

Chapter 9 Case Study

A British business school

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The United Kingdom has a peculiar business schools system. Most of the schools are linked to the public sector even at a post-graduate level, with just a few exceptions. However, unlike in the USA or Spain, they have been able to retain enormous prestige and often appear well placed in the top European rankings. Therefore, they have managed not only to attract international students all over the world but also to be successful in developing high quality and rigorous research, hiring among their staff scholars with impressive records of scientific publications rather than management practitioners. This work culture has helped build an academic community in which critical approaches have gained a relevant space inside a vibrant intellectual scene. While some of the schools currently enjoy a privileged position, there are problems and tensions related to dramatic changes in the environment and struggles among different schools of thought are foreseeable in the near future.

The aim of this case study is to point out and assess two issues: first of all, the importance of intellectual traditions in business schools, stressing the tensions between mainstream and critical positions as well as among critical positions; and secondly, the changes in the socio-economic context which might affect deeply the learning environment and the organizations and actors involved.

This case study is focused on a business school in the UK which brought together different views and approaches to management education (one was more engaged with business and the other had a more traditional academic approach). One group of academics aligned with a more business-friendly approach where students learn conventional skills (leadership, creativity, innovation, work ethics, teamwork, etc.) in order to integrate themselves in the corporation's culture; others understood their role in a very different way, seeing themselves as scholars who would unveil problems of entrepreneurial capitalism and its discontents (and realities) to students.

The second issue to be discussed in this case study is related to the influence of socio-economic changes in the context of the learning services provided by the school. The impact of the economic crisis has led to drastic adjustments in the British public sector. The mandate to universities to become more or less self-funding institutions (cutting public sector transfers) has raised fees by 300% leading to inequalities in access and deepening the problem of very indebted students. These changes cannot be understood without reference to a neo-liberalism that, due to the crisis, has become particularly aggressive and militant in recent years. According to some in the educational field, the neo-liberal political project has the goal of dismantling the public university. Due to this context, not only students' economic rights have been eroded – such as 'equal opportunities' – but lately some minor changes in the curricula to adapt courses' contents to employers' interests have been successfully pushed through, leading to a fear that academic freedom is on the verge of being at stake. There is also an additional challenge related to the instability in numbers of foreign students, as these students constitute an enormous source of income and might find other opportunities in

competitive but not so expensive business schools overseas. Debates about the need to offer them critical knowledge have also occurred, and the ideas about the kind of business education they require or expect are contested from all sides.

Many business schools have seen shifts in the balance of power toward the positions of the 'mainstream' academics, favoured by a political landscape coherent with pro-market views. The fact that future students might come from wealthier backgrounds is also used to legitimate changes, as they are pictured by management to be less engaged with the harder realities of MNCs. Despite this, an important number of critical scholars question the benefit in this turn and are trying to establish different strategies that engage with highlighting a broader and more critical understanding of business and its realities, trying to build bridges with other critical factions; they still represent an important group inside business schools and are academically quite important. Therefore, it would be unlikely that the marketization project ends up being easily imposed in such institutions. Yet it is impossible to predict whether the critical and independent identity of such schools and their research will fade away or will, ironically, become stronger as it will be dependant not only on the context outside the schools, but also on the micro-politics of academia.

Questions

- 1 What challenges do a more open and critical approach to management learning exist in a business school at the current moment?
- 2 What do we mean by 'Americanization'?
- 3 Why is this relevant to business schools in terms of what they teach and how?
- 4 What implications might the recent changes in the socio-economic context have on the profile of future business and administration students?