

SEEING DIFFERENTLY: PUTTING MBA LEARNING INTO PRACTICE

Post-Print

Abstract

MBA programmes frequently form part of managers' training and development activities. However, such programmes have been subject to intensifying criticism with critics arguing that MBAs do little to enhance management practice. Against this background, the paper presents an exploratory study of UK MBA graduates which sought to identify the ways in which their MBA programme was seen to contribute to management practice. The findings suggest that the MBA is seen to add value to management practice in terms of seeing differently, in respect of self, others and organisation.

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INTRODUCTION

MBA programmes frequently form part of managers' training and development activities. Such programmes have however, been increasingly criticised for failing to speak adequately to management practice (Mintzberg, 2004, Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). Most strikingly, Mintzberg (2004) argues that 'MBA programmes train the wrong people, in the wrong ways with the wrong consequences' (p.6). His argument claims that most MBA programmes worldwide place an emphasis on analysis and business functions at the expense of leveraging the experience that is brought to the classroom. Consequently, the contribution of MBA programmes to management practice is highly questionable, echoing previous criticisms of MBA programmes (Thomas and Anthony, 1996).

Paradoxically, despite such widespread criticism, the MBA has remained popular, continually attracting large student numbers (Workman, 2003). This apparent contradiction perhaps raises curiosity as to the actual value of the MBA. Indeed, it is interesting to note that criticisms of MBA programmes are rarely accompanied by systematic evidence, and thus the actual contribution of the MBA to management practice remains to a large extent empirically unexplored. Moreover, there have been recent calls for research to investigate the contribution of management programmes generally (Hirsh *et al.*, 2002). It is thus suggested that given such background, it is timely to empirically examine the contribution of the MBA.

The paper seeks to add to current debates surrounding MBA programmes by examining their contribution to management practice. With this purpose in mind, the paper presents the findings of an exploratory study of UK part-time MBA graduates, which adopted a qualitative approach, allowing an in-depth exploration of graduates' experiences of their MBA programme, and the identification of ways in which this was seen to enhance management practice. Here, voice is given to the MBA graduate, one rarely heard in the current debate, which suggests that MBA learning adds value to management practice and facilitates seeing differently in respect of self, others and organisation.

THE MBA AND MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

Controversy surrounding the contribution of the MBA to management practice is not new. Scholars in both the UK and the US have suggested that the MBA does not improve managerial performance (Grey, 2004; Porter and McKibbin, 1988) and some even speculate whether it would matter if such programmes ceased to exist (Thomas and Anthony, 1996). Criticisms tend to suggest that MBA programmes promote a narrow understanding of management, with Bloom (1987, p.369) arguing for example, that the 'MBA is seen as a critical indicator of the closing of the (American) mind'. There is thus a suggestion that the MBA provides little of value to management practice and indeed may in fact cause detriment. But for all this talk, little is actually known about the realities of the contribution of the MBA degree.

Little work exists which examines the perspective of the MBA graduate, and as such our understanding of the ways in which MBA programmes may inform management

activities in practice remains underdeveloped. Of interest, the small number of studies which have attempted to explore the added value of the MBA, generally suggest a more positive impact than is ordinarily assumed. Studies by Baruch and Peiperl (2000), Boyatzis and Renio (1989) and Kretovics (1999) have all demonstrated that the MBA is seen to have a positive impact on managerial abilities although there is disagreement as to which skill areas the MBA effects. Whilst the self report questionnaires used in these studies are able to provide an indication of perceived skill improvement, less is known about the detail of such improvement and how this in turn may relate to actual workplace performance.

A more detailed insight into the outcomes of MBA programmes are provided in the qualitative works of Hilgert (1995, 1998); Simpson, (2000); Sturges et al (2003) and Winstanley et al (2003). Hilgert's (1998) study for example, illustrated the ways in which the MBA was seen to aid the personal development of managers. Similarly, Winstanley et al (2003) observed that the MBA resulted more in a personal transformation than the transfer of knowledge and skills. Further, the work of Sturges et al (2003) importantly suggests that such benefits may have much to do with hidden curricula and informal learning. This latter group of studies would seem to indicate the complexity of MBA learning.

Given this complexity, it is perhaps unsurprising that our understanding of the ways in which MBA learning in turn contributes to practice is rather limited. It might be speculated from the evidence above that learning may influence practice in subtle ways, if we accept a transformational learning experience rather than an acquisition of technical expertise. It might be suggested that the MBA makes an indirect

contribution to management practice. Indeed, Holman's (2000) consideration of models of management education highlights the possibility of an indirect vocational role described as providing 'a broad enquiry into management and the development of useful skills and abilities, although some of these skills might not be immediately useful or correspond directly to those required by the organisation' (p201). There is a suggestion above that individual learning on the MBA may not correspond directly to workplace performance and as such we might expect a complex contribution to management practice.

It is argued here that if we are to better understand the contribution of MBA programmes to management practice, further in-depth work is needed to explore not only the outcomes of MBA programmes but how in turn such outcomes may inform actual management practice. The present study thus has two broad objectives:

- To identify what managers take from their MBA experience
- To identify how MBA learning may in turn contribute to management practice

METHODS

The study was conducted at a large UK university whose business school is rated in the top 15 UK schools (Guardian, 2004), and focused on the school's part-time programme. The study included 35 in-depth interviews with MBA alumni from the university: 19 men and 16 women, aged between 29 and 56 years old who graduated between 1993 and 2004. Those interviewed came from a variety of job backgrounds spanning private, public and voluntary sectors. The study adopted an interpretive

methodology which sought to capture the individual's own account of their MBA experience. An interpretive approach is concerned with developing an understanding of the meanings individuals attach to experienced phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) which was seen to be appropriate here given the complexity of the relationship between MBA learning and management practice suggested by the literature. The interviews asked managers to describe their careers to date, the challenges of their current role, their manager learning in general and their MBA learning in particular. With respect to the MBA, managers were asked to describe what they had taken from this, and to provide examples of how this in turn was seen to contribute to their managerial jobs. The interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. The research adopted a grounded theory approach consistent with Strauss and Corbin (1998), and as such ideas developed inductively as the fieldwork progressed.

FINDINGS

The study suggested that for most managers, the MBA programme was seen to be highly beneficial. Three broad learning outcomes were identified: broadened perspectives; an enhanced sense of self; and tools, techniques and theories. Such outcomes were seen to contribute to practice in subtle ways by facilitating the manager in 'seeing differently' in terms of self, others and organisation. The identified benefits are now discussed and illustrations of how these contribute to practice are offered.

Broadened Perspectives

The development of an awareness of alternative ways of thinking and doing was identified as a salient benefit of the MBA programme by all of the managers interviewed, and frequently related to exposure to different industries, organisations and international cultures. This is illustrated in the comment below:

“Opened my eyes, you see with being in just one company for so long it was useful to see what other people were up to, and to see ‘oh actually there are other ways of doing this’. Not everybody does it like us. So that was good to get a wider perspective.” [Strategy Planning Manager]

This widening of perspectives was seen to be significant for management practice, but not always in ways which were highly visible. A residential manager, for example, suggested that in practice his broadened perspectives involved a “*sort of more qualitative difference in terms of how you are, what you can do, how you think about things, how you approach your job, thinking outside of the way things are traditionally looked at and done*”. Indeed, numerous managers provided examples of ways in which they had begun to see differently. For example, managers often talked about the challenges involved in managing relationships and suggested that their broadened perspectives had facilitated this by enabling an enhanced understanding of the positions of others:

‘I think whether you are in the public sector or the private sector, even though you do have some contact with others, there is a degree of distrust about motives and issues of control really and I think it is important to sort of contextualise sort of what different individuals are doing, why they do what they do, ... so it gives you the sort of

confidence to address some of the things that other individuals come up with.'

[Strategy Manager]

Being open to alternative ways of thinking and doing is thus seen as an important outcome of the MBA and contributes to management practice by facilitating the manager in seeing the organisation and others in new ways. This outcome is interesting since management education is often accused of being irrelevant to the needs of the organisation, yet paradoxically here it is such irrelevance which is seen as beneficial. Learning about other organisations, industries and cultures seems to prompt new ideas and thoughts which may be seen to counter the insularity of thinking within the organisation.

Enhanced sense of self

The findings revealed that an important outcome of the MBA for all managers, was an 'enhanced sense of self', which describes increased positive feelings towards the self entailing increased self confidence, self esteem and personal credibility. For the managers here, this was especially important as an ongoing struggle with 'learning to be confident' in their learning to manage generally was frequently acknowledged. The analysis revealed this outcome contributed to practice in various ways. Several suggested that their increased confidence and esteem meant that they felt much more comfortable in putting forward their own ideas and attempting to influence others to take on board their points of view:

'I suppose the confidence to share and approach things and challenge things. Whereas two years ago I would have been mortified if somebody thought what I said was stupid or whatever. So I have obviously grown a huge amount in my own confidence and ability.' [Communications Manager]

Thus it would seem that there is evidence of managers seeing themselves differently, feeling that they are somebody to be heard, whose views and ideas are important and equally valid to those of others. The analysis also identified that an enhanced sense of self, in practice often meant a more proactive approach, with managers seeing themselves as 'somebody who can do':

'I guess if somebody had dropped me into a position like this five years ago, I would have been very uncomfortable dealing with things that I had no previous experience of. Like, all of a sudden VAT returns had to be done.... Now five years ago I would have probably panicked and desperately looked for someone to throw it over the wall to. Now I say 'ok', pick the phone up to the VAT, 'I have just come in I don't know how to do this, can somebody talk me through it'? So I guess I have gained in confidence in that way, things don't faze me as they used to.' [Business Improvement Manager]

An enhanced sense of self is thus seen as a key way in which the MBA is seen to be of value and would seem to be associated with changes in the way managers perceive themselves in practice. The ways in which this is manifest are various and may be thought to perhaps illustrate a form of 'soft skill' development which MBA programmes have traditionally been assumed to neglect (Porter and McKibbin, 1988).

Such development is commonly seen to involve the ability to interact with others and there is evidence here that an enhanced sense of self is seen to contribute to such activity, through for example attempts to influence and challenge others.

Tools, techniques and theories

Managers highlighted the value of academic knowledge taken from their MBA programme, which was described in various ways such as ‘tools’ ‘techniques’ and ‘theories’. The analysis suggested that the value of theoretical material was not seen in terms of prescription but rather description which facilitated understanding. It is suggested that for the managers here academic material provided helpful insights which facilitated changes in the way managers viewed the organisation, self and others:

‘I took a language, references and models and a way of thinking which was enormously helpful in terms of I wouldn’t be doing things and think oh on my MBA I did this, but I think it gave me time to reflect, to analyse processes, in a way which I would never have done had I not done the MBA.’ [Sales Director]

For many of the managers, an understanding of strategic issues was seen to be immensely helpful and is unsurprising given the strategic focus of the MBA programme here. Managers suggested that in practice, their strategic understanding had led to changes in the way the organisation was perceived. For example, one manager described how his increased strategic understanding of his organisation

provided him with a framework to assess where he could contribute most in taking the organisation forward:

“The MBA for me, helps me to look at a particular area like project management [a personal strength] and to say well where are the synergies between this and what my colleagues are doing, so it is that bigger picture and it’s kind of saying as a business what are we trying to achieve? How can I make a contribution here?” [Training Manager]

Additionally, the ‘academic language’ of the MBA programme was seen to make subtle contributions to practice. Below we see evidence of the manager no longer being ‘overawed’ by business language, resulting in changes in the way the self and others are viewed:

“... you know people talk about, they’ll throw academics into it, and in the past some people do it and you think ‘I am a bit overawed by that’. Whereas now I have been through all of that and I understand it, so I think it having that inner belief that you are as good if not better than these people”. [Operations Director]

In sum, academic material is seen to make significant although subtle contributions to practice, facilitating an increased understanding of organisational issues, in turn prompting new ways of seeing.

DISCUSSION

Against a background of intensifying criticism of MBA programmes, the study set out to understand the ways in which MBA programmes are seen to contribute to management practice from the perspective of the MBA graduates themselves. Consistent with previous work, the study suggests that the MBA can provide valuable learning outcomes, and illustrates how such learning in turn is seen to inform actual management practice by facilitating the manager in seeing differently, in respect of self, others and organisation. The work here suggests that the relationship between MBA programmes and management practice is complex, with contributions to practice often being subtle and indirect.

The learning within the MBA programme here may be seen to represent a 'higher level of learning' (Cope, 2003) since the MBA was frequently associated with profound personal changes to thinking and behaviour. Of interest, the broadening of managers' thinking is in stark contrast to suggestions of closure of thought (Bloom, 1987). However, one might question whether such benefits are peculiar to the MBA; arguably such benefits may arise from a diverse range of experiences, quite divorced from management education. Alternatively, this consideration may say much about the nature of manager learning, that is, its contributions arise from a variety of sources, illustrating its 'boundaryless' character (Burgoyne and Reynolds, 1997).

Discussions of the peculiarity of MBA learning here aside, the identified benefits were nevertheless seen to in turn contribute to management practice. Generally it seems that MBA learning can be seen to make a qualitative difference to practice

rather than obvious quantitative improvements, suggesting a need for a broader understanding of educational outcomes to include the intangible (Snell and James 1994). Indeed, it has been argued that MBA learning facilitates seeing differently in various forms which is difficult to objectify. The work thus provides support for an indirect vocational role for the MBA as it provides a contribution which is not always immediately applicable (Holman, 2000). However, it might be suggested that increasing the number of ways events and situations may be understood aids the manager in dealing with unknown future possibilities, and thus the contribution to practice although indirect, may actually be of greater long term value to the manager.

Overall, the findings suggest that the MBA is seen to be of greater value to practice than critics contend. Critics such as Pfeffer and Fong (2002) argue that the MBA is doomed since it demonstrates little if any value to manager performance. However, it has been proposed here that whilst the value of the MBA may not be obvious and highly visible, the very real value to the practising manager should not be overlooked. There is perhaps then hope of a more promising future for the MBA.

It is acknowledged that the work here is an exploratory study and is subject to a number of limitations. Most obviously, the research focuses on a small sample of graduates from a single MBA programme, which raises caution to the wider generalisation of the research findings. The exclusive focus on the part time MBA student is also noted since arguably such students may be better placed to put their learning into practice; outcomes for the full time student may be somewhat different. Additionally, issues relating to the cross sectional nature of the sample are acknowledged. Whilst the present study offers the perceptions of the MBA graduate,

further work may also explore the opinions of organisational colleagues. However, it is hoped that the work provides a window into the complex relationship between MBA learning and management practice, and that insights generated here can offer starting points for further research, and more generally offer possibility for a more promising future for MBA programmes.

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