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Management studies educational knowledge: technical, elite or political?

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Abstract

This paper draws on technical, elite and political interpretations of the purpose of management to identify demands for particular forms of educational knowledge in the management studies curriculum. The varied character of this knowledge is discussed using Bernsteinian concepts of verticality, grammaticality, classification and framing, and illustrations from a benchmark statement and MBA programme documentation. It is argued that the development of rational and technical knowledge for management education is confounded by the absence of a definable 'profession' of management, which could aid the specification of a body of abstract knowledge. Meanwhile, the promotion of weakly classified and framed forms of elite and political knowledge or 'knowing' in management programmes negates the potential for conceptual and contextual coherence in the curriculum, and suggests that the inclusion of forms of rational and technical knowledge may primarily support the consolidation of particular social formations and managerial identities.

Keywords

Knowledge, curriculum, management studies, MBA

Introduction

Management studies as a field of study in higher education continues to achieve considerable growth internationally, with thousands graduating annually from over 13,000 degree awarding institutions (Bruner and Iannarelli 2011). In the U.K., for example, the last thirty years have seen management studies move from peripheral status to a situation in which business and management students comprise 14% of the total student population, including one in eight undergraduates and one in five postgraduates (ABS 2013; Cooke and Galt 2010). Approximately 30,000 students were enrolled on MBA qualifications at UK institutions in 2008/9, of whom almost two thirds were studying part time and the majority were non-UK students (Association of Business Schools 2010; Rowland and Hall 2012). Business schools provide significant revenue for U.K. higher education, and have grown to an extent that most institutions that have them would consider them indispensable. However, despite this considerable growth, management studies is plagued by uncertainties as to its rationale. Is management studies providing knowledge for, or about management practice? Why is business education not more 'professional'? And why can't business schools be more like medical schools (Pfeffer 2007), with academics and practitioners seamlessly co-constructing useful knowledge for the profession? The dislocation between management research and the concerns of practice is brought into focus by deep scepticism as to the value of management educational knowledge for prospective and existing managers (Bennis and O'Toole 2005; Ghoshal 2005).

This article sketches an alternative analysis of the purpose and structure of management educational knowledge by articulating Grey's (1999) account of technical, elite and political perspectives on the development of management with sociological approaches to knowledge and the curriculum (Bernstein 2000; Muller 2009; Young 2008). This analysis serves to address some of the assumptions that continue to be made about the rational and professional

orientation of management education by examining how Grey's critical interpretation translates into potential demands for particular forms of knowledge. With reference to the structure and content of an MBA programme at a research intensive U.K. university, and the subject benchmark statement for postgraduate degrees in management produced by the U.K. Quality Assurance Agency, the paper illustrates how the knowledge and 'knowing' suggested by technical-rational, elite and political perspectives is recontextualised into curriculum forms and thereby realised in management education.

The development of management: Technical-rational, elite and political perspectives

Grey's (1999) develops a typology, adapted from Reed (1989), of three interpretations of the nature of management that are derived from different socio-historical understandings of the role of management in economic and social change.

1. Technical-rational: In this interpretation the emergence of management 'reflects certain economic and technical necessities ' (Grey 1999, 562), developing as an 'inevitable' consequence of industrialisation and modern social organisation. Management can be seen here as fulfilling a necessary function, requiring appropriate forms of tried and tested knowledge. Grey notes the prominence of this view of management (566).

2. Elite: Management is seen here as a group 'enjoying certain kinds of social power' (Grey 1999, 562), which, in accordance with elite theory will act through 'collective agency' to sustain positions of influence in changing power structures (Scott 2008). Grey conjectures that the demise of 'organisation man' and traditional bureaucratic forms of management could lead to the emergence of 'a new kind of managerial elite' represented by the 'brash…high-flyer, adept with the language of MBA programmes' (Grey 1999, 574).

3. Political: In this perspective management is seen 'primarily in terms of its role in controlling labour' (Grey 1999, 562), a notion that accords not only with traditional Marxist thought and labour process analysis, but also with post-structuralist and foucauldian perspectives that develop understandings of how power is exercised through language, performance monitoring, and the internalisation of norms of self-regulation (568-9)

Arguably, one could further subdivide the technical-rational interpretation into a 'technical' and a 'rational' camp. Those who emphasise the technical aspect of management may foreground the practical value of management techniques in solving concrete problems, whereas advocates of a rational interpretation may emphasise the role of management in providing rigorous analysis of complex scenarios, followed by structured implementation. In both cases, however, management is portrayed positively, as a benign process of improving organisational efficiency, irrespective of social or historical context. This contrasts with the scepticism of both the elite and political approaches, which locate the development of management within sociological and historical analyses of industrialisation.

Verticality, grammaticality, classification and framing

The perspectives on management outlined above suggest differing forms of knowledge and 'knowing' may be valuable for the various students of management. Bernstein's concepts of verticality and grammaticality provide a means of distinguishing between the types of knowledge that may be 'selected, appropriated and transformed' or 'recontextualised' into the curriculum knowledge of higher education programmes (Bernstein 2000; Young and Muller 2007). 'Verticality' relates to the capacity for knowledge to 'progress' using an agreed 'internal language of description' that enables communities of scholars to build on previous

knowledge. Bernstein delineated between a 'vertical discourse' of academic disciplines with different 'hierarchical' and 'horizontal' knowledge structures, and a 'horizontal discourse' that is 'oral, local, context dependent' and 'segmentally organised' (Bernstein 2000,157). Grammaticality relates to the capacity for knowledge structures to 'generate empirical correlates' (Young and Muller 2007, 188) through an 'external language of description' (Bernstein 2000), enabling the substantiation of knowledge claims. Thus the physical sciences can be described as hierarchical knowledge structures exhibiting 'strong grammaticality', while the social sciences are more likely to be horizontal knowledge structures with weaker grammaticality, as demonstrated in the proliferation of different schools of thought or methodological approaches in disciplines such as sociology. Whereas vertical discourse is located in academic disciplines, horizontal discourse relates to knowledge of the 'everyday'. Vertical discourse progresses according to 'strong distributive rules regulating access' (Bernstein 2000, 157) with a commitment to establishing the veracity of truth claims. Horizontal discourse, on the other hand, involves the 'circulation' and 'exchange' of 'repertoires' or 'strategies' between members of some form of community or network, with the potential for the 'expansion' of a 'reservoir' that can supply repertoires for all community members (2000, 158-9). Although Bernstein's discussion of horizontal discourse is discussed in terms of how this discourse operates in wider society, it is possible to conceive of multiple patterns of the exchange and circulation of repertoires feeding into different 'reservoirs' upon which different individuals are able to draw. Thus, as Bernstein says, 'any one individual may build up an extensive repertoire of strategies which can be varied according to the contingencies of the context' (Bernstein 2000, 159-160), but this process is likely to be dependent more than anything on access to other individuals able to share appropriate strategies, and relevant reservoirs where those strategies can be found.

Bernstein's work on educational knowledge developed the key notions of classification and framing. Classification focuses attention of the strength of boundaries between categories, with 'strong classification' demonstrated where boundaries provide a clear delineation from one category to the next, enabling a space for 'specialised' identities and rules of conduct to develop, and 'weak classification' exhibiting weaker boundaries and greater fluidity between categories (Bernstein 2000, 6-7). In the case of disciplinary knowledge, one might argue for weak classification between the social sciences, but stronger classification between social and physical sciences (Young 2008, 16), with the strength of classification weakened or strengthened in specific representations of the curriculum. Importantly, Bernstein's work underlines the connection between knowledge, social organisation and identity, with the strength of classification impacting on all these phenomena. Whereas classification 'constructs the nature of social space' (Bernstein 2000, 12), framing is concerned with 'how meanings are put together', and 'who controls what' in a given context (Bernstein 2000, 12). In terms of knowledge and the curriculum, framing relates to how knowledge is selected, sequenced and paced, and who determines this, with 'strong framing' usually considered to put control in the hands of pedagogical authorities (i.e. teachers or academics) and weaker framing offering greater control to students. Thus framing has particular significance in debates around the relation between disciplinary knowledge and individual experience in pedagogic practice (Young 2008, 16). Critically, classification and framing are said to have the potential to vary independently of each other, although very weak framing will inevitably weaken classification (Bernstein 2000, 15), opening up the possibility for various curricula and pedagogic forms.

Management studies as a field can be described as a form of vertical discourse with a horizontal knowledge structure. However, unlike the more strongly classified social science disciplines of economics, psychology and sociology, management studies appears to have

weak or 'soft' boundaries that result in the discipline absorbing most of its prominent theories from other disciplines (Oswick, Fleming and Hanlon 2011), and perhaps also from the wider world of management practice. This results in a structure of extreme 'horizontality', characterised by a series of 'segmented' languages which appear to have limited common ground. In Bernstein's terms the development of management studies as a field is an example of 'regionalisation' (2000, 52), where aspects of older disciplines have been 'recontextualised' into a new combination of knowledge for the requirements of 'practice' or for another 'supervening purpose' which exists external to the existing disciplines (Muller 2009, 213). However, unlike the fields of Medicine and Engineering, which can be considered classical 'region' which have developed a form of classification that enables the effective recontextualisation of knowledge from other sources, management studies appears to struggle to 'constitute its own order' (Bernstein 2000, 33).

What forms of knowledge do the different perspectives require?

Technical and rational conceptions suggest that a form of professional knowledge generated by problem-driven research is necessary for effective management activity and should inform management education. The emphasis in this perspective is on the generation of reliable theoretically informed knowledge that can guide managers in the making of decisions. There are pressures within the field of management studies to 'verticalise' knowledge into a structure that replicates perceptions of the discipline of economics, and even ultimately the physical sciences (Thomas and Wilson 2011), through the construction of greater 'grammaticality' and agreed external languages of description (Bernstein 2000:163) that would enable knowledge to 'progress' systematically through 'evidence-based management' (Rousseau 2006). The justification for such an approach is often presented in terms of enhancing the professionalism of management research, reinforced by a commitment to

rigorous methodology and scientific method (i.e Donaldson, Qiu and Luo 2013), but often neglects to acknowledge the inherently social nature of management activity. Difficulties arise, however, with the defining of suitable 'practice problems' for rigorous analysis, with some suggesting that these are inadequately conceptualised by academic researchers, leading to an 'internally driven monologue' (Thomas and Wilson 2011, 449) which warps the nature of the problems to fit prevailing academic concerns. Advocates accenting the 'rational' potential of management may also stress the superiority of academic 'management studies knowledge' over 'management knowledge' produced by consultants and 'gurus', deriding the latter form for its lack of rigour but also expressing concern, or fear, at its popularity. On the other hand, those who may emphasise the 'technical', while having some agreement on the overall purpose of the enterprise, may have a narrow, instrumental focus on knowledge that is perceived to provide direct 'benefits' or solve tangible 'problems' for organisations, although who defines the problems and accrues the benefits is often left unexamined.

The technical-rational perspective is predicated on the assumption that 'management' is a profession, and that management education should aim to 'educate individuals as managers' and thus 'improve the quality of management as a profession' (QAA 2007, 1). Arguably, however, management shares none of the characteristics of classical professional forms or logics (Friedson 2001; Spender 2007). Unlike in Medicine or Law, 'monopolistic control' (Friedson 2001, 32) or 'jurisdiction' (Abbott 1988) over management work is not held by a definable body of 'professionals' with the degree of associative organisation needed to develop the quality of managerial work. Managerial work is subject to various intense and unremitting forms of 'commodification' as new technologies are employed to organise activities and measure performance (Abbott 1988, 146-7), and thus managerial discretion and autonomy is easily eroded. Management suffers from a weakness of classification, in that defining where managerial activity starts and ends can be highly problematic (Grey 1999).

Moreover, there seems to be considerable reluctance amongst some studying management to define themselves as managers (Brocklehurst, Grey and Sturdy 2010). Yet, the technical-rational perspective implies that a valid 'abstract, formal knowledge system' (Abbott 1988, 53) can and should be pursued and iterated in order to support the occupation of management, notwithstanding the enormous potential range of managers and managerial activity.

In contrast, the foregrounding of management as the activity of an 'elite' suggests that management knowledge needs to provide a means by which the 'managerial elite' are able to sustain or advance their position of relative power. Although the hierarchical managerial roles outlined by C.Wright Mills (1956) may have been replaced by new elite manifestations, the 'knowledge' required may be similar. Studies of elites have demonstrated the significance of networks and common practices for the maintenance of power, social mechanisms that require participants to 'know' how to demonstrate their continued membership of an elite (Bourdieu 1984; Warde and Bennett 2008). From an elite perspective, educational institutions characteristically assume the role of socialising prospective managers and professionals into their occupations, enabling them to recognise themselves and their peers as appropriate members of the managerial-professional class (Schleef 2005; Hartmann 2001). With economic turbulence and organisational restructuring, elites have had to reinvent these mechanisms, with the business school playing a role as a key locus of network formation and a site of induction into and immersion in the thinking, behaviour and language of the business world.

Thus the 'knowledge' required for the elite perspective is perhaps best understood as a form of horizontal discourse, involving the capacity to engage in specific patterns of 'circulation' and 'exchange' of 'repertoires' (Bernstein 2000, 158-9) or strategies for advancement that are exclusive, signified by membership of a network or by being an alumnus of a business school. The acquisition of 'repertoires' by individuals becomes a key objective of

participating in management education, with individual business schools and their networks acting as 'reservoirs' which can be accessed for strategies, and where 'elite' behaviours can be modelled and reproduced, through peer pedagogy and interaction with prestigious alumni or business leaders. It is important to note the extent to which this form of knowing departs from the foregrounding of abstract knowledge as central to a professionalised occupation (Abbot 1988; Friedson 2001). If 'management' activity is primarily about gaining and securing membership of an elite, then formal 'management knowledge' is more about demonstrating membership than solving difficult problems. This suggests a different role for the technical-rational knowledge produced by management studies researchers, and by those outside the academy. In this perspective 'management knowledge' can be employed as a source of language and ideology through which elite members consolidate their social formation.

 If management is seen as primarily a political practice, forms of knowledge that can enhance control of work, rather than its 'rational' improvement, are required. Grey's (1999) analysis encompasses interpretations of management rooted in the thinking of Marx and Foucault, indicating that 'political' knowledge could focus on the means of constraining worker autonomy through scientific management, limiting worker participation in decision-making, or monitoring performance through appraisal systems and targets. The notion of political practice can also foreground knowledge of how to advance a negotiating position, or how to destroy alternative arguments, irrespective of their intrinsic value or the wider consequences. In this conception, academic management studies knowledge has a potential role to play in an instrumental process of providing new techniques for achieving greater dominance and manipulation of workforces, and of competitors or 'opponents'. However, the focus on techniques that will prove effective in practice situations also suggests a role for knowledge generated outside of the academy, where 'best' practices can be circulated by consultants

meeting the needs of organisations eager to source ideas that can squeeze maximum effort from workforces at a minimum cost. Such an approach may enable 'fads' and decontextualized heuristics peddled by management consultants to gain credibility. Examples might be found in literature and workshops for executives on topics as diverse as 'leadership effectiveness', 'business process engineering' or 'lean techniques', recycling ideas generated both inside 'management studies' and by consultants and gurus.

This conception of knowledge suggests very weak classification and framing, with knowledge validated by its utility for a particular purpose, and no boundaries between practitioner experience and knowledge generated in research environments. Political conceptions are sceptical of the value of an established academic body of management knowledge. Here the mantra is the 'inevitable obsolescence of accumulated knowledge' (Beck and Young 2005, 191), as the mode of knowledge production draws closer to what Bernstein described as a 'generic' (2000, 53), and a principle of 'short termism' where the capacity 'to cope with the new requirements of 'work''(59) becomes the defining principle of knowledge validity. Knowledge can be sourced from anywhere, drawn from any discipline or none to meet an overriding purpose. Such an imperative takes the field of management studies even further from 'vertical' aspirations of greater disciplinary recognition, with limited requirements for the development of internal and external languages of description.

Recontextualisation : knowledge production to curriculum formation

Bernstein's work outlines how discourses of knowledge and identity production are relocated from fields of knowledge production to those of pedagogic activity, subject to a 'recontextualisation principle which selectively appropriates, relocates, refocuses and relates other discourses to constitute its own order'(Bernstein 2000, 33). Thus the knowledge forms of production and curricula are different yet related. Social forces are at work in this process,

as 'there is a space in which ideology can play' (32), and 'agents with recontextualising functions' and 'practising ideologies' (33) serve to orientate the recontextualised discourse towards new objectives. Thus in the development of the management studies curriculum we can conceive of how the 'agents' of the 'the field of the production of discourse' (31), who govern the orientation of management studies research, may cede some control to 'agents' with greater influence over management education. In the U.K. context organisations such as the Association of Business Schools (ABS) or the British Academy of Management (BAM) may retain considerable influence in both management knowledge production and management education (Masrani, Williams and McKiernan 2011). International organisations are also highly influential, such as the Association of MBAs (AMBA) for high level management qualifications, or EQUIS for their assessments of management education in individual business schools. In the United States, meanwhile, the Academy of Management (AoM) and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) hold sway. A distinctive characteristic of management education is the particular importance of evaluative structures, including rankings of business schools, accreditation mechanisms (i.e. of AMBA and EQUIS), and the employment outcomes of graduates. Although it can be argued that various other forms of higher education are located in similar contexts, business and management studies appears especially subject to influence external to individual institutions. It should be noted, however, that much of this influence is not 'external' to the field of management education itself as organisations such as ABS, and the accreditation processes of AMBA and EQUIS, are dominated by senior management academics (Masrani , Williams and McKiernan 2011; AMBA n.d.). Dominant curriculum practices and beliefs about knowledge value may thus be generated and enforced through hierarchical institutionalised mechanisms that would seem restrictive in the 'purer' social sciences, such as Economics, Politics and Sociology. It could be argued, therefore, that the form of the

curriculum in any given programme of management education has specific symbolic value, as an affirmation of the status of the institution at which the programme is taught. Meeting the perceived requirements of external evaluative structures may become more important than considering the conceptual or contextual coherence of the curriculum, or developing its 'conceptuality' or 'contextuality' (Muller 2009:220), with considerations of the pacing and sequencing of knowledge secondary to ensuring that curricula fit legitimated standards.

Illustrations from a management programme

The implication of Grey's (1999) analysis is that technical-rational, elite and political interpretations of the purpose of management co-exist within the academic management studies, underpinning the rationale for research projects and beliefs about the purpose of management education. Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that various aspects of these perspectives will be perceptible in the structure and content of the management curriculum. The particular combination of rational, technical, elite or political 'knowledge' on offer to students may also relate specifically to the context of their programme. To illustrate how technical-rational, political and elite elements co-exist, this section briefly examines the programme structure, content and rationale of an MBA in a Business School in a research intensive institution in the U.K., with reference to the legitimation of valuable knowledge in the higher level management studies curriculum provided by the QAA benchmark statement on postgraduate management degrees. MBAs are 'defined as a career development generalist programme' with an emphasis on 'leadership through strategic management' and 'a strong practical and professional orientation to the curriculum' (QAA 2007, 3), and are marketed both to those who have had significant management experience and relatively limited workplace responsibilities. The programme considered here has both a full time and a part time route, both of which are described in detail in the programme specification, handbook

and brochure documents. In the sections below the structure of the programme is initially analysed, followed by scrutiny of the 'knowledges' contained therein.

Classification, framing, conceptuality and contextuality

The choice of modules on the programme illustrates the weak classification and 'horizontality' of management studies knowledge. There are 11 compulsory taught modules (comprising 60 credits), a series of optional modules (comprising 12 credits) and a final project/dissertation (36 credits). The 11 compulsory modules demonstrate the breadth of management studies, encompassing topics as diverse as applied microeconomics, strategic marketing, operations management, leading change, and personal development and careers. In Bernstein's terms (2000, 52) the curriculum on offer shows signs of 'regionalisation', through an orientation towards the perceived needs of practice. It can be argued that the range of modules on offer, and the diversity of disciplines they draw on, negates the potential for an adequate 'disciplinary core' or 'conceptual coherence' (Muller 2009, 217) to anchor the programme and provide students with the foundation of knowledge which enables them to think 'beyond their experience' (Young 2008, 10). Indeed, the notion of disciplinarity could be seen as actively discouraged in the MBA curriculum, as the QAA benchmark statement asserts that MBA graduates should be able to 'challenge preconceptions and to remove subject and functional boundaries so as to handle complex situations holistically' (QAA 2007, 5). Thus the rationale for the curriculum invites weak classification, comprising a series of assembled segments of knowledge that could potentially demonstrate some form of 'contextual coherence' (Muller 2009, 217) that would prepare students for working in a professional or vocational context. However, it is clear that the MBA degree is not intended as professional formation for specialists focused on a particular work context, as the QAA benchmark statement asserts that MBAs should be 'essentially generalist in nature', offering

'a broad, analytical and integrated study of business and management' (QAA 2007, 4). The QAA statement also emphasises the importance of 'interrelationships' and 'interconnectedness' (4) between areas of management knowledge, an integrative process which, it could be argued, could be achieved through a project or dissertation. However, there is no guarantee of this if projects allow students to 'focus on a business area of their choosing' in their employing organisations (MBA specification, 5).

In addition to weak classification, the MBA degree is weakly framed, as students are offered 'flexibility in terms of pace and sequence of units in attaining their MBA' (MBA specification, 5), with the segmented nature of the programme rendering the notion of 'vertical' progression through the body of knowledge redundant. The post-experience nature of programmes of this type also suggests that the knowledge that students bring to the programme is particularly valuable. The 'learning process' of an MBA 'should build' on the 'relevant work experience' of students (QAA 2007, 3), and MBA graduates 'will be able to reflect on and learn from that prior experience and thus be able to integrate new knowledge with past experience and apply it to new situations' (5). A commitment to interspersing 'real world' experience with that of research-driven knowledge content is a key element of the MBA programme examined, as the programme 'combines the expertise of the school's international academics with corporate partners who participate in teaching throughout the degree, bringing their own cutting-edge knowledge of business directly to the classroom' (MBA brochure, 2). The MBA apparently sets out to engender a 'deep intellectual appreciation of the theoretical foundations of management and its wider context' (MBA specification, 2), but the weak classification and framing of the MBA structure suggests that the curriculum is not designed with this as a key priority.

Rational and technical knowledge

'Technical' and 'rational' knowledge is presented as the cornerstone of the management curriculum. According to the QAA benchmark statement, management education will serve to 'advance the effectiveness and competitiveness of employing organisations' (QAA 2007, 2) and demonstrate a 'strong practical and professional orientation to the curriculum' (3). The content should include 'theories, models, frameworks….together with rational analysis' (4). Thus students of the studied MBA programme will achieve 'the ability to integrate the knowledge of a variety of functional and theoretical areas through application to organisational problems' (MBA specification,3), and ' be able to manage in such a way that an optimal outcome may be expected from each decision' (MBA handbook, 5). A considerable proportion of the MBA programme specification focuses on rational and technical content and learning outcomes, emphasising that 'a core philosophy of the degree is the development of professional managerial competence', so that once in 'professional practice' graduates of the programme are able to 'deal with complex issues and make sound judgements' and to 'analyse operational issues at a strategic level' (MBA specification, 4).

Elite 'knowing'

Whereas notions of rational and technical knowledge are readily used to assert the value of management programmes for employers and to achieve acceptance in the broader higher education community, the concept of gaining membership of an 'elite' group through access to networks and adopting managerial behaviours comes to greater prominence when justifying the value of management education to prospective students. Thus the MBA programme literature emphasises how the programme is designed to 'develop the manager's career by interweaving academic theory with personal skills development' (MBA handbook, 5) and by offering skills development modules such as 'managing interpersonal networks' (7). The programme reinforces the assumption of elite status with modules entitled

'managing *your* people' and 'personal leadership and careers' (8). The status conferred on

graduates of the programme is primarily a function of the reputation of the school. This is

established through a ' high ranking that confirms the world-class standing of our faculty…..

many of whom you will have the privilege of being taught by during your time here' (9).

Programme documentation also underlines the importance of 'peers' and 'alumni', as 'the

interaction between accomplished and ambitious individuals from a wide range of

backgrounds adds immeasurably to the experience' (MBA brochure, 8) on the programme.

This is achieved through 'peer coaching groups' (MBA specification, 4) and 'regular

meetings with a syndicated group of peers' (MBA brochure, 2) which enable what the subject

benchmark statement describes as 'a process of peer interaction' and 'participants being able

to modify and develop their own, and others' business practices' (QAA 2007, 7). Even the

programme structure appears to be geared towards networking, as the opportunity to students

to flexibly select modules provides a 'great networking opportunity with wide exposure to

both full-time and part-time executive students' (MBA brochure, 5).

However, despite offering the carrot of seemingly elite status, students are also subject to the

stick of necessary self-discipline, taking responsibility for making an effective contribution.

Certain behaviours are clearly expected of MBA students and graduates. For example, 'our

alumni are committed to ensure the continuing value of the programme by participating in

surveys' (MBA handbook, 10); and participants 'are encouraged to take advantage of

networking opportunities with alumni' (10). Programme documentation uses a number of

graduate profiles and testimonies to reinforce the assertion that a 'typical… graduate is

someone who promotes innovative management thinking; continues to develop themselves

professionally and personally, and brings their skills back to the school as well as to their

working environment' (10). Thus assent to a mode of participation that values certain

behaviours rather than others is required of MBA students, with participants embracing a sense of proximity to status, power, and of course, enhanced career prospects.

Political knowledge, identity and ideology

Political conceptions foreground the development of skills and attributes which are perceived to assist the manager in maintaining dominance and control at work. From some perspectives this can also be extended to uncritical acceptance of 'managerialism' as an ideology, the adoption of a set of management practices and the assumption of a flexible 'managerial' identity (Alvesson and Wilmott 1996). The political dimension can be perceived in assertions in the QAA benchmark statement of the value of 'high personal effectiveness' (QAA 2007, 6), the ability to 'negotiate and persuade or influence others', and the importance of 'motivating, monitoring performance, coaching and mentoring' (7). Graduates of management programmes should have 'developed the skills to implement agreed situations effectively and efficiently' (5), 'be adaptable' and be able to 'operate effectively in a variety of team roles and take leadership roles' (8), 'selecting appropriate leadership style for different situations' (7). Reflecting similar themes, the MBA programme puts a 'heavy emphasis…on developing personal effectiveness and powerful outcomes for both individuals and sponsoring employers' and on 'creating well-rounded, critical thinking managers' (MBA brochure,2). However, interpretations of 'well-rounded' may be somewhat narrow, as the MBA programme brochure goes to considerable lengths to develop an image of the 'ideal MBA graduate', setting out the 'typical qualities' as having 'a real desire to drive change' and an 'entrepreneurial spirit' (8). Highly reflective approaches may be considered problematic as the programme is 'known for its atmosphere of friendly competition – students have a strong drive to succeed but also give each other support and encouragement' (2).

Forms of 'self-management' are emphasised by the QAA benchmark statement, which highlights 'self-awareness and personal development appropriate to graduate/management degrees in business', and 'the development of positive and critical attitudes towards leadership, change and enterprise' (QAA 2007, 2). This is also evident in the MBA material, where each student should demonstrate 'an understanding of their own individual context….current career strengths and areas for managerial skill development' (MBA specification, 3) and is encouraged to evaluate how their 'personal growth is related to organisational development' (MBA brochure, 2).

Concluding remarks

The specific combinations of the knowledge required by technical, rational, elite and political conceptions of management present in management programmes may reflect the orientations of business schools and the constraints of isomorphic pressures stemming from the globalising field of management education. These are framed within considerations of reputation, recruitment and student outcomes that marginalise notions of induction into a discipline or field of study. While the elite approach foregrounds networks, the political approach suggests that the value of 'management is limited by time and context, with an emphasis on learning 'how to learn and to adapt as knowledge changes' (MBA specification, 2). This renders greater disciplinary engagement unattractive for management education, fuelling a consumerist approach to knowledge which encourages a purely instrumental engagement, and negates the potential for both 'conceptuality' and 'contextuality'. The clear aspirations for management studies to 'verticalise' and acquire greater 'grammaticality', to stand alongside 'our sister social science disciplines…and more specifically…economics' (Pfeffer 2007, 1334) do not therefore appear to cohere with the forces impacting on management education or with the nature of management itself, suggesting that the varied

conceptions of knowledge discussed above, and the tensions they create, will continue to be prevalent in management studies programmes as long as students are prepared to enrol on them.

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