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## Teaching organizational project management at postgraduate level

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### Abstract

At postgraduate level, students expect more than basic project management education. Therefore a course called “Organisational Project Management” (OPM) was introduced in an international master’s program in project management. The intention with the course was twofold: Firstly, to introduce OPM as a research field in organization theory; secondly, to prepare the students for working in a multi-project environment.

In this paper we present how the course was designed to fulfill the students’ demands on an academic course at this level, while at the same time giving them practical experience of how OPM is implemented in the industry. Hence, the course is divided in a theoretical part presenting current theories in OPM, and a practical part, in which the students study how these theories and practices are applied in different companies. The students are working in a project spanning from initiation to closure, in which they prepare for and perform a maturity assessment of a company of their choice.

The course has been run in six consecutive programs. From start, feedback from the students has shown that they consider the learning outcome very high and useful for their future work life. For some of the students, this is the first time that they have been provided an opportunity to discuss organizational issues and concepts such as project governance and project portfolio management with a manager in the industry. For students with work experience, the course has provided means to reflect on their previous work life.

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## 1. Introduction

At universities the subject project management was introduced about half a century ago and then chiefly in engineering curricula. Stemming from the developments in the 1950s with the advent of computers, operational research and systems management (Morris, 1994) the focus in project management education was on scheduling and optimization techniques. The project management task was thus more or less reduced to merely a planning-and-control exercise underpinned by a rationalistic engineering mind-set. It was not until the 1980s that a shift started to take place as projects more and more were regarded as a way of working in teams in order to grapple with specific problems. Temporary teams (task-forces) demanded proper enablement from the team leader as motivator and communicator. Later, as business schools started to engage in researching project organizations, other aspects, such as the projectification of society (Ekstedt et al, 1999) or of organizations (Midler, 1995); the organizational contextualization of projects (Engwall, 2003); the professionalization (e.g. Blomqvist and Thomas, 2004) and institutionalization of project management (e.g. Blomqvist and Söderholm, 2002; Bergman et al, 2013); etc. Today there is much awareness of the importance of viewing projects, not as singular and isolated undertakings, but rather as ways of structuring and simplifying complex tasks in a larger organizational setting. We now talk about programs and project portfolios and new managerial roles have been introduced, such as program managers or portfolio managers. Yet, these new perspectives are only slowly integrated in university teaching, as there is a perplexity about how to do it and at times a lack of fresh ideas. In many ways the engineering mind-set still reigns in textbooks used primarily in undergraduate courses.

### 1.1. Background

Since its inception in the late 1990s, the postgraduate program International Project Management has been run by Chalmers University of Technology in collaboration with Northumbria University, UK. In 2007 the program had to be redesigned in order to fulfill the requirements for master's programs according to the Bologna declaration. One of the requirements implied that the program had to be extended from three to four semesters, which entailed adding new courses to the syllabus. The development team saw this as an opportunity to expand the program's view on project management and to incorporate new ideas as mentioned above. As a consequence a course with a corporate and strategic perspective on project management was introduced. The course was designed to be a sequel to the existing and introductory course in basic project management.

The intention with the new course was twofold. Firstly, it aimed to give the students an understanding of how companies use projects to achieve strategic goals and to prepare them for working in such contexts (Engwall, 2003; Hobday, 2000). To achieve this end, students would be introduced to organizational project management and its concepts, techniques and tools, and to how such practices are established and implemented in various organizations. By changing the focus from individual temporary projects to a company's bundle of projects and their place in the permanent organization, the students would get an understanding that it takes more than delivering projects on time, on budget and in conformity with specifications for the overall project operations of the company to be successful. Secondly, the course aimed to introduce the students to organizational project management as an emerging research field in organization theory. This included, e.g. letting the students read academic articles and analyze the discussed topics, and making the students aware of the researchers' different views on how organizations handle the challenges of a multi-project environment.

This paper presents briefly the theoretical frame on which the above-mentioned course is grounded, the structure and contents of the course, and the pedagogical approach applied. By aligning all course elements, i.e. lectures, readings, writing assignments, class discussions, and case studies, with the learning objectives and the course evaluation criteria we wish to demonstrate that it is possible and rewarding to introduce a young and immature field of research such as organizational project management, to students at postgraduate level.

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