



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

The International Journal of Management Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijme



Practice Weeks @ Bedfordshire: An innovative response to criticisms of management education



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 June 2014

Received in revised form 4 December 2014

Accepted 20 January 2015

Available online 12 March 2015

Keywords:

Graduate employability

Graduate employment

Employer engagement

Employability skills

Higher education (H.E.)

University–industry interaction

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to position and appraise the University of Bedfordshire Business School's initiative – 'Practice Weeks' – as a potentially innovative response to the current criticisms facing Management Education (ME). Criticisms of ME, we argue, are founded on the 'irrelevancy' debate, which is conceptualised in the first half of our literature review. The second half of the literature review examines Association of Business Schools (ABS) reports and reviews how business schools are responding to these critiques, reliant primarily on the tried and tested experiential learning models to do so. Building on these, 'Practice Weeks' are then presented as a case example from the University of Bedfordshire Business School (UBBS) as an innovative response to surfaced criticisms. Data is drawn from interviews carried out with students and employers who have participated in UBBS Practice Weeks, supported by quantitative insights from student survey questionnaires. Findings evidence that Practice Weeks have the potential to go further than existing experiential learning models to deliver practice-based education to business school students, whilst also capturing an effective and efficient approach to supporting business and community organisations in meeting their objectives.

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1. Introduction

The central purpose of this paper is to position 'Practice Weeks' at the University of Bedfordshire Business School (UBBS) as a contender for an innovative response to the criticisms of business schools and their dominant Management Education (ME) model. Recent academic and industry literature recognises that globalisation has spurred business processes, products and delivery to develop at a rapid pace (Colton, 2014; Cox, 2014; Sullivan, 2013). As a consequence, however, the adaptability of ME has been called into question, and whether its curricula can keep pace with these advances (ABS, 2014; Gitsham, 2010; Thomas, Lee, Thomas, & Wilson, 2014). Current discourse around ME suggests academics and practitioners are critical of business schools in their provision of industry-relevant curricula, especially regarding Masters in Business Administration (MBA) courses (Hall, Agarwal, & Green, 2012; Jackson & Chapman, 2012; McMillan & Chen, 2012; Teece, 2011). ME has come under increasing scrutiny, as it is alleged that business schools often lack an understanding of 'real' business issues that are central to developing and disseminating the type of knowledge that can be applied to enhance management practice (Davies & Hilton, 2014).

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Our paper is thus located against this context of ME and specifically against the backdrop of the critique of ME, which questions its relevancy and ability to develop work ready graduates (Beenen & Goodman, 2014; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Davies & Hilton, 2014; Tibby, 2012). Whilst these criticisms are targeted at all business schools and ME providers, the remit of this paper has been restricted to UK based business schools in particular, though with transferable applications and relevance for global business schools.

Following a comprehensive literature review, through which we cluster the dominant 'irrelevancy' critiques under six key criticisms we then go onto review how UK business schools have responded to this critique. To do so, we appraise business schools that have been recognised by the Association of Business Schools (ABS) reports (2007–2013) as 'best practice' examples in ME in response to the six criticisms. It is concluded that a range of experiential learning-driven approaches are adopted by exemplar schools to respond to a critique of their ME model and its relevancy.

This then forms the basis for a discussion of our case study example of 'Practice Weeks' developed at the University of Bedfordshire Business School. We evaluate Practice Weeks as a potential innovative tool that facilitates greater business–academia interaction, and thereby assists in the development of work-ready graduates. Practice Weeks are essentially weeks of activity inbuilt into various stages of the programme learning experience, in very flexible ways, which are designed and delivered in conjunction with employers. We conclude by offering implications for further research and especially with implications for other business schools, who may look to deploy Practice Weeks by discussing in detail the benefits and impact of the UBBS experience. In the next section we begin to contextualise our study against the 'irrelevancy' critique of ME.

2. Literature review: the 'irrelevancy' critique of ME

The literature on ME has attempted to approach the irrelevancy of current ME programmes (Lester & Costley, 2010). Consequently, the quality of outcome for both academia and industry has been placed under scrutiny by a number of scholars and practitioners (Davies & Hilton, 2014; Starkey & Madan, 2001; Teece, 2011). Hence, we first carried out a comprehensive literature review and identified six key areas that characterise the criticisms pointed at ME in business schools. These are the mismatch between pedagogy and practice, ineffective MBA programmes, barriers to ME from a business perspective, skills mismatch between ME graduates and employer demands, lack of recognition of SMEs, not-for-profits and the local development agenda and the absence of innovation in business schools.

This clustering is not meant to be exhaustive, but one which serves as a tool for the conceptualisation of the argued gap between ME and management practice. It also enables an enhanced understanding of the reasoning underpinning the criticisms. We will discuss each of these in detail in the section to follow.

2.1. Criticisms of ME

2.1.1. Criticism 1: mismatch between ME and practice

Prior to the economic recession in 2008, business schools were already receiving broad criticism (e.g. Biz Ed, 2007). Following the downturn, ME was under more pointed scrutiny for providing a generation of ill-equipped leaders and managers who may have contributed to the failings of major corporations. For example, Jackson (2009a) suggests the global economic recession in 2008 is possibly linked to the unpreparedness of ME graduates. Indeed, "It is business schools, after all, which flooded the banking world with graduates of their prestigious MBA courses. They then helped the economy to nosedive" (James, 2009, p. 1). The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) seems to be leading the debate on behalf of employers, many of whom believe graduates lack key skills, and thus 45% of UK industry representatives report skill shortages among current employees (Reid & Haynes, 2014). Discussions on how to bridge the gap between learning and practice is one of the key challenges for ME. From a business school perspective, this may be reflected in the composition of the faculty; many of whom have not been in industry or not so for a long time, and hence can only theorise it rather than reflect or connect with it in a typical classroom (Hawawini, 2005; Ivory et al., 2006; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). For others, the mismatch refers to the content of ME not fully addressing the change of pace in the business environment (Hall et al., 2012; Maxwell, Scott, Macfarlane, & Williamson, 2010).

2.1.2. Criticism 2: ineffective MBA programmes

MBA is often regarded as the 'flagship' course within ME and business school context and can command a premium fee (Bruce, 2010). In fact, the MBA is frequently the most expensive course across a university-wide offering (Mondalek & Rogers, 2013). The MBA's efficacy and impact are therefore of much interest to ME critics. David, David, & David (2011) carried out a study across a sample of MBA student *résumés* nearing graduation. Student *résumés* were put against 140 skills and certifications identified as being essential for candidates applying for business jobs. David et al. (2011) study demonstrated that the skills of MBA graduates had a low correlation with job descriptions, thus emphasising on the disparity between the pedagogic and curricular focus of MBAs and business community needs.

MBAs may be giving students the confidence to make decisions, yet, not the competence to cope with the messy reality in which decisions are being executed argued Mintzberg and Lampel (2001). Further contending that they tend to emphasise the teaching of business functions, whilst neglecting the practice of administering. This concern is raised by Rich Lesser – Boston Consulting Group's CEO – who pointed out that the business sector demands more diversity and depth than an MBA can offer as reported in Mondalek and Rogers (2013). It is then not surprising that specialised Masters programmes are

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