about curriculum. They were more fussed with numbers on the programme, the involvement of industry or corporate people on the programme or internships, but we felt that the chair of the panel had a particular bee in the bonnet. […] He had a model of what an MBA should be like and basically he was saying 'oh, why isn't yours like what I think it should be?' And I suppose we had a fairly frank exchange of…

Resp … I mean Equis is a quality improvement scheme, isn't it? It's not about what an MBA should be like. But this person was saying 'well you need to have this number on the course, otherwise it's all no good, and you need to have this, and you need to have that.' And you know, we were saying '**well actually we don't have those assumptions**. We don't think that's *necessarily* right, so we…' I mean it wasn't a problem, we – well it wasn't a problem – I think we're still officially awaiting the feedback, but certainly that person's vision of an MBA was not met by what we're actually doing, well not completely.

AC 22

Conclusions

- The MBA is old, has been the subject of extensive and sustained criticism, is currently in the process of regeneration, but remains a recognisable and desired brand throughout periods of economic recession and across the world.
- This paper suggests that this series of existential crises have been met by MBA directors enacting and interpreting their role as fluid, directly constructional but whilst exhibiting significant heterogeneity in their responses, both to internal or endogenous demands (accreditation, student satisfaction) and those considered exogenous constraints reflected within the local and organisational context (autonomy, structural, resourcing).
- This paper suggests that it is this very heterogeneity in the range of response which have in part succeeded in maintaining the positive image of the MBA award, but that this accidental magic is not well understood, is precious, localised and, critically, is non sustainable.

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Consequences

- Business Schools create the conditions for the creation of, and preserve the legitimisation for, the contents of the MBA curriculum. However they are also able to shape the demand for the knowledge and skills that the curriculum expresses. But in ways that preserves their power and status.
- The more powerful students and members of staff attracted by the narrative of the 'best' business schools, afford credibility to league tables and by seeking their products and services (or employment platforms) are acting in a way to reinforce the credibility and validate their expertise.
- The Directors are looking to potential students with an eye to not solely educating them but as future clients and recruiting agents (who are able to do more than ensure that future generation of students will want to study at that institution) but in a real sense what that MBA does and what that MBA is, so it can be autopoietically validating.

AC 24

Discussion of implications:

- The paper suggests that this fluidity of response set is made manifest through heterodoxical patterns of action and response.
- The very diversity in interpretation of the problems situations facing MBA directors appears to have afforded them a range of response options each of which has served to ameliorate some structural problems and ignore and reclassify others.
- Key features of MBA directors' espoused responses to these concerns were typified more by their variety than their similarity. From accreditation agency assessment prescriptions to national benchmark statements and student satisfaction indices, responses are unpredictable and varied and actively mediated by Directors aspirations and autonomy
- It is argued that understanding this heterogeneity of response, reflecting unpatterned framings of the nature and importance of the pressures facing Directors in meeting the perceived demands of internal and external agencies, will be increasingly important in helping current MBA stakeholders understand the contours of a post-MBA management development world.

AC 25

Looking Forwards

- It is clear therefore that tensions exists for the Directors between an understanding and recognition of more critical approaches which privilege indeterminacy, render 'truths' contestable, problematise the processes of management (and hence management education) and the educational context in which the MBA remains locked.
- Educational value is extrinsic and tacit, façade and defence, but it is not durable. This is why the MBA directors see their roles as reinventing what knowledge is valued, and, whilst responding to the more imminent demands of commercial pull (generated by rapid changes in technology, corporate, leadership fads (mis)interpretations of fresh academic theories, etc.) they also act to bring that knowledge, and the ability to deliver it, back squarely into their domain.
- Magic: The art of producing a desired effect or result through the use of incantation or various other techniques that aim to assure human control of supernatural agencies or the forces of nature. Achieving this effect by representing elements of the world in different or miraculous forms which often depend for their effect on the desire or willingness of the viewer to be deceived.

AC 26