Social justice and a distance education business education curriculum: unlikely bedfellows?

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Abstract

Business schools have been accused of being the 'academy of the apocalypse', serving and perpetuating greed and 'rapacious capitalism'. There are increasing calls for business schools to redefine the purpose of business and to empower students to serve broader society whilst being profitable. Social justice is not considered to be high on the agenda of the curricula of many business schools, on the contrary. While the debate rages on regarding the complicity of business schools in pursuing a capitalist path, an important question is whether students and (potential) employers care about social justice as an essential element of the MBA curriculum?

This paper shares the findings of a study undertaken to establish the expectations of various stakeholders including students, faculty and employers on the curriculum and pedagogy of the MBA curriculum in an open and distance learning institution. The study indicates that social justice issues are very low on the 'wish list' of students and employers, while representatives from the faculty had differing views regarding the value of including social justice issues in the MBA curriculum.

Introduction

While this paper specifically focuses on the role of business schools in open, distance and e-learning (ODEL) in serving social justice, the functions of business schools are embedded in the broader discourses regarding the increasing influence of neo-liberalism on higher education (see for example Giroux, 2003; Lynch, 2006). Business schools are perhaps more guilty than higher education in general of providing 'pedagogy of the privileged' (Nurenberg, 2011; Schumpeter, 2009) or 'pedagogy *for* the privileged (Curry-Stevens, 2005; emphasis added). These pedagogies stand in stark contrast to the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator who originally coined and explored the notion of 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (1972).

Though higher education as a whole is accused of having sold out to 'rapacious capitalism' (Giroux, 2003, p.181; see also Blackmore, 2001; Lynch, 2006); business schools in particular have been called upon to 'make room for people who are willing to bite the hands that feed them' (Schumpeter, 2009, p.85). While there is vast disagreement regarding the extent to which business schools can be held accountable for the economic collapse since 2009 (see, for example, the report published by the Global Foundation for Management Education, 2010), there is general agreement that ethical conduct, corporate citizenship, social justice and 'planetary citizenship' should receive urgent attention in business school curricula (eg Mintzberg, 2002; Mintzberg, Simons & Basu, 2002; Prinsloo, Beukes & De Jongh, 2006).

Distance education or cross-border education is also increasingly accused of being imperialistic (see for example Blackmore, 2001). Not only is ODEL seen as a viable and highly profitable market (Giroux, 2003, p.190), there is increasing pressure from the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to liberalise all sectors of the economy globally, and redefine education as a tradable service rather than a public one (Lynch, 2006, p.4).

Higher education in general, and business schools in particular, is therefore caught up in a 'maelstrom' where these different discursive currents 'continue to widen, and … become more turbulent' (Barnett, 2004, p.70). This leads to a 'cluster of fragility' which can (and should) result in self-understanding (Barnett, 2004, p.71). An essential element of higher education, ODEL, and business schools' self-understanding is to clarify the perceptions of a range of stakeholders regarding the 'what' should be taught and 'how' it should be taught. And social justice does not appear to be high on the list…

Student, faculty and employers play a crucial role in the design, development and delivery of the curriculum – and their views and perceptions crucially influence the curriculum and its realisation. What do key stakeholders 'want' from a qualification such as an MBA? Do they have or perceive a need for a curriculum that addresses social justice and human rights?

This paper shares empirical research on the perceptions of students, faculty and sponsors linked to one business school on the challenges facing managers and on the skills and values that should inform MBA curricula and pedagogy.

Literature review

As stated above, the question regarding the extent to which higher education in general, and, more specifically, ODEL serve social justice essentially confronts the central mandate of business schools. While there are several initiatives to teach ethics, social justice and corporate social responsibility in business school curricula, there are also concerns that these efforts are simply 're-arranging the deckchairs on the Titanic (Prinsloo & Beukes, 2005) and not changing the face behind the 'mask' of corporate citizenship (Matten, Crane & Chapple, 2003).

Andrews and Tyson (2004) share their analysis and findings of a survey sent to more than 100 executives in over 20 countries to identify the knowledge, skills and attributes which young business leaders need to succeed. From their context at the London Business School, the researchers define their objective as follows: 'We needed to understand whether we were offering what they, and other employers throughout the world, needed' (Andrews & Tyson, 2004, p.1). The research questions were phrased as follows: 'What are the skills executives require? How might they change in the future? What must your people be able to do for your company to remain successful? And how can we help you meet these needs' (Andrews & Tyson, 2004, pp.3-5).

Andrews and Tyson (2004, p.3) express their surprise at the responses… 'The corporate leaders we interviewed indeed produced an extensive list of qualities they desired in future recruits, but almost none involved functional or technical knowledge. Rather, virtually all their requirements could be summed up as follows: the need for more thoughtful, more aware, more sensitive, more flexible, more adaptive managers, capable of being molded and developed into global executives'. This, according to Andrews and Tyson, is in stark contrast to the 'content specialisation' offered by business schools over the last four decades. Instead of furnishing students with knowledge, business schools need to equip students with 'skills and attributes, the means by which knowledge is acted upon'.

They go on to state further that business education has changed dramatically since the 1950's when business schools were accused of not being 'academic enough' to more recent years where business schools have been accused of not setting an ethical tone. Andrews and Tyson (2004, p.4) also discuss the accusation that business schools do not do enough to 'set an ethical tone' and have allowed the 'quantitative … to have driven out the moral, and the scientific… to have overwhelmed the human'. They quote Professor Ghoshal, previously professor of strategic and international management at the London Business School as saying 'Business schools do not need to do a great deal more to help prevent future Enrons; they need only to stop doing a lot that they currently do' (Andrews & Tyson, 2004, p.4). The need, then, is not to develop new courses, but to stop teaching some old ones (Andrews & Tyson, 2004, p.4).

With the above as background, Andrews and Tyson continue to discuss 'what companies want'. They feel that a primary requirement is to provide executive education which is 'global in its outlook and content … to prepare business leaders with global business capabilities.' The responses of the surveyed companies regarding the knowledge, skills and attributes do not include any

reference to 'social justice', 'equity', 'human rights', 'corporate citizenship', or 'sustainability' (Andrews & Tyson, 2004, p.5).

Despite initiatives such as those from the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) to redefine the purpose of business (see Prinsloo et al, 2006), and the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC)'s drive to get business schools and business to embrace principles such as human rights, eliminating all forms of child, forced and compulsory labour, contributing to more sustainable and responsible environmental practices and to fighting corruption, only a few international business schools and higher education institutions have committed to these principles (see an updated list of academic institutions at http://www.unglobalcompact.org/ParticipantsAndStakeholders/academic participation.html, viewed 28 April, 2011).

This literature review found very little evidence to show that social justice has moved to be of central concern in higher education, and more particular, in business school curricula.

Research context

This study was undertaken in the context of two modules comprising the first Stage of the MBA programme at the Open University Business School. This MBA is available via a distance learning route to students from countries around the world. The research focused on surveying students, tutors, faculty, administrators and employer sponsors involved with these modules regarding their perceptions and expectations of the content and delivery of an MBA programme.

MBA students could study one of two modules at Stage 1 – one provided a direct entry route onto the MBA for graduates with some middle/senior management experience. The other module provided an entry route for students who had worked through a previous entry qualification and were assumed to be aspiring managers. Both modules were also available for delivery in two formats: one provided direct tuition contact time via an online medium, the other provided direct tuition face-to-face.

Methodology

The survey was sent to over 2000 recipients. Questions were largely identical across all stakeholder groups, with simple rephrasing as appropriate, with the aim of obtaining comparable data for analysis. The survey sought to identify, from a range of perspectives, reasons why students would register for an MBA; the challenges that managers face; the knowledge, skills and values which managers need to face these challenges, the advantages and disadvantages of working in multicultural and international groups and the challenges in working in such groups. Each stakeholder group was also asked to list topics which they felt should be included in an MBA and their perceptions regarding the meaning of an 'international' degree.

The student survey was tested on a small pilot group. It was then sent to all students registered within a single year across both Stage 1 MBA modules (direct graduate route and non-graduate entry route) and for both face to face and online tuition versions of the modules. Tutor and relevant faculty and administrator contact details were provided by the Business School. Employers were selected as those having sponsored students on the modules for whom clear contact details were available.

The surveys were sent via a URL link in an explanatory email invitation to all stakeholder groups between 13 and 20 September, 2010 with a prompt sent after two weeks to those who had not responded, or who had started and not yet completed the survey. The survey was live for four weeks. The response rate from students was 23.9%, from faculty (academics, tutors and administrators) almost 58% and from employers 19.1%.

The researchers undertook a thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clark (2006, p.79). We agreed what might constitute a theme and whether to focus on a rich description of the data set, or a detailed account of any one particular aspect. In choosing between semantic or latent meanings, we opted for semantic meanings as described by Braun and Clark (2006, p.84), identifying themes within the text at face value, that is, we did not attempt to interpret further the possible meanings of the entries. We followed their guided process and became familiar with the data before generating initial codes. These were cross-checked between the three researchers and agreement sought, before being used to generate themes. Themes were subsequently cross-checked between the researchers and consensus sought on the scope of each.

Analysis and discussion of findings

Due to the volume of the dataset, we have not attempted to describe the outputs from our analysis of all of the survey questions here. For the purposes of this paper, we have presented our findings with regard to stakeholder perceptions on the reasons for study and the challenges and skills required by managers today, as well as those regarding stakeholder preferences of 'content' to be included in the MBA curriculum. It is important to note that the sample of sponsors was very small compared to the other stakeholder groups and therefore no generalisations can be made from the percentages of the sponsor stakeholder group.

Reasons for studying an MBA

Mintzberg (2004) and others have suggested that one of the most important reasons why students register for an MBA is to realise salary increases and promotion. In the survey, we asked respondees to provide their own suggestions as to why students register for an MBA (registered students from their own perspectives and the other stakeholders responding in general). A total of 1,492 responses from students (n-506) were coded and classified into themes given as: career progression; sponsored by employer; personal development; the status of the MBA; to improve management skills; increase in

knowledge; for the qualification; adding value to their organisations; networking and 'other'. 'career progression' included all responses referring to aspiring for promotion after completion of the MBA; job security; changing jobs; increasing chances of finding a different job; and/or seeking more responsibilities based on studying for an MBA. The category 'personal development' included responses referring to self-improvement; personal fulfilment; improving personal skills, etc. The 'other' category included responses such as 'Boredom while on maternity leave'; 'Interested in learning'; 'I wanted to spend my spare time constructively' and 'understanding of the world'.

The most provided reasons by *students* were clustered under career progression (28%); personal development and self-improvement (17%); increase in knowledge/expertise (15%) and improving management skills (9%). In fact, all stakeholders listed career progression most frequently. However, tutors, faculty, administrators and sponsors differed from students in their second choices, listing 'Improve management skills/acquiring specific skills' next. There was no significant difference between the different student responses registered on the different modules/versions, nor when the dataset was reviewed regarding gender, race, educational background or occupation.

Challenges faced by managers

The survey asked each of the stakeholder groups to list three main challenges faced by managers today. In asking this, we sought to understand the context for studying an MBA presented as, or at least perceived as, 'global' or 'international'. What were the issues that the various stakeholders assumed that (future) managers would face, and how might the MBA prepare them for those issues? We were curious to see whether 'social justice', 'environmental issues' and 'corruption' (as listed by the principles of the UNGC) would be mentioned.

Stakeholders ranked their answers in order of significance. The reasons provided by the student groups were analysed and thematically clustered. This resulted in 13 categories including: the changing context; people management; stakeholder/shareholder and network management; resource management; project and operation management; developing as manager and/or leader; information and knowledge management and ICTs; sustaining growth/strategic management/providing organisational leadership amidst complexity; ethics and environmental issues; personal; relationship with seniors/hierarchy; multicultural and diversity issues and 'other'.

As a whole group, students ranked the 'changing context' as the 4th most important challenge that managers face, while the other stakeholder groups considered it to be the most important. This is crucial for our exploration (and understanding) of the impact of internationalisation on curriculum design and delivery. It would seem that students were either unaware of the impact of the changing context on managers, or tend perhaps to focus on more immediate issues such as people management (e.g., conflict resolution; staffing issues; performance management, etc) and strategic planning in their day-to-day operational function as managers. It may be that dealing with the changing context is possibly the prerogative of senior and executive management, while Stage 1 MBA students are currently working at a more operational level.

Challenges that managers locating to a different country might face

Respondents were asked to imagine they were a manager transferred to a different country but working in the same role, and to list three challenges that they might face in the new location as a manager. The most frequently cited were those related to language issue and adapting to cultural change. The challenges mentioned were very varied and included: 'Understanding the cultural/social/ political/ economic milieu in which a company operates', 'Understanding local religion and the law', 'Overcoming language barriers – learning new business terminology as well as the local language', 'Cultural sensitivity', 'Legislative differences', 'Dealing with corruption' and 'Gender role differences'.

It was heartening to see that issues such as 'corruption' and 'gender role differences' were mentioned, although these were largely overshadowed by practical concerns such as communication and cultural differences.

Topics of interest for inclusion in a MBA curriculum

Stakeholders were given a list of possible topics that MBAs often include and asked to select all the topics that were of interest to them. Though 'social justice', and 'human rights' as topics were not specifically mentioned, the list included 'ethics', 'corporate citizenship', 'environmental issues' and 'intercultural issues'. 'Ethics' as a subject area was highly regarded by faculty with sponsors and students rating 'ethics' approximately 20 percentage points lower. 'Corporate citizenship' was rated highest by faculty, with sponsors rating 'corporate citizenship' 20 points lower than faculty, and students about 50 points lower than faculty.

Faculty rated 'environmental issues' highest of all of the stakeholder groups, while students and sponsors rated 'environmental issues' respectively 40 and 50 points lower than faculty. 'Intercultural issues' were rated very high by faculty, with students and sponsors rating it around 40 points lower than faculty.

Conclusions

This research has shown that initial claims that business schools may be regarded as 'uncritically supporting 'rapacious capitalism' (Giroux, 2003) are not true of all business schools. From our study, it was evident that faculty at least regarded 'ethics', 'corporate citizenship', 'environmental issues' and 'intercultural issues' as very important for inclusion into an MBA curriculum and so have an interest in promoting social justice in its broadest sense. What is evident from this research though is that students and employers are more concerned with the day-to-day challenges of being a manager in a highly complex world.

The research provides evidence that some business schools may be willing and ready to provide counter-narratives to greed and selfishness and to embrace social justice unreservedly.

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