International imaginaries – a study of four MBA programmes

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Abstract
There are different notions of what international management education might imply and include (Tomlinson and Egan, 2002; Raimond and Halliburton, 1995; Kumar and Usunier, 2001). Some of these notions imply 'universalism' in different ways. These notions range from inclusivity and celebration of diversity to an acknowledgement of the 'harsh realities' of the international global workplace. One place where universalisms of various kinds might be examined and challenged is in management education institutions themselves, including UK business schools offering full time MBA programmes. Here, over the last 10 years, there has been a significant change in the student constituency and in the ways in which the institutions have presented themselves, that is from 'national' to 'international'.

However, there is a potential disconnect between students' and institutional imaginaries of management and management education as 'international'. International management education sits within the wider context of attempts to 'internationalise' universities (Callan, 1998; Scott, 1998; Knight, 1997), to make them more marketable to prospective students from across the globe (Bruch and Barty, 1998; De Vita and Case, 2003; Starkey et al., 2004). And, as our interview data reveals, international students refer to a university's international reputation as a reason for their choice of institution. A 'tight' definition of what is meant by internationalisation however, remains 'conceptually elusive' (Callan, 1998:44). For those to whom the internationalisation of universities is regarded as an economic, rather than a cultural, imperative, students have become consumers who can read university web pages 'as they would a catalogue', and for whom the course content and philosophy is less important (Harris, 2008: 348). The consequences for institutions emerging from web-based representations of international management education are however, less well explored. What assumptions are being projected in the visual imagery employed on web pages? Are they symbolic of a 'universal' neo-liberal capitalist world order, simply acting as a marketing device, or do they attempt to present programmes' learning and teaching approaches? How do these representations of, and claims for, management education concur with what we know of individual students' motivations, expectations and experiences?

Our concern in this paper is to study how international management education is being visually represented through the web pages of four business schools, and to do this against the backdrop of MBA students' expectations of, and learning experiences in, these schools. Close examination of the manner in which schools represent their programmes on web pages is long overdue, if only due to their role as the global shop windows of schools' activities. As Harris's quote above implies, web pages have become many students', particularly international students', initial point of information about the institution in which they intend to invest significant time and money to develop their knowledge and skills. A more fundamental concern that we pursue in this paper is implications of schools' visual representations for approaches to pedagogy. Specifically, how is the process of an 'international' management education represented? Who, for example, features in photographs and video clips included on web pages? What is the nature of schools' claims about their 'internationality' and how their programmes will develop students' knowledge, competences and skills as international managers? We will present the different worldviews that we identify from web pages, and those that emerge from

ten students' stories to identify congruence and dissonance between these stakeholders' (world) views, orientations and assumptions

The paper draws on two main data sources to explore international management education and learning. First, we begin a series of cycles of critical hermeneutic analysis (Thompson, 1981; Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000), by examining four business schools' web pages, paying particular attention to how international management learning is represented visually. Our second source of data is 43 qualitative interviews conducted with full-time MBA students studying in these business schools. Given the depth of analysis encouraged, and amount of discussion generated in our application of this approach, for the purposes of this paper we focus specifically on stories generated through ten of these interviews, discussing the different worldviews present in these stories.

To conclude our discussion we will put the data through one more cycle of analysis by turning to Taylor's (2002; 2004) concept of social imaginaries, which Taylor describes as the way in which 'people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations' (2002: 106). We discuss the ways in which the students manifest their positioning in social space in their interactions with others, how they consequently acquire different forms of capital, and the three types of imaginaries that emerge: the Managerial Imaginary; the International Managerial Imaginary, and the Cosmopolitan Imaginary. By bringing the cycles of analysis together in this final cycle we consider how these imaginaries may or may not be represented in business schools' visual representations of the international MBA experience. We consider the tensions and contradictions which emerge, and point to further issues to be addressed and researched. We argue that a better understanding of both student and institutional imaginaries can help us to better understand ways forward in theorising about the nature, limitations and possibilities of international management education and learning.

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