

Management Learning and the MBA: The Beast that Morphed into a Chameleon.

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Abstract

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Critique of the MBA is as widespread as the number of Business Schools and Management Departments offering the degree. Mintzberg (2004) summarises many of the extant arguments against the MBA, regarding it as overly managerialist, a poor example of Masters' level scholarship and as more instrumental to individual careers and a provider of significant revenue streams for Business Schools, than it is a vehicle for scholarship and learning. Mintzberg suggests that corporate MBAs are a solution to this problem since they allow reflexive and situated learning. This paper is an in-depth study of three UK Business Schools each offering a corporate MBA. It investigates to what extent sponsored MBAs exhibit signs of facilitating learning through the inter-relationships between their sponsoring organisation, the Business School and amongst the MBA students themselves. To what extent was there evidence of a common language and shared perspectives, for example, engendering the formation of communities of practice (or their equivalent) which initiate and develop organisational learning? The results indicate, first, that Business Schools differ in their characteristics and their inter-relationships with sponsoring organisations. The paper identifies three types of business school, university-based, non-university-based and a hybrid.

The data further suggest that the MBA should be studied in context. Far from being a unitary degree, the MBA seems highly fragmented and equifinal. A general critique of MBAs (such as that outlined by Mintzberg) would therefore seem misplaced since it treats the MBA as generic. Our data reveal the opposite. What characterises and colours the MBA depends on context.

From a sample of 1200 respondents, the data reveal a distinct lack of learning in sponsoring organisations as a result of their managers undertaking MBAs. Individual learning was jealously guarded by candidates undertaking an MBA, with many instances of refusing to share any knowledge at all. The individualisation and highly Darwinistic nature of MBA study were strongly supported by our data.

Introduction

Mintzberg (2004) argues that, as far as North American FTMBA (full-time) programmes go, the wrong people are being taught in the wrong ways. The ‘wrong people’ are students recently graduated from undergraduate courses, who score well on the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT), but who lack managerial experience.

‘Trying to teach management to someone who has never managed is like trying to teach psychology to someone who has never met another human being. Organizations are complex phenomena. Managing them is a difficult, nuanced business, requiring all sorts of tacit understanding that can only be gained in context’ (2004: 9).

These ‘tacit’ understandings point to the essence of management as far as Mintzberg (2004: 11-13) is concerned, that it is a *situated practice*, embodying art (insight, vision, intuition) and craft (experience, learning on the job), as much, if not more so, than science (the development of systematic knowledge through research). Taught in the ‘wrong ways’ means students are fed material palatable to staff and students alike and is material which students, in their immaturity, can best absorb. This is management knowledge as science, gleaned from systematic research and largely comprising analytical models and frameworks, with a stress on quantitative approaches and techniques. This codified, commodified, abstract knowledge that focuses on generic, functionally-oriented strategies is then ‘pour[ed] into that empty vessel called an MBA student’ (Mintzberg, 2004: 33), who lacks the experience to synthesise and contextualise such knowledge, let alone subject it to critical reflection on the basis of experience. Nevertheless, this pedagogic approach is acceptable to students because it ostensibly prepares them for lucrative jobs. A quick return is often a priority for FTMBA students, who are largely self-sponsoring on an expensive degree course. The downside, of course, is that demand drops for such programmes when economic downturn leads to fewer jobs for expensive analysts and the pay-off for large MBA fees seems less certain.

Such a pedagogic approach is also acceptable to many business school staff as discipline based research and research-led teaching are seen as the route to academic respectability. Historically, leading schools such as Carnegie Mellon and Stanford differentiated themselves from Harvard Business School and its claim to be the leading ‘professional’ school, teaching business management and strategic leadership through the ‘reality’ of the case method. This they achieved by proclaiming the importance of a ‘sophisticated command of analytical and research tools derived from fundamental disciplines’ (Gordon and Howell, 1959:100, cited in Mintzberg, 2004: 27). Indeed, in a retrospective interview, James March, who had taught at both Carnegie and Stanford, ‘claimed not only that the business school’s “primary role” is to produce research (“contribute to knowledge”) but that this beneficially happens through the “subterfuge” of “[l]arge expenditures on research...concealed within the rhetoric and accounting of education”’ (Schmutter, 1995:59, cited in Mintzberg, 2004: 29). As Murray (1988: 71, cited in Mintzberg, 2004:30) put it: “[H]ow strong is the gravitational pull of ‘respectability’ [even if] “the only business that could seem to benefit [from such attitudes] would be the business school business!”’

Mintzberg (2004: Chapters 3-6) goes on to identify many deleterious effects of this pedagogy. These range from an overemphasis on creating shareholder value as opposed to organic growth (cf. Beer and Nohria, 2000), on exploitation (short term gains) rather than exploration (building long term capabilities), on creating a lean and mean society rather than one with concern for human values. Not surprisingly, the typical FT MBA student may be characterised by 'self-centred individuality' (Mintzberg, 2004: 103). The so-called 'managers' emerging from such programmes tend to be 'out of balance' and have a 'calculating' or a 'heroic' style that is 'disconnected managing' (Mintzberg, 2004: Chapter 4, p.93, Figure 4.1). The answer, Mintzberg proposes, is to balance the art, craft and science of management, to develop 'engaging' managers. This involves a change in both the target recipients of an MBA education and its pedagogy.

The solution (according to Mintzberg) is that the MBA student ideally should be an experienced mid-career manager, sponsored by an employing organisation, that should send not one, but a cohort of managers to learn together on a modular, consortial MBA programme. Pedagogy should be based on utilising the managers' wide-ranging experience in the education process, encouraging their sharing of competencies and their development of critical reflexivity while emphasising the importance of spreading learning back into the sponsoring organisations and suggesting mechanisms to achieve this result. An example of such an experimental programme is the International Masters in Practicing [sic] Management (IMPM), run by a consortium of international business schools (based in the UK, Canada, India, Japan and France) and an informal consortium of large organisations (including Alcan, BT, Matsushita, Lufthansa and the Red Cross). Such a programme aims to develop practising managers with five 'mindsets': 'reflective' (about self, at a UK business school), 'worldly' (about context, India), 'analytical' (about organisation, Canada), 'collaborative' (about relationships, Japan), 'action' (about change, France).

Mintzberg rejects the 'codification' and 'commodification' approach to knowledge (or 'the epistemology of possession' as Cook and Brown, 1999, term it). His approach to designing an MBA rests on a commitment to 'situated learning', or the 'epistemology of practice' (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Cook and Brown, 1999). 'Situated learning' has several characteristics. First, knowledge is not separable from practice, but is a social accomplishment where knowledge and practice mutually constitute each other (Orlikowski, 2002). Secondly, knowledge does not just reflect the world but is reciprocally generative of social reality, through a process of 'enactive sensemaking' or collective negotiation, whereby 'people who act in organizations often produce structures, constraints, and opportunities that were not there before they took action' (Weick, 2001:225). Thirdly, learning is not about the transfer of knowledge that can be individually possessed, but is about learning to function as an 'insider' in a 'community of practice'. 'Learners are acquiring not explicit, formal "expert knowledge", but the embodied ability to behave as community members...the central issue in learning is *becoming* a practitioner not learning *about* practice' (Brown and Duguid, 1991: 48, authors' italics).

Mintzberg (2004:254) emphasises reflexive learning rather than teaching. In an IMPA context, two 'communities of practice' come together: mid-career managers belonging to a specific organisation or consortial member of the programme and the

community of practice of the cohort members as participants of a particular cycle or iteration of the IMPA. Knowledge development, through enacted sensemaking, is encouraged by a process which Mintzberg (2004: 264) terms 'experienced reflection'.

Mintzberg (2004:181) argues that interesting developments in MBA design which conform to his preferred pedagogy of situated learning are occurring in the UK. One such development is the Corporate MBA (CMBA), where cohorts of experienced managers from a single company (or from a consortial group of companies) come together to participate in MBA programmes that, to a greater or lesser extent, have been customised to meet to various concern of the participant companies. Furthermore, these MBAs are modular, allowing the participants to work on assignments inter-module that apply classroom conceptual exposure and reflection to real-life 'back-home' applied assignments and projects and to re-introduce the resultant learning back into the classroom with iterative effect. Here are potential communities of practice, both as learning communities on the modular sessions and as networked learning communities operating back in the organisation.

Such an argument begs a number of questions, not least the research questions addressed in this paper:

- Do CMBA result in the development of the learning communities of practice on the MBA course itself?
- Do CMBA give rise to cross-functional (and cross-organisational) communities of learning and practice once the MBA has been completed?
- How does the interorganisational relationship (IOR) between participant business schools and organisations influence or shape the potential development (or lack of it) of such communities of practice?

Sample and Method

During 2002-2003 the authors undertook an ESRC funded research project to explore these questions. The details of the research design and methodology may be found in earlier papers (Legge et al., 2004).

Briefly, sample and method comprised an earlier pilot study which informed the main research (reported here). The main research comprised a study of business school/corporate relationships in the mutual development of corporate/consortial MBAs (CMBAs). The sample included six business school/corporate relationships (the six including one consortial programme of three companies). Three open programmes were also studied by way of a control. Data collection was by means of 40 semi-structured interviews with business school programme directors/administrators (22) and their corporate equivalents (18) and a web-based questionnaire to course participants. The latter comprised a sample of 1200 respondents, 60 from each of two intakes across 10 programmes and achieving a response rate of 42 percent. Although the data allow quantitative analysis of some aspects of the research (such as participant perceptions) we focus in this paper on the

rich qualitative data that the study yielded drawn from a wide range of informants. In this way, we seek to address the questions and assumptions posed by Mintzberg.

The sample was selected to achieve wide variation on a number of key characteristics (identified from the pilot study) and these are listed in Table 1.

TABLE I
SAMPLE OF BUSINESS SCHOOLS IN THE STUDY

BUSINESS SCHOOL	MBA PROGRAMME	UNIVERSITY-BASED	CLIENT/SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP
A	Consortium of 3 companies (financial services, transportation services, pharmaceuticals)	Non-University based	School is extremely client-centred
B	Single company corporate programme (IT multi-national)	Non-University based (but with university links) 'Hybrid'	School is highly client centred
C	Two separate corporate programmes (heavy manufacturing and professional services).	University based	School is moderately client centred

Findings

1) The Business Schools and Their Client Relationships

School A: Both Business School and Corporate Programme Directors recognise that A *'isn't strictly an academic institution'* and that *'we're not publication driven'*, but see this as a positive advantage. Most of the staff have had prior careers in industry and generally have an MBA as their higher degree, so are both similar in background to and *'talk the same language'* as their students. Status in the School does not derive from research reputation, but from programme management and developing long and fruitful relationships with clients who are prepared to pay a premium price for a highly customised programme. The School is seen by the Corporate Programme Directors as having a high degree of empathy with their students.

The words of one member of staff, *'I think you'd find it difficult to find anybody that was more flexible than we are'* are echoed by the Corporate Programme Directors:

'[School] A bent over backwards to create a partnership' (Financial Services) and *'[School] A focused on our needs'* (Transportation Services). The three consortial companies were unanimous in what they sought from School A: a practically focused course, emphasising 'soft' skills (e.g. in personal and leadership development), learned in small, highly interactive groups and taught by empathetic staff with business experience:

'They are extremely good and better than most of the business schools in the combination of theory and practice, in my opinion a big strength of them' (Pharmaceuticals).

Both staff of School A and the Corporate Programme Directors of this Consortial MBA without exception agree that School A is a learning organisation (if somewhat hazy about its definition): *'Learning organisation is too abstract, learning is about people'* (Pharmaceuticals); *'Organisations don't learn, number one..it's about building capacity among people within an organisation for continuous learning'* (Financial Services)). This may be partly because the Faculty are so responsive to their clients, but also because, in their mutual interest in bringing in/maintaining client relationships (their first priority), School staff are highly interactive and sharing:

'(School A) is a close knit group both in terms of participants and the people that are managing the programmes. Normally, if there is a good idea, then within two-three months, it is spread across all programmes. It's quick to implement good ideas and to make changes if we think that something isn't working' (School A, Programme Director).

School B, which focuses primarily on executive teaching, lies half-way between the extremely responsive, practically-oriented School A and a conventional university business school (C)--a sort of 'hybrid'. While its early history had been similar (if more bureaucratically oriented) to that of School A, it now has partnership arrangements with a university that are changing the nature of its staffing and culture.

'...the MBA history was about action learning projects...so staffs' background was very different from a traditional university business school background...the people running the programmes today came from that sort of background and that continues to be influential in the programme today and no doubt colours the kind of people we recruit and all of that...[but] some of the people we recruit now come from a more traditional university background and are stronger in their belief in the kind of more academic approach-most people attracted to here recognise the value and synergy we believe exists between the two' (School B, Programme Director)

Like School A, it is seen by its staff and clients as being client responsive, with an emphasis on practical application, but with university imposed limits on degree and speed of responsiveness, that are accepted by staff:

'[We are] very receptive. Probably too much for our own good sometimes. I mean we do, as I say, have very regular feedbacks and, wherever we can, we modify things, but, as I say, sometimes we can't because there's academic regulations that prevent it'

and we've so far found that once this is pointed out and made clear, then it's accepted' (School B, Programme Administrator).

This is not to imply that there are major tensions in the School-client relationship. On the contrary, the Corporate Programme Director spoke of the relationship as being *'a real partnership', 'an excellent relationship', 'they try to satisfy as much as they can'*, whilst the School B programme directors and administrators reckoned that despite constraints the School is *'very receptive'*.

In contrast to School A, however, there is no consensus among both its staff and between staff and the Corporate Programme Director as to whether School B is a learning organisation:

'Yes, it allows individuals and teams a lot of freedom and encouragement to learn' (School B, Programme Director M).

'We could be better. We're not bad, we're certainly not the worst, but we are probably not number one either' (School B, Programme Director C)

'No. In general, business schools are not good at being learning organisations...' (Corporate Programme Director).

Informants recognised that, while learning might be shared within a course team, it was not shared as much as it could be across course teams and that academic individualism undermined the motivation and the perceived necessity to share information. Comments such as: *'we tend to go our own way', 'individual agendas, individual areas of interest, not looking at each other's work', 'can't push Faculty to work together'* were echoed by both School and Corporate staff.

School C is a research-led university business school, which, unlike Schools A and B, teaches a full portfolio of programmes from undergraduate through to a large doctoral programme. Many of the academic staff say they prefer to teach on specialist masters, undergraduate programmes and undertake doctoral supervision rather than teach on MBA programmes. While it prides itself on excellence in teaching, this tends to be defined in terms of *'cutting-edge'* content that the client is privileged to receive. (Indeed, the word *'client'* is not favoured, as many of the academic staff still prefer the word *'student'*). In *School C*, academic staff tend to think no further than delivering academically rigorous material within the classroom or in supervision. Corporate liaison is seen generally as the responsibility of non-academic programme administrators. Academic staff know that research excellence will deliver fast promotion as long as the teaching is adequate (i.e. *'there is not a riot in the classroom'*). In order to entice academics to take on programme direction roles with respect to corporate clients, an additional fee may be paid on top of regular salary. It is largely the *non-academic* programme administrators that are highly client focused and act as intermediaries on a day-to-day basis between academic teaching staff and the corporate client.

School C is, nevertheless, fairly responsive to clients. One of its corporate programmes represents a continuing relationship with the client organisation for over fifteen years. This is jointly managed by an academic director who has a personal

research interest in the industry involved and readily customises much of his material to the sponsor's interest. In relation to this client, then, the School adopts a posture more closely resembling the 'hybrid' model. However, this practice is considered by many of School C's academics as raising unrealistic expectations on the part of the sponsor about the extent to which they, too, would customise their material. As the co-director admits, extensive customisation is not the norm on the programme:

'They're [Faculty] teaching theory and they're teaching case studies from which you are supposed to induce theories, so they don't care and they don't make any effort at all to tailor it to X, they're just teaching an MBA programme' (School C, Programme Director, Academic C).

The Corporate Programme Director of the second programme in School C (professional services) did not want programme content to be tailored to the company as the quality of the content was recognised and the sponsor did *'not want to diminish standards'*. Where high responsiveness was required (and found) was in scheduling and general 'housekeeping' issues, matters dealt with by School C's non-academic programme administrators. As one commented:

'There wasn't a thing that the students asked for that, provided it didn't contravene the university's regulations, wasn't given to them....I think we found it very difficult to refuse their requests because they were in a strong position, they knew they were a big client' (School C, Programme Administrator, Non-academic J).

School C's selling point to corporate clients is its position in various league tables rating MBAs, undergraduate teaching and doctoral programmes (notably those of the Financial Times, Times and Economist) and in its various badges of MBA and institutional accreditation (AMBA, AACSB and EQUIS), not to mention its RAE rating. It promises to deliver research-led teaching and 'intellectual stretch' rather than the 'soft' skills and practical applications of Schools A and B.

Interestingly, compared to the other Schools, there was a high degree of cynicism about whether School C was truly a learning organisation, encapsulated in comments such as:

'I have a very cynical view of academic life and therefore I think the notion that we have an open network and communicate freely with each other is naïve' (School C, Programme Director, Academic B).

2) The Client Companies and Organisational Learning

School A and its Consortial Partners: The three Consortial partners (financial services, pharmaceuticals and transportation services companies) all saw the MBA 'as a branding device to encourage the recruitment and retention of top talent, as a tool for its subsequent development and as a visible signal of their companies' commitment to 'continuous learning'. All three companies had considered that a consortial arrangement would stimulate a cross-fertilisation of ideas that would be facilitated by School A's practical, small group, 'hands-on' approach. Further the companies' coming together as a consortium was a result of their belief that they

faced a similar set of challenges and could learn from each other, in the safe knowledge that, belonging to different industries, they were not in competition.

All were large companies, in mature, highly competitive markets and all three were grappling with issues of change management within the context of a co-ordinated market economy confronted by globalisation. All were concerned that School A's programme should develop leadership skills in course participants who would have major roles in planned change management initiatives.

School A's MBA was designed explicitly to encourage the application of lessons learnt in the classroom back into the organisation, by means of a year long internal consultancy type project. Transfer of learning both between the consortial companies and from classroom to organisation was perceived to have taken place by both Corporate Programme Directors and by School staff alike.

School B and its Partner (IT Company): The IT company had four major objectives for its corporate MBA programme. First, it was considered to signal the company's aspiration to become a learning organisation that was an important part of its commercial branding. There was much talk on the part of the Corporate Programme Director of '*refreshing the knowledge base*', '*leveraging the best knowledge*', '*benefiting from 'the latest academic thinking*' and of the MBA being '*part of continuous, life-long learning*'. Secondly, the programme was seen to be for the development of and (to a much lesser extent) the retention of high flyers. Participants are carefully selected by the company to attend the programme. Once selected, it is difficult for a candidate to say 'no', although in theory this is possible. Thirdly, there was the conscious wish, via the creation of virtual learning teams and team building exercises, to encourage team-working and networking. This must be seen against the background of the IT company attempting to change its traditional structures and culture of functional silos into a highly matrixed structure on a global basis. This involves the development of a common language; the broadening out of technical specialists destined for general management roles and the knowledge of the global company itself which participants gain through internal networking via the virtual teams. E-learning through virtual teams was a final learning objective and one that was central in the choice of School B to deliver the corporate MBA (the development of an e-based programme).

The programme designed for the IT company is a Distance Learning MBA, using software that had been designed by the company itself. School B was considered by the company to be the leading business school in e-learning and delivery and therefore was a suitable partner in developing the software. Initially this would be for the benefit of the company's management development, but ultimately, it was hoped that the partnership would deliver a de-bugged product for a wider marketplace. The School Programme Director spelt out the mutually beneficial and symbiotic relationship:

'I mean there's a uniqueness about X [IT company] which is the fact that their business is the business of IT and electronic working and e-learning is one of their business arms....So we're teaching, using what they sell and, therefore, that makes it a much more important thing for them to win. They almost can't lose—they have to

make it work because it is their solutions that are being used on the programme...they are selling the whole concept that you can learn electronically, they are selling that to people in the marketplace, so they themselves have to be seen to be able to do it... It's rather a unique situation for us at X, because we're both teaching their people and working as a partner to develop part of their own service offering ...and so X talk about us as both a customer of their's, because we use this product and services, and we're a supplier, and that is a very different relationship than with any other corporate we have' (School B, Programme Director R).

Both the Corporate Programme Director and School B felt that the School had delivered on these objectives but, as will be discussed below, course participants were less sanguine.

School C and Its Two Corporate Programmes: The manufacturing company is in a beleaguered, highly cyclical industry with a history of surplus capacity, contraction in the west and of loss-making. The firm's priority has been cost-cutting, chiefly through downsizing, but also, in the surviving plants, through process improvement. The process of rationalisation has recently involved a merger with a Netherlands company, perceived to have a complementary portfolio, but which has a very different culture and one which is unfamiliar with a CMBA. Times and the relationship with School C are changing as recently a new Corporate Programme Director has been appointed who comes from the Netherlands merger partner and wishes to '*shake the tree a bit*'.

The major motivations for the programme, which began fifteen years ago, are the development of a senior management cadre and the retention of talent. With the advent of privatisation, there was recognition that a new cadre of managers needed to be developed to cope with a less cushioned environment and that engineering specialists needed to be broadened. An MBA is also a carrot with which to retain talent that might consider leaving the industry. Course participants display a high degree of loyalty to both the industry and the organisation. There is unanimity among several Corporate Programme Directors and their School counterparts and, indeed, by course participants themselves, that to be chosen to undertake the corporate MBA is a very valuable mark of recognition, that one had been selected to join an elite club which, on the basis of observed promotion patterns, is the doorway to senior management:

'They are the golden children of the organisation'.

'It's a high-flyers club, it's the tick in the box, it's the tap on the shoulder'.

Much stress is placed on the MBA providing the broader knowledge necessary for a senior management position and, to this end, a key feature of the course, prior to the dissertation, is an extended internal consultancy project, commissioned by the participant's senior line manager, invariably focusing on some aspect of business improvement. The presentation of the consultancy report in the presence of the divisional director and other senior management is a rite de passage in becoming a full member of the select club.

Changes to the programme that ensued (some 'skills' material taught in the Netherlands by consultants, some adjustments to modules) met with some resentment

both within the UK partner of the merged company (*'Don't break the legacy', 'don't f...k up the programme'*) and in School C (*'X has cocked us up in many, many ways'*).

The professional services firm contrasts with the manufacturing company on virtually every dimension. Revenue-generating, with high margins rather than cost-cutting and loss-making, resilient in downturns rather than vulnerable to recessions, prioritising client servicing rather than process improvement, a partnership rather than M-form structure, brand image all important rather than not cultivated, free floating professionals rather than loyalty to the industry—the two companies could not be more different.

This CMBA was designed to serve three major objectives, central to the key drivers of the business. First and foremost, it was explicitly designed to achieve the retention of their middle rank professionals, who played a key role in mentoring junior staff, and it represented an investment in their intellectual capital in a way consistent with their business strategy of developing a 'one-stop-shop' for their clients. The MBA, being a generalist degree, was considered useful in 'broadening' the perspectives and knowledge base of specialist professionals. Finally, it signalled to the client the level of investment that the firm was prepared to make to enhance the expertise of its staff. To secure this it was considered essential to select an elitist school that was appropriately badged and well-placed in the league tables. 'Simply the best', as the firm liked to consider itself, demanded a partnership with a premier league business school of like reputation.

3) *Course Participants and Learning*

Participants in all four programmes identified personal reasons (broaden knowledge and experience, intellectual stimulation, personal development and increased employability) as the major motivations as to why they had chosen to do an MBA and the majority felt that their expectations had been highly satisfied with respect to the first three. (With regard to 'improving employability', the majority response was a 'don't know' as the water had yet to be tested).

Less than a quarter of the total sample rated 'improving job performance' and only about five percent rated 'developing networks inside the organisation' as one of their top five reasons for doing the MBA. The MBA was seen to be a project of individual development, of individual badging and an individual achievement that might assist in promotion and general career development. 'Might' is the operative word, at least as far as the sponsoring companies were concerned. Both course participants and corporate programme managers from the IT and professional service companies were quite clear that it was performance on the job that counted for promotion, not the acquisition of an MBA, although an MBA might assist indirectly through enhancing performance.

Given that 'improving job performance' was not a prime reason for doing the MBA for most respondents, one might deduce that its role in career development lay mainly in improving employability. Generally speaking, over the sample as a whole, such networking that took place was with members of the participant's own intake (rather than across intakes) and during the course (not after the course had concluded). Over

three quarters of the participants did not think their organisation was a learning organisation in practice, but around a quarter of these thought their organisation was a *'learning organisation in rhetoric only'* and around ten percent *'in aspiration only'*. Less than ten percent of respondents typified their organisation as characterised by being 'open' or 'sharing'.

That said, respondents on the corporate MBA programmes discussed here differed from the open programme informants and differed as between each other. First, although not a high priority, corporate MBA participants were more likely than the sample as a whole to rate networking as one of their top five reasons for doing the MBA. Further, whereas over ninety percent of participants on open MBA programmes did *not* find themselves networking more frequently with colleagues who had been on their MBA programme as compared with those who had not, participants on all four of the CMBA programmes discussed here are twice as likely to network with colleagues on the course than colleagues who were not.

Two major differences characterise the responses from participants on the four programmes. First is their response to networking opportunities.

Respondents at School A are far more likely than participants on the other three programmes to network *outside* their organisation, to develop international networks and to rate positively the extent to which networking activities are available to them amongst their own intake, other intakes and after the programme is completed. This may be attributed in part to the consortial nature of the programme, but mainly to the well developed account management structure of School A, involving a large number of academic staff in programme management. Given the organisational focus on client responsiveness and servicing, this helped to maximise opportunities for bonding within each intake, with the business school and its members, and for inter-organisational networking during each MBA programme module. These opportunities were also facilitated by a well-developed alumni structure. There was flexibility to send different profile managers on different types of programme, refresher MBA courses and alumni events so that people could *'relive their experience'*.

Respondents at School B, from the multinational IT company, were more likely than participants on the other CMBA programmes to rate highly opportunities for developing networks within their own organisation and within their own intake, but not to have their expectations met about developing networks outside the company. A high level of networking with members of the same intake over work issues suggests that the e-learning virtual teams did deliver a measure of teambuilding, if only for the instrumental purposes of completing group work assignments.

The respondents most likely to rate networking as important and to consider their expectations met, and to record the highest level of networking both within their intake, across intakes and in the organisation generally were participants from the heavy manufacturing company at School C. *'It's a bonding experience, it's a group thing, it's an interface with each other and it's a sharing of common problems and common needs and forming that "class of 85" mentality....But they'll talk to each other in those terms: "I'm Andy P5", "I'm Andy P7", and you know they have those numbers. We don't have a little Harvard ring, but if we did, they'd probably all wear them'* (School C, Programme Director, Academic). Given the culture of the 'high

flyers club', this is hardly surprising. It may be summed up by one respondent's comment (about networking opportunities): *'Very much so as now we have a peer group of other [X company] personnel in all areas of the company which was my "Year Group". An MBA colleague is now my boss!'*

Informants from the professional services company (School C) were the one group to score opportunities for networking with other intakes and within the organisation generally higher than networking with their own intake. An explanation for this may be found in the culture of the professional services firm (cf. Grey, 2003). It was reported by both Corporate and School C Programme Directors that, during a week's module, *outside formal teaching situations*, course participants attempted to catch up on their daily work, particularly client liaison. In any non-programmed time, participants were glued to their mobile phones and lap top computers and reported with pride that after the evening group sessions were over, rather than continuing in the bar, they put in four hours work for clients. As two respondents put it: *'The further you are away from billing, the harder it is to justify'* and *'It was expected by my bosses that the MBA would not impact too much on my chargeability'*.

Broadly speaking over eighty percent of participants were either happy or very happy with their School and course format. While the informants at School A record the highest levels of satisfaction, closely followed by those at School C (heavy manufacturing), the least satisfied respondents were from School B (IT multinational). These participants were more likely to wish they had done a full time MBA or gone to another school. One interpretation of this response is as follows. Participants were aware that their organisation had a very performance driven culture. One aspect of this is that, while all MBA fees and expenses are paid for by the organisation, the students are not given any time off for study. All has to be done in their own time/holiday entitlement. As the Corporate Programme Director put it:

'the organisational culture(of the IT firm) is very much performance driven. No one really looks at the time that is invested—everyone looks at the results. So these people are very busy and, on top of that, they have to manage their studies, and no one asks how they do that, everyone expects the performance basically both in the business and study arena and at the same time they have families who also have a claim....'

Further, the participants know that the MBA is not a guarantor of promotion—it is performance and results that count (*'it helps the career to a certain extent, but it's not the only thing....they have to perform...they won't be promoted just because they've done an MBA'*). If doing an MBA takes time away from achieving work performance, but at the same time those selected feel that they hardly can say "no", they are likely to feel that they are placed in a double bind. Also, the [relative] dissatisfaction may partly reflect a general dissatisfaction with a distance learning format (in the total sample, including informants on open programmes, the distance learning MBA participants were most likely to opt for a different format).

Given the firm is fully funding the direct costs of the CMBA and that participants have been especially singled out and selected as high performers, their psychological contract with their company may inhibit explicit recognition (and expression) of negative feelings about the company's lack of work-life balance support and their

doubts about the CMBA's ultimate payoff, other than as a ticket out of company X. It is interesting that informants on this programme, as compared to the other three, were more likely to cite 'increased employability' as a major reason for undertaking the MBA.

Individual and Organisational Learning via the CMBA

We can now return to the questions that we posed at the beginning of the paper.

- To what extent do CMBA's give rise to communities of practice, both as learning communities on the course and as continuing communities on return to the workplace?
- To what extent are CMBA's more appropriate vehicles to enhance organisational learning as compared to the FTMBA?

There is some evidence of the development of learning communities while on the course. Informants remarked on the benefits of brainstorming in non-hierarchical groups. Working in virtual teams was seen by the Business School B Programme Director as '*building up a community*' and certainly participants felt they had learnt a great deal about their company through this enforced internal networking. All stakeholders spoke of the importance of participants developing a common MBA language, although they noted this could also backfire in terms of general organisational learning, since the language could intimidate colleagues at work who had not undertaken an MBA.

Do these nascent learning communities continue on return to the workplace? On the positive side, it would appear that CMBA's *do* generate more networking among their participants than open programmes, networking that, in theory at least, may provide a building block in the development of a community of practice. The networking on the Consortial Programme was notable for claimed learning between companies, facilitated by School A's emphasis on soft skills, small group working and a 'practical' approach. Networking was considered by participants to result in far greater and broader knowledge of the company itself. The most intensive networking seems to have occurred in School C, with the manufacturing company programme, as a result of both the company motivations for the programme (development of a senior management cadre) and its longevity.

Learning transfer here seems to be related to two factors. First, programme design encouraged application of MBA concepts to business problems (learning applied to company related projects in both project work and dissertation, much customised input by an academic director having research interests in the industry). Secondly, the strong support of sponsoring senior management, often themselves early participants on and beneficiaries of the programme ('the legacy') was crucial. Nevertheless, even here, the role of this CMBA in developing a learning organisation may be questioned. Certainly the new Corporate Programme Director was sceptical about how much double-loop learning was taking place, seeing the programme as more of a mechanism for creating a cosy UK-oriented management club rather than a dynamic company. Further, one of the Business School's Programme Directors had misgivings

about the extent of organisational learning as an outcome of the MBA, remarking that there was little learning *across* businesses within the company and that more could be done to develop learning across generations of intakes.

Despite these positive signs, what emerged most clearly were the inhibitors in maintaining learning communities and attempting to develop a learning organisation via the MBA. The data point to two major reasons that inhibited learning transfer in the organisations:

- Difficulties in transferring knowledge.
- The nature of the inter-organisational relationship (IOR) between the Business School and the sponsoring organisations.

We discuss these below.

Knowledge Transfer and the Inter-Organisational Relationship

MBA ‘knowledge’ tends to be tacit, context-specific and ever-evolving as opposed to ‘codified’ (and thus is more difficult to transfer). The development, absorption, assimilation, (re-)combination, distribution, application and leveraging of knowledge to achieve organisational learning are predominantly people-based activities, requiring direct interaction between individuals in the organisation. Knowledge transfer depends upon the ways in which organisations facilitate, guide or limit the development of knowledge transfer and the interactions between particular specialists enabling them to integrate knowledge for particular outcomes. These two elements, the knowledge itself and the mechanisms of interaction and integration, comprise the ‘knowledge base’ of the organisation (Coombs and Hull 1998; Leonard-Barton 1995; Metcalfe and De Liso 1998; Spender 1996).

Much of von Hippel’s (2000) work captures how the personalised, tacit, contingent and context-specific nature of knowledge make it ‘sticky’ and therefore difficult to transfer, share or integrate. Our research suggests MBA knowledge may correspond to such ‘stickiness’ of transfer. Table 2 summarises the main reasons for the relative lack of knowledge transfer to the sponsoring organisation. They are a combination of individual and organisational factors.

TABLE 2

KEY FACTORS INHIBITING KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER FROM MBA TO ORGANISATION

ORGANISATIONAL OBJECTIVES	INDIVIDUAL OBJECTIVES	ORGANISATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Main objective is to secure co-branding with a top rated business school. • Retention carrot • Mutual prestige matters more than learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-interest in keeping knowledge gained to oneself. • Self-interest in using the MBA to increase employability in another organisation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boss not supportive of MBAs. • Risk averse. • Performance driven. • Lack of continuity in business school/corporate relationship.
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Performance-driven cultures inhibit learning. Whether expressed in terms of billable hours or meeting targets of income generation or cost-cutting, MBA learning had to take second place to the immediate demands of the job and in-tray, even if it was recognised that in the long term the MBA would make them better managers. This pressure of work resulted in a highly instrumental attitude to MBA learning. *‘There are a lot of mercenaries like me who just want to get in and out and get a degree’.*

Not all bosses were supportive of people taking time out to pursue an MBA, particularly if they had no say in the decision and were concerned that it might have a detrimental effect on the employee’s performance at work. Short term-ism rather than the longer view still seems evident in many informants’ experience.

In our sample, CMBAAs were developed in large companies that are risk averse. Attempting to use MBA knowledge for double-loop learning and the implementation of radically new ideas is considered too risky. Many stories emerged of a failure to experiment with new ideas on the basis of *‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’.*

There are political reasons that inhibit knowledge sharing. An informant from the professional services company made the point that, where promotion depends on the individual’s possession of perceived valuable and inimitable competencies, knowledge gained on the MBA might be useful to impress clients, but not necessarily to share with colleagues in an ‘up or out’ culture and nor to alienate the boss: *‘..the objective with the client is always to show off that you know something which they are going to pay for, whereas you are worried internally that although knowledge is power and knowledge is promotion, you don’t ever want to make your boss look stupid...you know knowledge is power in our business and sharing knowledge is perceived to be limiting your career..’*

When an organisation’s chief motivation for initiating a Corporate MBA is retention or branding, it is perhaps not surprising that there is little evaluation or follow-up on the learning that has taken place. As one participant of the professional services company put it: *‘there were very loose objectives set around sharing knowledge in the organisation, but this was a paper exercise and it was never referred to again’.* Another added: *‘Foolishly, there was nothing to leverage the knowledge’.*

Similarly, if an individual is seeking an MBA to increase employability, including career progression outside the sponsoring organisation, the development of an MBA community of practice *within* the organisation can be undermined by individuals leaving the organisation.

Perhaps the greatest inhibitor of maintaining MBA communities of practice via C MBA programmes is the lack of continuity, due to wider organisational changes. School C's programme which had continued for fifteen years, was exceptional in this respect. Even here, given the change in the Corporate Programme Director (and a perceived post merger shift in the power balance in senior management towards continental Europeans), the programme was facing an uncertain future and business school staff wondered whether it might face '*death by a thousand cuts*'. One of the CMBA in this study no longer exists due to the demise of the professional services company. Several of the Business School programme directors reminisced about other corporate/consortial MBA programmes with which they had been involved, that had been discontinued following the loss of a product champion, a change in the CEO or a merger.

Conclusions

What clearly emerged from this research was that, quite apart from obvious differences between full-time/ part-time, two year/one year, face-to-face/ distance learning variants of the MBA, even within one (corporate) mode the MBA could not easily be characterised as a single, standardised entity. Rationale for the programme, content, delivery, standards and syllabi differed markedly across the three Business Schools studied. It would be more accurate to talk about four different modes of delivery and content which finished as being an MBA, giving the impression of a standardised product, but which turned out to be very different. Our data strongly suggest that the MBA should be studied in context. Despite the best efforts of the accrediting bodies, far from being a unitary degree, 'the' MBA seems highly fragmented and equifinal. A general critique of MBAs, such as that outlined by Mintzberg, would seem misplaced since it treats the MBA as generic. Our data reveal the opposite. What characterises and colours the MBA depends on context. It is a many-headed beast and we would be well advised to pay attention to the differences in context which in turn reveal different tensions and questions about the potent and widespread symbol of the MBA.

Without doubt, the CMBA programmes we looked at delivered immense benefits in terms of participants' individual personal and educational development. But the learning was perceived as just that - an individual possession and achievement, if partially gained in a group context. Sharing knowledge and maintaining contacts with fellow participants for the development of organisational learning, let alone a learning organisation, was not high on their agendas compared to personal achievement and growth. The corporate nature of the MBA seems to have done little to counteract the 'self-centred individuality' of the FT MBA that Mintzberg complains of. Indeed, most participants as well as Corporate Programme Directors found the concept of a learning organisation, as opposed to individual learning, to be confusing. Most considered that their organisation's talk about becoming a learning organisation was

in rhetoric alone. Most recognised their organisational culture as performance driven. Nor is this very surprising when most of the organisations were competing in (or competing with) liberal market economies where short term-ism predominates.

Finally, this research would suggest that Mintzberg's high aspirations for his IMPA appear just that: aspirations that are likely to succumb to the realpolitik of large, bureaucratic organisations driven by short-term performance measures and by individual participants whose chief motivations are personal rather than organisational gain.

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