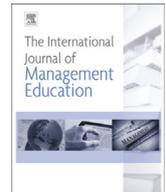


Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

## The International Journal of Management Education

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/ijme](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ijme)

## Research notes

## Management relevance in a business school setting: A research note on an empirical investigation

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 10 August 2015

Received in revised form 13 February 2016

Accepted 14 April 2016

Available online 27 April 2016

## Keywords:

MBA

Business schools

Wicked problems

Conventional problems

Management education relevance

## ABSTRACT

In this research note, we address wicked problems within the context of business schools. Our aim is to understand if business schools fully reflect the needs of business. To achieve this, we assess the mission, vision, and stated strategies of the top 200 global business schools to determine if the MBA curriculum addresses wicked problems. From our findings, we demonstrate that the MBA curriculum does not address the nature of wicked problems or provide the intellectual and interdisciplinary frameworks to educate managers on serious competitive issues in a global context. In addition to challenging many premises of the MBA curriculum, we outline several areas of opportunities to assist business schools in adapting to the evolving needs of business and organizational problem-solving.

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## 1. Introduction

The American model of MBA schools remains the main vehicle to train managers around the globe. Publicly-funded universities, private universities, or even stand-alone MBA schools are scrambling to recruit faculty, develop course materials, and apply the teaching tools – course syllabi, case studies, journal reprints, and textbooks. Public rankings of MBA schools by the leading publications like *Business Week*, *Financial Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*, despite shifts, all show an unequivocal positioning of the leading US business schools. In the *Financial Times 2014* ratings, to cite one example, seven of the top 10, 12 of the top 20, and 30 of the top 50 were American business schools.

However, for over a decade, MBA schools have faced a paradoxical challenge. Despite rapid growth, high fragmentation of the business school industry and research output in academic journals, business schools are under intense scrutiny by the public at large, key decision-makers in business and government, and the business schools themselves (Datar, Garvin, & Collen, 2010). According to Rubin and Dierdorff (2013), researchers have largely argued that the MBA curriculum is either deficient or contaminated. It has been suggested that business schools are too focused on scientific, abstract research and not focused enough on practical knowledge that can be generalized and used by practitioners (Datar et al., 2010; Kuchinke, 2007; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2013; Rynes & Bartunek, 2013). To counter this issue, there have been calls for greater focus on applied research that can be used by practitioners (Knight et al., 2008).

In the curriculum, there is a lack of focus on problem solving, decision-making, globalization, or even sustainability. As a result of this deficiency, graduates care less about sustainability issues, which conflicts with the movement of the global

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economy toward sustainability. Compounding the issue is that graduates possess limited awareness of global issues (Rynes & Bartunek, 2013). To overcome this issue, universities have experienced increasing pressure to develop international partnerships, which can expose their students to global, political, economic, and technical forces that are shaping our environment (Bartell, 2003). Perhaps most concerning is that graduates possess poor decision-making abilities (Atwater, Kannan, & Stephens, 2008). Furthermore, deans are hiring faculty with limited professional experience and business acumen. As a consequence of being taught by faculty with limited practical knowledge, graduates are ill-prepared to address the problems that they will encounter in their careers (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005). Given the limited experience, faculty members often possess limited ties to business. However, partnering with businesses tend to increase the career opportunities of students (Friend, 2010) and, as a result, the partnerships between universities and businesses are becoming increasingly vital.

An early criticism of the existing MBA curriculum is Mintzberg's (2004) view that specialized training for the various functional areas fails to offer a broad perspective of actual practices of management, a view now widely accepted (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009). Related criticisms include too much functional emphasis in the curriculum that fail to integrate the disciplines (Teal & Krishnan, 2011). There has also been a limited focus on innovation. Given the fast-paced nature of many, if not, all industries, the need for teaching innovation has never been more important (Brown, 1998). Indeed, firms that have a greater capacity for innovation tend to be more profitable (Fixson, 2009). Aligned with this, employers are arguing that the core MBA curriculum is becoming disconnected from the evolving needs of the marketplace (Bisoux, 2005; Datar et al., 2010; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009, 2013). From their study, Rubin and Dierdorff (2009) concluded that the competencies that were considered the most critical to employers were the least represented in the standard MBA curriculum. As a result of meeting the requirements of accreditation agencies, there is a perceived lack of flexibility in MBA programs. Indeed, these accreditation agencies perpetuate a less-optimal curriculum model that appears to no longer meet the needs of employers (Datar et al., 2010; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009). Perhaps most concerning is that many universities have shifted their focus on attaining these accreditations and, specifically, the 'triple-crown' accreditation (i.e., EQUIS, AMBA, and AACSB) as a way to differentiate themselves from others through perceived quality.

In this research note, our aim is to understand if business schools fully reflect the pressing needs of business, by addressing the following needs: (1) international orientation, (2) focus on sustainability, (3) partnering with business, (4) focus on innovation, (5) wicked problems (problem-solving), and; (6) applied research orientation. To achieve this, we assess the mission, vision, stated strategies, and curriculum, of the top 200 global business schools to determine if the curriculum is addressing complex or 'wicked' problems (McMillan & Overall, 2016). To this end, we argue that the MBA curriculum does not address the needs of business, the nature of wicked problems, or provide the intellectual and interdisciplinary frameworks to educate managers on serious competitive issues in a global context. In addition to challenging some premises of the MBA curriculum, we outline several areas of opportunities for business schools that can assist them in meeting the evolving needs of employers. Indeed, this research will be helpful for business school deans that are in the process of redefining their vision, mission, strategies, curriculum, and research focus.

## 2. The new paradigm: wicked problems

Churchman (1967, p. B142) defined wicked problems as "a class of social system problems, which are ill-formulated; where the information is confusing; where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values; and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing". Wicked problems require a process of structuring and restructuring, in which solutions emerge only gradually through a process of defining external and internal constraints (Simon, 1969). Accordingly, there are several aspects associated with defining very complex problems. First, in order to solve the problem, one needs to recognize that a problem exists. Second, how one defines the problem affects the attempts to solve it. To add to the complexity, wicked problems have various antecedents, are difficult to define, and when conventional solutions are applied to them, the consequences can be undesirable (Camillus, 2008) (see Table 1). Considering the ambiguity,

**Table 1**  
Ten characteristics of wicked problems.

1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem (defining wicked problems is itself a wicked problem).
2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule.
3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true or false, but better or worse.
4. There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem.
5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a 'one-shot operation' because there is no opportunity to learn by trial and error, every attempt counts significantly.
6. Wicked problems do not have an enumerable (or an exhaustively describable) set of potential solutions, nor is there a well-described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into the plan.
7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
8. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.
9. The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways.
10. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem's resolution. The planner has no right to be wrong (planners are liable for the consequences of the actions they generate).

Source: Rittel and Webber (1973)

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