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The Business of Business Schools: Putting Strategic Choice Back on the Agenda

By

David Wilson and Peter McKiernan

Introduction

How times change. Writing in 2005, Eric Cornuel argued that *" in the future the legitimacy of business schools will no longer be questioned".* He developed the argument to say that that Business Schools had become *"legitimised parts of society"* and that *"their role was clear".* (Cornuel, 2005). Just 6 years later neither claim would seem very robust or accurate. For example, The *New York Times* printed several letters on March 3, 2009, reacting to a news story about the pressure these trying economic times have exerted on the teaching of the humanities. The letter writers argued that "*by studying the arts, cultural history, literature, philosophy, and religion"*, individuals develop their powers of "*critical thinking and moral reasoning"*. The letters continued to argue that Business schools rarely develop those skills, which is allegedly why MBAs made the short-sighted and self-serving decisions that resulted in the current financial crisis and other organizational crashes (e.g.Enron, Parmalat, WorldCom).

Podolny (2009) argued that the problem does not solely lie with MBAs. He found that many Business School academics allegedly also aren't curious about what really goes on inside organizations. Many prefer, instead, to develop theoretical models that obscure rather than clarify the way organizations work. Many academics also appear to believe that a theory's alleged relevance is enough to justify teaching it as a solution to organizational problems without further critical thought.

Alongside these critiques of Business Schools (and there are many arguing substantially the same points) sits some evidence that Business Schools have 'plateaued' in their extraordinary growth trajectory and may be in danger of impending decline (Schoemaker 2008; Starkey and Tempest 2008; Starkey and Tiratsoo 2007). Evidence is cited describing declining enrolment on MBA programmes (especially full time); declining enrolment on specialist Masters programmes across the whole spectrum of management subjects. 25 years ago, MBAs spent 50 hours a week studying academic subjects. In 2009, they spent less than 15 hours, spending more time on networking and finding a job (Hacker and Dreifus, 2010). Many Deans argue that it is increasingly difficult to recruit high quality academic staff. The career path from PhD, through Assistant to Associate Professor is becoming more difficult and more discontinuous. The treadmill of teaching and administration is arguably getting faster and the burden heavier (staff have less time for research). Finally, many School set limits to the use of external tutors/virtual/adjunct faculty who would be able to take on some of the heavy teaching loads and thus leave time for research active staff to apply for grants and to publish.

This paper will argue that such criticisms of Business Schools can be largely avoided and that Schools are not path-dependent in their decline. However, we argue that this will only hold true to the extent that Business Schools can re-invent themselves in ways which make their activities, teaching and the research work of their staff more relevant, useful and insightful to address key societal and organizational problems (such as simultaneous obesity and starvation in the world or climate change and its socio-economic implications). We set out the opportunities for Business Schools in the later sections of this paper and suggest some ways forward. First, we situate the current context of Business Schools drawing on a range of organization theories.

Situating Business Schools Theoretically

Business Schools present themselves as *bona fide* academic institutions. At the same time, they are expected to demonstrate their abilities to manage themselves as businesses and conduct research and teaching which is considered 'relevant' to practitioners and to funding bodies (Crainer and Dearlove 1998: 48).

This creates a series of tensions which have been increasing in recent years (Khurana 2007). Research in Business Schools faces strong internal and external criticism for the production of theoretically grounded, but irrelevant research (irrelevant to either the needs of practitioners or the needs of society more widely). These criticisms are fuelled further by unfavourable comparisons of the academic nature of business schools relative to other professional schools (such as law, medicine, architecture and engineering) and to the University communities in which they reside (see, for example, Starkey and Tiratsoo, 2007; Thomas and Wilson, 2009). Such critiques (and there are many) tend to remain either 'viewpoint' or mostly descriptive articles and books. In order to understand more fully how Business Schools have reached this situational context, it is necessary to draw on theoretical approaches which can help us understand the ‘how’ as well as the ‘what’ and ‘where’ of the Business School context. We choose two broad theories of organization to help our understanding, namely strategic choice theory (Child, 1972; 1989) and institutional theory, particularly isomorphism (Di Maggio and Powell 1983). We are mindful of the critiques of isomorphism (see, for example, Mizruchi and Fein, 1999), in particular that mimetic isomorphism can be easily socially constructed, but we find compelling and arguably objective evidence in the context of Business Schools to support Di Maggio and Powell’s proposition of collective rationality.

As Child (1972) argues, all features of organizations are, to a degree, chosen by their management. Business Schools are not wholly determined in their structures and processes by environmental factors beyond their control. Managers of those Schools have a degree of strategic choice. For example, organizational size and degree of specialization are strong correlates as we all know from the extensive work of the Aston programme (see Pugh, 1998), but Deans may choose to grow Schools or not. And if they choose to grow their Schools, then the increase in organizational size will either enable or influence them to add more specialists (departments, research centres and individual specialists) to divide scholarly work amongst more people (who in turn acquire more specialist expertise). Deans and their senior teams can also choose not to grow and hence not to add new departments, new research centres and the result will be a Business School with a very different structure and organizational context.

Child’s thesis, which runs in counterpoint to Di Maggio and Powell’s institutional theories, where environmental factors determine largely (or wholly) strategic choice, has built in to it a theory of managerial choice, or degree of autonomy (both of thought and action). In Business Schools, this may mean the Dean, who as Chief Executive Officer nominally takes strategic decisions on behalf of his or her institution. But as anyone who has experience of Business Schools will know, Deans do not always have such autonomy of action and strategic decisions are sometimes made (or at least heavily influenced) by senior managers who lie outside the Business School (for example, by Vice-Chancellors or Principals). We will return to this point later in this paper. For the moment, we can propose that the theory of strategic choice at least in principle, gives senior managers scope for both autonomy of strategic decision making and choice of direction for their institutions.

Institutional theories present a rather different picture. As Zucker (1987) notes, institutional theories argue that organizations and their managers are both influenced and constrained by normative pressures which can find their source in a number of contexts (from government; from other organizations and from inside the organization itself). To the extent that such pressures are considered 'legitimate' by senior managers, then organizational action becomes aligned with (isomorphic with) its institutional environment. Although Zucker was not specifically discussing Business Schools, she nevertheless identified a number of pressure which would be familiar to authors and readers of this special issue (and indeed anyone working in a Business School). She identified two aspects of institutional processes. The first describes the pressure that emanate from rule-like patterns of action and behaviour which are imposed upon organizations from external agencies, such as state requirements and the demands of professional certification. The second describes how such pressures are embedded (Granovetter, 1985) in formal organizational structures and processes. The importance of the latter is that such embedding (according to Zucker) is not specifically tied to individual managers but becomes, instead, a characteristic of the whole organization as it develops norms and standard operating procedures to enact patterns of action and behaviour from its constituent individuals. Granovetter disagrees, arguing that norms are not so abstract and that they can be tied to specific individuals. But he goes on to say that these specific individuals are tied together in systems of social relations which, in turn, can be seen as a characteristic of the whole (or parts of) the organization. Either way, such an intuitionalist view contrasts fundamentally with the notion of strategic choice. As Granovetter (1985:482) argues, "to construe actions and behaviours as independent is a grievous misunderstanding".

In many ways, this paper re-visits the pithy statement by Duesenberry (1960:233) that:

"….economics is all about how people make choices (and) sociology is all about how they don't have any choices to make"

Strategic choice theory falls close to the position of the economist in the above statement, whilst institutional theorists would agree with the position of the sociologist. We will argue later that strategic choice theory offers Business Schools an opportunity both to change and to innovate.

Both Zucker's and Granovetter's works owe a debt to the writings of the anthropologist Polanyi, who proposed that human actions and behaviours are embedded in and intricately interwoven with institutions which are economic and non-economic (see Polanyi et al., 1957). In particular, Polanyi emphasises the important influence of non-economic agencies as important players in the embedding process. From a Business School perspective such agencies would include the state, funding councils, ranking institutions, universities and professional associations (such as BAM, ABS and EGOS).

It is probably no surprise to observe that there is substantial work by many scholars which adopts the broad institutional position and to use such argumentation to account for why it is that Business Schools have ended up in the position they have today. In the current special issue, the majority of the analysis which take a historical or developmental view of Business Schools takes an institutional perspective to some extent (see Thomas and Wilson, Engwall, etc etc add names here of authors in this special issue: X ref). These authors argue that whilst there may be many theoretical 'choices' a Business School can make, there are a range of pressures which impact on Business Schools' decreasing range of strategic choice and increasing collective rationality. We argue that these include three key aspects, namely 1) Accreditation and Regulation 2) Rankings and 3) Mimetic tendencies across Business Schools. We deal with each in turn.

Accreditation and Regulation

The Business School sector is no stranger to accreditation. The three largest and arguably most important accreditation bodies are: The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) and The Association of MBAs (AMBA) all act to regulate the alleged quality of Business Schools' MBA programmes. Of these, AACSB commands the greatest number of accredited Schools (568 worldwide) with EQUIS having 118 accredited members and AMBA 161 (AACSB, 2007). Accredited Schools argue that intending students (and wider society) can be assured that an independent agency has scrutinised the Schools' portfolio of activities and pronounced them to have passed its rigorous quality standards. Accreditation agencies argue that their role is to help segment the market between higher quality providers and lower quality providers in the Business School sector.

Some non-accredited Business Schools dismiss ranking and accreditation as primarily a marketing exercise since ranking is elitist because it excludes institutions that do not wish to conform to certain norms and practices (which are laid down by the accrediting agencies). This view has been reinforced by academic writers too (especially with respect to the impact of AACSB). For example, Lowrie and Willmott (2009:411) describe accreditation as a "regime". Quoting Navarro (2008:10) Lowrie and Willmott say that AACSB is like a "group of foxes, guarding the MBA henhouses". Moreover, they argue that accreditation is elitist, since it serves to diminish the value of education which takes place outside the accredited schools (the elite). Accreditation also serves to preserve and perpetuate the elite, thereby maintaining the status quo of what is considered to be a ‘good’ Business School. In short, they argue that accreditation stymies knowledge improvement and development in both elite schools and in non-accredited schools (which are deemed to be poor relations by default). Durand and McGuire (2005) add a dose of ethnocentrism to a similar critique of AACSB. They argue that AACSB is not interested in what is taught and not taught outside a strictly North American model of an elite Business School.

Beyond the arguable North American isomorphic pressures from AACSB, EQUIS adds some more. They will only accredit schools which are deemed to be international and which have developed their programmes based on close contact and input from the corporate world. For example, a school which is strong in its domestic market, but deemed to be weak in international presence and operations will not be accredited by EQUIS. This accreditation agency also insists on schools using predominantly permanent faculty. Thus a school which uses a large number of faculty who are adjunct, or who are flown in ad hoc from other Business Schools, will not be accredited. Paradoxically, employing organizations tend not to be aware of (or interested in) accreditation to the same degree as Business Schools, despite EQUIS insisting on evidence of close contact with the corporate world. Nevertheless, EQUIS does seem to recognise that many schools in Europe are diverse and do not always readily conform to the North American elite school model. For example, research output from European schools may be difficult or inappropriate to place in the top US journals and EQUIS acknowledges that this is a key difference between European and US schools. EQUIS also usually recommends future changes for schools it accredits in an attempt to nurture development and innovation.

AMBA presents a more specific and specialised set of norms and expectations on Business Schools. Its remit is solely to accredit the MBA programmes offered by schools. As such, its greatest influence is on the quality of students (intake and recruitment) and curriculum content as well as pedagogical delivery to ensure “relevance to the real world of business” (Stoddard, 2010). The latest pressures from AMBA are for Business Schools to adapt their MBA curricula to reflect post-financial crisis context and needs. Perhaps not surprisingly, the recommendations are for syllabus change to include and emphasise areas such as business ethics, creativity and innovation alongside change management and entrepreneurship.

It is arguable that all of the above accreditation agencies contribute (perhaps unintentionally on their part) to isomorphic pressures on Business Schools. Isomorphism can be defined as 'the constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions' (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 149). Essentially, this view is derived from a contingency view of organizations and their environments. For example, an increase in differentiation or complexity in an environment pressures organizations to adopt similar patterns of complexity or differentiation (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967). Developing this theme, population ecologists and institutional theorists then extended these contingency based perspectives. For example, the population ecologists Hannan and Freeman (1977) viewed isomorphism as rooted in competition in a population of organizations where competition selects out non-optimal forms of organization. Those organizations which survive are isomorphic both with each other (mimetic isomorphism, with which we deal later in this paper) and with the demands of their environment.

Institutional theorists such as Meyer and Rowan (1977), DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Zucker (1987) introduced the ideas of norms and culture, adding a degree of depth to the otherwise rather stark Darwinian approach of the population ecologists. Normative pressures are placed on organizations from the state and other regulatory bodies. Conformity to these pressures results in organizations changing their structures and processes to become aligned with these institutionally prescribed expectations. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identify three types of pressure: *coercive* isomorphism is the result of formal and informal pressures exerted on dependent organizations by (for example) regulatory agencies). We would argue that accrediting agencies have, over time, created a degree of dependence on the part of Business Schools. Not least this is because it is the accrediting agencies who 'call the shots' in the accreditation process and not Business Schools themselves. The criteria against which accreditation will (or will not) be awarded are prescribed in advance of the accrediting panel's visit to the Business School. Thus, a dependence relationship is created between the Business School and the accrediting agency.

Beyond simple dependency, however, lies a further form of isomorphic pressure which, as Slack and Hinings (1994: xxx) note, occurs frequently in professional organizations such as Business Schools. They state:

"….(isomorphism) may also result from cultural expectations within the societal context in which an organization exists. Mimetic isomorphism occurs when organizations faced with uncertainty model themselves on other organizations which they perceive as successful. Normative isomorphism results primarily from professionalization".

Normative pressures are the result of professionalization of Business Schools. As we noted in the introduction, Business Schools are indeed supposed to be 'businesses' in their own right. From this (albeit limited) perspective, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) would suggest that competitive dynamics would select out those schools which consistently failed to make a profit. To an extent, there is some evidence for this strictly competitive view'. It is based on a "system rationality that emphasizes market competition, niche changes and fitness measures" (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983: 149-150). (Peter: do we have any examples of Business Schools that have gone out of Business because they failed to make a profit)?? I would suspect there are very few – but we need to say one way or the other here and give examples – or if few have gone out of business for not making a profit say that competitive isomorphism does not figure large).

One can see readily how these competitive dynamics are most applicable to organizations which operate in a relatively free and open competitive market. However, this is not solely the case for Business Schools which not only compete in the market place to turn a profit, but also (and we argue more importantly) compete for political power and institutional legitimacy as well as for social and economic fitness. Here the construct of *normative* rather than competitive isomorphism becomes more appropriate.

Normative isomorphism describes pressures brought about by Business Schools being professional organizations. As such, accreditation agencies impose standards, rules and values on schools and reinforce normative expectations. This process, we suggest, is more dominant and important to Business Schools than making a profit. Political power and institutional legitimacy are achieved substantially through accreditation, particularly 'triple accreditation' (EQUIS, AACSB and AMBA) simultaneously. They are also achieved through rankings, which are discussed in the next section of this paper.

It is worth noting at this stage that accrediting agencies are not the sole power brokers in the normative isomorphic process, even though they occupy an important role. Business Schools also operate in a comparatively tightly knit inter-organizational network Norms, developed during the education of staff, become a strong influence in the school (and the majority of academic and professional staff in Business Schools have very similar educational backgrounds and achievements). In addition, inter-hiring between schools also encourages isomorphism since the job specification for an academic post world-wide displays remarkable similarity across institutions. People from the same educational backgrounds will tend to approach problems in much the same way and socialization reinforces these behaviours. The appointment of staff in Business Schools is undoubtedly a process checked and influenced by powerful gatekeepers (including accreditation agencies) and there is a strong homogeneity in the backgrounds and qualifications of individuals who gain entry into the profession. The net effect of such conformities is to allow Business Schools to interact with each other more easily and to build legitimacy among the sector.

Rankings

Operating in parallel with accreditation are the various rankings against which Business Schools are judged. There are two distinct themes in rankings. One ranks Business Schools themselves (on aspects such as their MBA and their infrastructure). The other is an assessment of the quality of research carried out by academic staff in the school. We deal with these in order in this section of the paper.

Business School rankings have been around for decades with rankings of US Business Schools being produced in the 1970s. But it is relatively recently that Business School rankings have become almost a way of life of all schools (and their prospective students). International media organizations are now heavily involved in producing and publishing rankings of schools and their programmes. For example, the Financial Times produce a list of European Business School MBA rankings in 1998. This quickly developed into an international list of rankings by 1999. This was something of a landmark year because it was the first time a single ranking had been produced which allowed the direct comparison of schools in Europe and the USA. Other media outlets followed suit and there is now a plethora of comparative rankings from (for example) the Economist, the Guardian, the Wall Street Journal, Forbes and Business Week amongst many others. It is worth noting that these rankings mirror attempts to rank Universities overall into world university rankings (the Times Higher Educational Supplement) or the more recent Jiao Tong University rankings.

Not surprisingly, rankings have become the subject of scrutiny and criticism by academics themselves as methodology, criteria, operationalization and so on, have all been heavily criticised (and not just by the comparatively lower ranked institutions). However, as Wedlin (2007) notes, rankings have very quickly become institutionalised and playing the rankings game well has become a key pursuit of many Business School Deans. Wedlin had previously researched playing the rankings game as part of her Doctoral Thesis at Uppsala University, Sweden in 2004. She argues that there are strong isomorphic pressures on Business Schools because rankings provide a 'template' which helps define 'belonginess to a group' and which is specific about measures for competition and comparison (Wedlin, 2007:24). Rankings are not simply mechanical, objective, measures. They have a strong impact on both the economic futures of Business Schools and the morale of its staff (Kogut, 2008). Rankings are, of course, heavily scrutinised outside schools by potential students, funders and other stakeholders. But they are also frequently used internally in Universities by Vice-Chancellors as a convenient mechanism by which to judge the quality of their own University's Business School. A fall in the Financial Times ranking is usually swiftly followed by an appointment to see the Vice-Chancellor to explain the apparent fall from grace!

Although many academic articles have criticised the operational aspects of rankings (poor methods and criteria for example) Devinney et al (2008) note that the rankings themselves have a highly strategic character for all Business Schools, especially those which are highly ranked. Devinney et al. (2008:196) argue that there is a distinct first mover advantage, since schools which are highly ranked are very difficult (but not impossible) to displace. In addition, top rated Business Schools attract better students and more funding from research councils and donors. Schools then invest in (for example) new buildings, top academic hires and high quality infrastructural support in order to maintain a high ranking.

Some new entrants do manage to enter the rankings in a high position. This was true of both the Said Business School (Oxford) and the Judge School (Cambridge). Hopwood (2008) talks about the key role played by the strength of the established University brand in gaining a high ranking (higher than perhaps was deserved, Hopwood notes). However the net effect was to boost an increase in applications to the Business School and to heighten the expectations of students and the University. Hopwood (2008) notes how these schools spent time catching up to match the rankings. But few schools are able to emulate this route. The rankings are driven by structural factors which are very difficult for most schools to change (see Devinney et al. 2008). The top ranks are relatively stable over time whilst the lower rankings are more dynamic. This is despite the rankings themselves using ambiguous measures and criteria for performance, which allows a degree of equifinality. Business Schools can appear to seemingly belong together, but closer inspection reveals that there may be significant differences in practices and organizational identity between them (Wedlin, 2008:24). In addition, Wedlin describes how noisy the data used to construct rankings really are. The net effect is an interesting statistical tendency. A school which has moved up the rankings in one year is more likely to move down the rankings in the next (and vice versa).

Despite their failings, their ambiguity and their imprecision, Business School rankings have become reified. They are an accepted (and expected) part of the social landscape. They have become another social statistic against which Business School quality and competition can be assessed by a broad public. It is possible to explain this reification of rankings by drawing on two social theories. The first is the development of the 'knowledge society' (Thrift, 2005) where information has become increasingly transparent and visible. The second is the general trend in cultural systems toward the development of taxonomies and a range of classification systems (see, for example, Wilensky, 1964; Bordieu, 1984). It is difficult to see how these processes could be reversed or changed radically and, hence, one can reasonably conclude that rankings such as these are likely to remain powerful constructs in the public domain for many years to come.

These are not the only rankings to which Business Schools are subjected. Research rankings also figure strongly. Measured by research assessment panels, each school receives a ranking on its research performance. These rankings are used to classify schools as research excellent or otherwise. There are strong economic and social rewards for individuals in research excellent schools and, of course, the institution itself benefits from a greater allocation of research monies. Details of the ranking process can be found in other papers in this special issue (see XXXXXXX refs here). Here, we are more concerned with the logics which lie behind research rankings and the highly influential and isomorphic impact such rankings have on Business Schools. Broadly, there are two inter-related processes. The first is based upon bibliometric analyses of research output, in particular the ranking of academic journals. The second relates to the governance of research in Business Schools.

The ranking of journals has produced numerous lists of alleged 'quality' and each has been criticised as a one size fits all metric to assess research quality (see http://harzing.com/jql.htm). Nevertheless, the impact of such lists has been strong and much debate has been lent to the ways in which such lists are constructed. Morris, Harvey and Kelly (2009) give an example of the typology of constructing the UK Association of Business Schools list, the ABS "Journal Quality Guide".

One characteristic of journal rankings that is less frequently discussed is that authors from the top Business Schools publish in them. And, which are the top business schools is often determined by the proportion of scholars publishing in highly ranked journals (Baden-Fuller et al., 2000; Borokhovich et al., 1995; Fishe, 1998; Trieschmann et al., 2000). Institutions world-wide pressure their faculty to publish in the 'top' journals, which has the effect of reinforcing the status of these journals. So we have a relatively stable ranking of journals which is directly linked to tenure and promotion decisions and, ultimately, to the ranking of Business Schools.

Indeed, many Business Schools (and Universities) have adopted methods for governing research in their institutions by copying processes one would find in commercial organizations. These include explicit mechanisms, which operate at the level of analysis of the institution and the individual, such as extra pay for performance assessed by output measures such as rankings in research assessment exercises and success in fundraising for research. Although multi-variate, most research assessments focus primarily on research output. In the UK, 65% of the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF) which is to be conducted in 2014, comprises research outputs per person (4 peer-reviewed publications in the assessment period) and the most recent (2008) Research Assessment Exercise weighted journal articles produced by faculty as 70% of the total score.

The collective rationality which journal rankings place on Business Schools cannot be over-emphasised. Once used to describe vehicles with 4 wheel drive and off road capabilities, the term "4 x 4" in Business School contexts means a scholar has achieved (or should aim to achieve) 4 journal articles each ranked 4* (the highest ABS ranking) during the assessment period. Indeed, an interesting project would be to undertake a content analysis of Deans' and Research Deans' exhortation letters to staff to increase their research performance in preparation for the REF and to examine how frequently the explicit goal of achieving 4 * publications was mentioned. The suspicion is that this would be very frequently indeed. The goal of achieving 4* publication has become something of a mantra in Business Schools.

The process by which (the many) journal lists are compiled - and the exclusion or inclusion of journals on various lists - has been criticised by many and it is not the intention in this paper to add another critique. Instead, we examine the isomorphic pressures exerted on schools and Deans by the existence of a 'one size fits all' metric of journal rankings. There have been, arguably, a number of perhaps unintended outcomes of journal rankings. One is the confounding of image and quality of content. In other words, scholarly content is substantially substituted for by place of publication. If an article appears in a top rated (4* or A rated in the USA) journal, then it might be assumed by those who assess Business Schools' research to be a high quality scholarly article. This may not be the case and, privately, some research assessment panel members have remarked on poor quality papers (in terms of scholarship) appearing in top rated journals and vice versa. Panel members are supposed to use their own judgements of quality, but given the enormous number of submissions to the Business and Management Panel in the UK for example, it is difficult to see how readers completed ignored such a handy guide to quality offered by the ABS and other rankings. Secondly, as Adler and Harzing (2009:80) argue, the use of single metrics to rank journals effectively encourages conservatism in research questions, research design, methodologies and precludes research “addressing new, often controversial questions that are investigated using innovative methodologies”. Thirdly, Business Schools come under immense pressure to organise their activities, research centres and departments to conform as closely as possible to a structure which will maximise the opportunity of staff getting 4* publications. Using journal rankings to manage performance means that some departments will be favoured over others in order to maximise the number of 4* journal articles secured per individual. This process is bolstered by the fact that the availability of 4* journals is not equally distributed across academic disciplines in management. For example, in the specialised fields of strategic management and operations research, there are no 4* European based journals, the maximum being 3* rated. To achieve a 4* publication in these fields means submitting to a US journal with all the added risks and complications (not getting published) that entails. Although US journals describe themselves as international, further investigation shows that their editorial boards are almost exclusively national; their authorship is predominantly US authors and even where the international spread of authorship is expanding, this can be camouflaged by US academics working outside the US, or by the inclusion of US co-authors (for example) by European authors.

In spite of these arguably dysfunctional consequences and flaws, journal rankings are used routinely by Deans to manage and assess the performance of academic staff. Indeed, such a use of rankings has substantially increased its alleged ‘value’ since, in preparing for subsequent research assessment exercises, the explicit use of rankings is spread across a wide range of Universities and Business Schools when planning submissions (Kelly, Morris and Harvey 2009).

The final impact of such ‘lists’ is to increase the pressure on younger faculty to self-censor the kind of research they undertake and write, to conform with the conservative characteristics of top rated journals (Adler and Harzing, 2009). This is not because younger faculty have nothing important to say. They do. But they also recognise that their careers, (promotion), depend almost entirely on how many high quality journal papers they have published (rather than what they said in them). In this way, the content of what is written is safe (since it confronts no-one and often nothing) but often lacks a creative or innovation edge and is almost certainly not challenging to either practitioners or scholars. In article which also points to the domination of white males in top academic publishing and work generally, Ozbilgin (2009:2) notes ruefully that there is little incentive to change such conservatism on the part of either journal editors or potential authors since “turkeys do not vote for Christmas” and the system continues to self-perpetuate. As Grey (2004) argues, research rankings for business schools “…are crude and ineffective measures to create rankings at the expense of real quality”.

Mimetic Tendencies

Schools are thus at risk of becoming more similar to one another because of the content, frequency and depth of assessments by accreditation agencies and research rankings. Indeed, this might be happening despite protestations and publicity from individual schools claiming individual differences in schools in their culture and orientation toward education.

Business Schools tend toward similarities rather than differences not only because of accreditation, regulation and research rankings, but also because of the tenacity and influence of institutional pressures and stakeholders. These include a number of factors which are discussed in this section. The first and, perhaps most obvious, is to note the significant success of Business Schools, both academically and financially (the latter making them attractive to Vice-Chancellors and other senior University managers who could utilise the Business School as a cash cow). It is difficult to identify a more rapidly growing set of subject disciplines over the last three decades than Business and Management in the UK for example. The substantial growth of the MBA degree from the 1980s through the 1990s and into the early 2000s reinforced the popular belief that an MBA enhanced both an individual’s earning power and his or her career prospects. As a result, schools were able to set prices high and charged fees of over £10,000 for 12 month MSc degrees, and more than double that for MBAs. Schools have attracted large numbers of overseas students (outside the UK) who pay substantially more fees than UK/EU students. Business Schools thus became rich and were increasingly milked as ‘cash cows’ by university administrators.

The second pressure toward mimetic isomorphism (and related to the growth described above) is the adoption of the MBA model of Executive Education as pretty much a standard offering with a standard syllabus world-wide (Crainer and Dearlove, 1998; Mintzberg 2004). This means it is largely possible for any MBA teacher to teach (usually in English) at most School world-wide without having to change much in the presentation at all. The MBA has become a standardised product. Although there are strong voices recently to change the content of the MBA toward (for example) a greater coverage of ethics, leadership and entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, the net result of such changes is unlikely to remove the intense standardization of the degree.

Thirdly, there is explicit (and perhaps implicit) theoretical and ideological support for free market economics in nearly all schools which, again, leads to mimetic isomorphism (see, for example, Khurana, 2007; Starkey and Tempest, 2008). From this perspective, isomorphism rests on the assertion that most Business Schools, teach capitalism and little else (Parker, 2008). Although Parker was writing an opinion piece for the Observer Newspaper in 2008, his views were presaged by Golembiewski (1989) who couched the argument as a problem of value free science. He argued that value free science is a significant danger to teaching management (and science generally) because elites will act in their own interests and discipline the rest of us by the application of knowledge which will meet their needs (by design) and possibly the needs of others (but only by accident). It is therefore no accident to Golembiewski, that free market economics became the staple and unquestioned diet of Business Schools aiming their wares primarily at the global managerial class. Economic models of capitalism reflect the values of their creators and their teachers and researchers. Business Schools do not on the whole "sell (their) wares to voluntary organisations, co-operatives or trade unions, and (their) relationships with the public sector are uneasy" (Parker, 2008). The result is a narrow conception of what Business Schools should research and teach. For example, there is little study of organizations beyond those which are managed and organized in particular ways. Communes, the Mafia, the Amish and many global regimes (such as those in Columbia, Nigeria, China and Italy amongst others) are rarely, if ever, studied as part of the Business School diet. Yet they are all organizations with global impact, considerable wealth and often highly profitable. This is important if one follows the logic of Monnet and Very (2010) when they assert that *Al Qaeda* has become the Coca-Cola of terrorism. It is a brand equally well recognised, world-wide.

Strategic Choice

The above has arguably painted an over-deterministic picture of Business Schools and their context. As we noted earlier, strategic choice theory argues that managers can choose to follow a range of options despite seemingly overwhelming external forces and pressures. Many scholars have suggested ways in which Business Schools might choose different routes. Khurana (2007) suggests schools should emphasise subjects such as law, economics, politics and psychology (and de-emphasise others such as marketing, operations management, accounting) to produce better and more highly skilled professionals. Mangematin and Baden-Fuller (2008) would add 'global professionals' as schools around the world increasingly occupy places in the top 25 of Business Schools (FT rankings). Gabriel (2002) suggests schools should increase the dissemination and consumption of research to practitioners. Starkey and Tiratsoo (2007) and

Reed (2009) suggest there is a need to 'engage' with practice and put in place a dialogical (co-production) rather than linear model of knowledge production (research) and dissemination to reduce the theory/practice gap. Starkey and Tiratsoo (2007) suggest Business Schools could thus resemble the 'agora' – a centre of political, commercial, social and philosophical activity – a forum and a cultural focus between practitioners and academics. We would concur with such views, but take them a step further. That is, Business Schools need to widen their horizons to address a broader range of social and economic concerns (rather than concentrate on how Dell, Apple or Hewlett-Packard 'got it right').

Before we suggest what those concerns might be, it is worth reflecting on where Business Schools actually stand in the context of their current operations. In spite of all the rankings of schools, research and the enormous pressures on staff to achieve 4* publications, Business Schools are relatively small players in the 'messiness' which lies between management theory and management practice (Wensley, 2011). This messiness includes consultants, journalists, the media and public relations amongst many others). There is no simple dichotomy between management research and management practice. In terms of turnover, Business Schools account for around 10% of that of consultancies. And the balance of revenue generation between teaching and research for most Business Schools is around 10:1 (Wensley, 2011). Revenue comes substantially from teaching and not research income. This does beg the question of why, therefore, is so much effort and importance attributed to research rankings and the ranking of academic journals when it is teaching which supports 90% of many Business Schools' operations, growth (and survival). We do not have space to discuss this argument in the present paper, but we fell this is a key question in the future development of Business Schools.

A notable (if not unique) aspect of Business Schools is that very few disciplines have experienced individuals (30+ years old) coming back to University to learn new material from management research. This feature of the MBA and other Executive programmes is hard to find in disciplines such as Politics, Economics or Sociology. A key point, therefore, lies in what is taught to these individuals. We would argue there is an opportunity here for schools to widen the horizons and scope of what they teach under the rubric of business and management studies.

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