

# **IMITATION AND TRANSLATION IN THE TRAVEL OF A GLOBAL EDUCATION MODEL: THE CASE OF THE MASTERS IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION**

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Peter Lamb (peter.lamb@nottingham.edu.cn)  
Professor Graeme Currie (graeme.currie@nottingham.edu.cn)  
Nottingham University Business School

Abstract: Using the lens of Institutional Logics this paper considers the diffusion and translation of the Anglo American MBA as a global idea in China. The application of Institutional Logics allows us to review the conclusions of Mazza et al., (2007) and Clegg et al., (2005), who stress the prevalence of local translations of the MBA as it travels globally. Our study highlights two dominant institutional -- market logic and transnational logic -- that exert influence upon the MBA in China.

Corresponding Author: Peter Lamb, Nottingham University Business School, University of Nottingham, Ningbo Campus, AB 361, 199 East Taikang Road, Ningbo 315100, China  
Telephone: +86 (0)574 88180199 Fax: +86 (0)574 88180329  
Email: peter.lamb@nottingham.edu.cn

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper addresses the travel of the Masters in Business Administration [MBA], which exemplifies a global idea. In the case of business schools, much of the literature focuses upon how institutional forces diffuse rationalised patterns (i.e. conceptions of knowledge and pedagogical configurations) across the education sector so that there is similarity rather than diversity in business school education and MBA offerings (Amdam, 1996; Doria et al., 2003; Engwall and Gunnarson, 1994; Seers, 2007). This reflects the neo-institutionalist argument regarding isomorphism made by DiMaggio & Powell (1983); Meyer and Rowan, (1977); Powell & DiMaggio (1991) and Scott, (1995) that organisations in the same field will tend to adapt to each other irrespective of location and will share key defining features and will increasingly come to resemble each other. However, more recently, studies have considered how individual business schools appropriate the original prototype in the travel beyond its country of origin. These more recent studies suggest greater diversity in the MBA as it translates globally. In our paper, we utilise literature about institutional logics, and how they blend or fragment in the global travel of the MBA (Clegg et al, 2005; Kipping et al., 2004; Mazza et al., 2005; Usdiken, 2004). Specifically, our paper examines what is diffused or translated with respect to US MBA programmes delivered in China.

## **GLOBAL IMITATION AND TRANSLATION OF THE MBA**

There are several key empirical studies of the diffusion and translation of the MBA in non-US contexts. Many of them point towards something other than unproblematic and uncontested diffusion of MBAs. Usdiken (2004) argues that "there has been a widespread penetration of American approaches to the researching and teaching of management and thus to curricular composition, indicating more broadly that content has tended to flow more readily than educational forms" (p. 88). It may not be appropriate to talk of a US model per se but evidence seems to indicate that US dominance in many aspects of the management education field is leading to a process of convergence and homogenisation and that, mechanisms such as accreditation and rankings tend to reaffirm the dominance of a US model, if not its exact replication.

The model of diffusion may be contrasted with the model of translation. According to the translation model, the diffusion and imitation of an original idea involves processes of editing and interpretation on the part of the adopter. Sahlin Andersson and Sevón (2003) have outlined several reasons why translation occurs during imitation processes. Schematically: imitation of ends precedes the imitation of means; organizations are not coherent bodies; imitation is a selective process; imitation is subject to editing processes; the role of translators as editors of ideas and experiences becomes salient.

While recognising homogeneity in the diffusion of the MBA as a global template of management education, recent studies have considered how individual business schools appropriate the original prototype beyond its country of origin. In particular, Mazza et al (2005) raise an issue crucial to our analysis, the question about what is diffused or translated. They distinguish between the circulation of the MBA label and the circulation of the MBA model. They argue the MBA label has remained unchanged during the process of circulation from its US origins, and has become something that has resisted translation into local language; i.e. the MBA is a global idea. However, they also argue that the actual form and identity of the MBA is not fixed, but still in the process of being determined as it circulates. Organizations may copy standards and models only partially and the MBA undergoes

translation, characterised by local variations, even as the label remains constant (Clegg et al., 2005; Kipping et al., 2004). As a result, there is no longer such a clear conceptual difference between an original model and an imitation (Sahlin Andersson and Sevón 2003). The important point raised here, which this paper builds upon, is what is subject to standardization and what is subject to variation.

Mazza et al (2005) consider the extent to which the MBA has been diffused or translated in a European context by analysing the extent to which the MBA has maintained a degree of homogeneity or taken on heterogeneous aspects across a no. of European universities in Denmark, Italy, Spain and Sweden. Their central conclusion is that even though the label MBA has diffused across national borders the actual form of the MBA clearly mirrors and symbolizes indigenous variations and versions. However, they do not consider possible of homogenisation or variance in terms of curriculum and pedagogy. Although they do report that similarities appear in the focus of the four programmes there is no real discussion of the significance of this.

Clegg et al., (2005) document how tension between drives towards isomorphism and localised agency in a paper that addresses how an internationalising standards body and a university based MBA together negotiate an outcome which is seen as producing "institutionalized hypocritical isomorphism"(p.2). This is defined as a "divergence between attesting to disembodied standards and dealing with the lived experience of educating"(p.2). They argue that even though the attempts to impose a set of globalised standards in relation to the MBA has been pushed by the AACSB, as the major global player in the standards setting context, it has given way to the urgencies of local realities in a specific Australian context.

Despite, the process of negotiation between the University and the AACSB over assessment, Clegg et al., offer a very strong indication of institutionalised convergence and homogenisation with regards to the nature of the MBA programmes at the University, which is said to follow a "relatively generic model" (p.9). Citing Mintzberg and Gosling (2002), they posit that the MBA is based on an organization of the curriculum premised on what were taken to be the various functions of business. They also claim that this is based on the assumption that management is "based on a general set of principles and analytical techniques which can be applied to organizational problems irrespective of context, or culture" (Davies, Easterby-Smith, Mann & Tanton, 1989). They regard this formation as rooted firmly in the "auspices of western cultural modernism as a singular, universalising narrative"(p.10). They argue that MBA was already associated with a generic model (Mintzberg and Gosling, 2002) and did not require any fundamental reconfiguration. Earlier imitations, they argue assured compliance with what had become institutionalised as the predominant norms (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). It seems quite striking to argue that local realities prevail in one sphere whilst at the same time noting that the curriculum does anything but integrate local realities.

The concept of institutional logics can shed light on this phenomenon and the evidence cited by Mazza et al. (2005), and Clegg et al. (2005), can be reappraised through our empirical study.

## **INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS AND THE MBA**

A review of the literature on the subject of institutional logics would indicate three broad logics operating within the field (see Üsdiken, 2007). They are the professional Logic, the

Academic Logic, and the Market Logic. However, Üsdiken, citing Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) and Glynn & Lounsbury (2005), suggests that institutional logics may embody contradictions and that this leads to the blending and fragmentation of the logics.

The central ethos of the professional logic is that the MBA should be constructed in such a way that it is orientated towards management practice (Bennis and O'Toole, 2004). The essence of professional logic is that management is a profession, the practice of which should be based on knowledge derived from scientifically based research. However, unlike other professional logics that underpin medicine or law for example, which encompass a wide range of stakeholders, when applied to the MBA, the orientation of professional logic is towards equipping managers with a problem solving capacity, which is aligned with shareholder interests (Üsdiken, 2007).

The academic logic is less concerned with narrow conceptions of relevance and is more geared towards providing research based critiques of current management practices and ensuring that knowledge claims made by others are accurate (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). Trank and Rynes (2003) suggest that the key element of this logic is that knowledge enhances a student's intellectual capacity in its widest and deepest sense, with emphasis on "moving students from the transient to the fundamental, and from the obvious to the significant" (p.197).

The market logic regards management education as a regulated business, which consists of consumers and suppliers, with oversight provided by accreditation agencies and ranking systems acting as proxy measures of MBA quality to inform the key participants (Gioia and Corley, 2002). Khurana (2007) describes the market logic as one whereby higher education is conceived as a purely instrumental system of production and consumption. He provides a genealogy of its emergence and illustrates how it has become evident in the discourse of management educators. For Khurana, market logic is underpinned by assumptions of both consumers and suppliers, that the MBA can facilitate the transfer of knowledge to the workplace and assist career development (Connolly, 2003). Khurana argues that market logic has become ingrained in the ways that business schools market themselves through the MBA offer of career progression and salary enhancement. The latter forms the basis of media judgments of programme quality in very instrumental terms that de-emphasise educational content.

Pfeffer and Fong (2004) note that the MBA has been accused of being professionally irrelevant and yet at the same time also been criticised for being too market driven. They claim that there exists a range of inconsistent logics that present different messages to various constituencies. There appears to be two broad perspectives. One seems to place the problems facing the MBA at the door of an overly academic orientation, and criticises the lack of relevance of research output and MBA content to the needs of contemporary business (Bennis and O'Tool, 2005; and Üsdiken, 2007). The other camp cites the encroachment of market rhetoric and the co-opting of the professional logic as undermining long established principles and practices as to the purpose of education (.Trank and Rynes, 2003; Gioia and Corely, 2002; Zell, 2001; Brindle and Stearns, 2001 Welsh & Dehler, (2007; Dey and Steyaert, 2007 and Khurana, 2007)

Sturdy and Gabriel (2000) argue that market based consumer perspectives (regarding the MBA in Malaysia) give way to deeper aspects of power relations that privilege Anglo-American culture. This is perhaps something other than representing a focus on consumer

sovereignty said to reside in market driven principles that underpin the MBA. They note that some tailoring has occurred, but the programmes continue to be delivered mainly by white males and conducted exclusively in English (p.988) with little knowledge of the delivery context. Citing the work of Gabriel and Lang (1995), they go on to suggest that the market driven consumer paradigm of the MBA breaks down upon closer inspection. Citing Dixon (1992), Keat (1994), and Knights et al., (1994), "they argue that the "neo-liberal notion of a free and sovereign consumer is flawed as it assumes a under socialised actor and open competition" (p. 994). Relatedly, they suggest that selection and assessment of MBA students, further remove the student from traditional understanding of the role of the consumer.

In summary, a focus upon isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), projects a primary institution and homogenous organisational structures. By examining institutional logics, it is possible to accommodate the existence of divergent values and beliefs in an organisational field that fosters possible variation in organisational structure. In the context of the MBA, Moon (2002) supports the case for variation and his view is supported by other commentators, such as Clegg et al., (2005) Mazza et al., (2005) Usidiken et al., (2004) and Moon (2002), who all question an isomorphic diffusion of the MBA in international contexts, particularly with respect to the programmatic level of MBAs. In our paper, we also note variation, but argue that this can be interpreted as being consistent with the market logic.

## **THE CHINESE CONTEXT**

Questions have been raised concerning the appropriateness and effectiveness of teaching and learning practices on such MBA programmes that are anchored by different cultural perspectives and pedagogical norms from the Chinese context. Fan (1998); Lau and Roffey (2002); Wang et al (2005) and Currie (2007) have all noted acute levels of discomfort that Chinese students feel in a western pedagogical experience. Why this proves an unsettling and often unhappy experience is cited as originating in pedagogical preferences, which are rooted in divergent cultural values.

The pedagogical preferences that Chinese students are reported to hold are also important in that their epistemological underpinnings are founded upon an apparent positivistic orientation (Schommer, 1994). This may exert influence on the conceptions of management that students may hold. Warner (1993, 1996, 1999) and Borgonjon and Vanhonacker (1994) have suggested that a relatively narrow conception of management exists in China and is largely characterised as being quantitatively oriented. This conception is based on historical, political and ideological grounds particular to China's development. This orientation towards management is likely to impact, not only on the skills deemed necessary for effective management, but also on the nature of management.

The case study method within MBA curriculum is often cited as an illustration of the cultural homogeneity of such programmes in a no. of different national settings. The utility of this instruction method in the Chinese context has been questioned in terms of its relevance to that indigenous context and to its established teaching and learning traditions (Newman, 1997; Berrell et al., 2001) The case method of instruction, which is principally Anglo American in origin requires the processes of engagement between the instructor and student body that are discursive and results in situations where no clear path as to a correct and definitive answer is attainable (Biggs, 1996; Hofstede, 1980; Lau and Ling, 1997). It has been noted on both on MBA programmes both outside, and inside, China how this method may lead to anxiety and discomfort of Chinese students. Furthermore, it has been also been stated that the underlying

logic of such teaching cases does not fit with the Chinese tradition. The salient underlying principle of teaching cases in terms of its western heritage stresses that wisdom cannot be told. This is entirely divergent from the Chinese notion that wisdom can be told (Cragg, 1954). This point about incompatibility is amplified further by Kumar and Usunier (2001), who suggest that is a problematical endeavour to move from a tradition rooted in formalism and a didactic and top down approach to a more participatory style of the Anglo-American MBA. A further issue of contention with the use of the case study in China is surfaced by Liang and Shu (2008) who argue "another danger of applying Western-based theories to other cultures, in the context of writing MBA teaching cases, is that it may lead to a neglect of topics atypical to the environment of the United States but important to the host country"(p.631). Citing Meyer and Lu (2004), they point out that the boundary between the state and the firm, and between the firm and its subsidiaries, is not clearly defined in China. Therefore, managers in China have to continuously negotiate both kinds of boundaries and engage in non-market strategies. However, they find the no inclusion of such issues in their research of case studies used in China.

The findings of Liang and Wang (2004) suggests that teaching cases are over reliant on a western rational analytical framework and thus convey a rather partial and distorting view of organizational life on the MBA programme that is likely to be incongruent to organizational life and managerial practice outside of the seminar room for Chinese students. However, Currie (2007) points out that cultural asymmetry between Anglo-Saxon and Chinese cultures may not be the "yawning chasm suggested within existing cross cultural work" (p.550) as a limited no. of Chinese students found their engagement with western pedagogy far from distressing. Wang and Wang (2006) also found evidence of students referring to their pedagogical experience in positive terms.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

To re-iterate the purpose of the paper, drawing upon an empirical case of the MBA in China, we address the question of what is diffused, or what varies in the MBA, and why this might be so, with a particular focus upon institutional logics upon the diffusion and translation of the MBA at the local level, as the MBA travels globally (Usdiken, 2007).

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

Our approach was comparative case (Eisenhardt, 1989, 1991; Yin, 1994) designed to surface contextual features within each business school that impact upon MBA development, design and delivery. We approached ten US and two UK business schools listed in the China MBA Guide of 2009 for access. These schools in conjunction with a range of local partners offer a total of sixteen programmes. Of the schools approached six US schools agreed to provide research access. These schools offer ten programmes in China. The sample includes six MBA and four EMBA programmes, as follows.

Business School A: Three MBA programmes

Business School B: Three MBA programmes

Business School C: EMBA

Business School D: EMBA

Business School E: EMBA

Business School F: EMBA

The early stages of the empirical work focussed on collecting and interpreting a range of MBA artefacts in the public domain. These included MBA and EMBA brochures, business school web content, public relations materials such as podcast interviews and the China MBA Guide 2009. Programme brochures and websites are important in that they expose future students MBA programmes. Coupland (2003) citing Armstrong and Hagel (1996) and Wynn and Katz (1997), argues that company websites are "geared to 'sell' to a particular audience" (p.4). A closer examination nevertheless reveals much in terms of the traditions and culture of the business school. These artefacts convey messages and clues about what information the business schools deem privileged and desirable in terms of representation and projection (Elliot & Robinson, 2008; Coupland, 2003; Beech, 2006).

The initial set of interviews took place around the same time as the collection and analysis of the programme artefacts, with these artefacts providing an anchor reference for the interviews. These initial interviews were conducted at the management level of the programmes and business schools; with Deans, Managing and Executive managers. In total, ten interviews were conducted, as per the following.

Business School A: Director of the School

Business School B: Associate Dean and Executive Director of one partner school

Business School C: Director of Executive Programmes and Cohort Director

Business School D: Dean of School/ Academic Director and Executive Director

Business School E: Dean of School/ Academic Director and Executive Director

Business School F: Managing Director

The interview schedule was semi-structured, focusing upon the configuration of the programmes in the China context. The interviews were conducted both face to face and by telephone. All together six programmes provide the sample for which the analysis will be drawn from. Business Schools A and B offer international MBA programmes. Both are tied to local university partners, but the programme of Business School B is explicitly presented as a joint programme in conjunction with their partner. The programme of Business School A is housed with a university partner, but the programme is delivered by Business School A only, rather than in partnership. Business Schools C, D E and F all offer international EMBA programmes housed with local university partners, but the partnerships do not extend to joint delivery.

We do not claim the interview sample is representative and we recognise that interviewees were reporting their perceptions of influences upon the development the programmes within institutions and the China context. The development of the key themes from interview analysis underwent an iterative process. In analysing the interviews, the authors undertook four stages of analysis. Stage 1: The two authors independently created analytic notes alongside the interview transcripts. Stage 2: Related parts of the embedded analysis in each interview were placed together. Stage 3: The analysis of each interview was then considered against the over-arching research questions, applying coding categories that related firstly, to the aims and focus of the programmes and homogeneity/variation associated with them and

how other aspects of the programme are presented drawing upon Khurana's conception of the market logic which we outlined earlier. A second stage of coding focused upon the impact of programme origins and the China context. Stage 4: Each author of this paper reflected upon the analysis of the other authors, in the course of which a more reflexive conversation between the authors developed about the interviewees' representation of their experiences of agency and structural limits to this.

The findings and conclusions that follow have to be considered within the limitations of the study. The sample is relatively small and the respondents are drawn from a narrow range of key informants. These findings and conclusions require further validation via triangulation through engagement with other key informants such as academics and MBA students to consider how these issues are played out the individual module level of these programmes.

## **FINDINGS**

Although the MBA and EMBA programmes are presented as distinct entities by the schools, the findings are presented together as consistent themes emerged that cut across both programme types. Data from both the artefacts and interviews indicates that the market logic is apparent in the decisions over what is diffused and what is translated. In consideration of word limit and scope, the paper will focus mainly on specific aspects of the market logic and how the programmes are affected by the interplay of the programme origins and the delivery context.

What is significant is that many of the above programmes make reference in their website and brochure content to their difference (see appendix one). However, all programmes bar Business School D are functionally oriented and possess similar core courses and electives. Business School D is organised along a themed orientation and does not offer electives. All programmes claim to have a global or international focus. All brochures have similar programme introductions and details, faculty biographies, student profiles and career development details, alumni testimonials, class schedules, admission details and process. This is consistent with Beech (2006) who expected to "discover multiple lines of narrated identity", yet found one highly dominant narrative that stressed "a closeness to practice" (p.47). French and Grey (1996) define this as the assumption that management education is functional to management and it is "predicated on a model of professional training in which there exists a body of knowledge that is understood to be central to effective practice" (p.3). This close to practice orientation is aligned with other elements that Khurana (2007) argues forms the basis of the market logic, specifically a focus on two primary stakeholders (students and business) in a way that accentuates the pay-off for these two stakeholders. The following artefacts and interview excerpts from Business School A typically demonstrates this.

### **Business School A**

*The M.B.A. program provides training in business for students interested in understanding the working nature of business in a competitive environment. The objective of this program is to develop students into broadly educated business managers and executives who understand the nature of business as a whole, with the tools and techniques applicable to a wide variety of business situations.* **Website content**

*"The most important stakeholder is the student"* **School Director**

*"We are very active with American Chamber of commerce and we hear what they say and crank it into the programme in terms of what they are looking for in employees".* **School Director**

Crucial to the embedding the close to practice orientation of the MBA has been the emergence of rankings. Their emergence has been used to signal to prospective students, potential salary and career enhancements and many schools displaying rankings and accolades prominently. Bearing these issues in mind it is not surprising that the messages conveyed in these artefacts speak in these terms in a way that can be interpreted as being indicative of a marketable commodity and product bundle (Khurana, 2007). The Executive Director Business School D and Managing Director of Business School F emphasise both positives and negatives of rankings, yet indicate their importance.

*"Rankings are important but... once people drill down on that they realize all the gaming of rankings that business schools do. But those things are really slanted. When I do presentations I mention our rankings... top 10, top 5 consistently. Our partner though was very concerned about rankings and why we didn't figure in a particular one. But now we are in the Wall Street Journal rankings it is no longer an issue".* **Executive Director Business School D**

*"They help in two ways but it is a double-edged sword... some people just want to come because you're highly ranked.... The danger is in admitting someone who doesn't really know how serious you are. The most important thing about the rankings is the internal power that it gives me. That top 10 ranking means we do it this way... If you want to compete these are the basic rules. It builds credibility and legitimacy and rankings are a piece of that but not the only piece".* **Managing Director Business School F**

Another consistent theme across the programme brochures and website content is the occurrence of references to elites, with the emphasis on the MBA programme as producing an elite cadre of managers. Several programmes also make reference to their long and distinguished history and this is interpreted as an attempt to convey their positions as pioneers in the field in a market where management education is a relatively young.

A further aspect of the market logic that has been increasingly embedded into MBA programmes is the role of extra curricula activities that serve to enhance networking of students and contribute to career progression (Khurana, 2007). This is interpreted as conforming to the career aspirations of potential students in terms of pay-off for those that sign-on and then graduate.

In addition to the textual content of these artefacts, the visual elements also convey a sense of particular institutional elements at work in the representation and projection of the programmes. The prominent display of accreditation logos, (AACSB), is interpreted as sign of the perceived elite character and quality of the programmes. The following quotes also highlight this.

*"So they go to Johnson and Johnson and can say this is not from a fly by night school but from an AACSB accredited School".* **Dean Business School E**

*"Most US schools are in the AACSB. In Asia relatively few have it because they are relatively new- it's taken for a sign of quality".* **School F Managing Director**

When considering the artefacts and the interview together more variation arises in terms how programmes are perceived as being close to practice. Data from the interviews with senior informants from Business Schools A, C, D and E seem to indicate a tight coupling between the external representations in the artefacts and display a commitment to a market logic inspired close to practice configuration. Meanwhile, some informants from Schools B and F attempt to decouple from the close to practice focus, indicative of hypocritical isomorphism (Clegg et al., 2005) but, simultaneously have a firm commitment to a market logic configuration. In this context, on the one hand, the market logic seems to require that MBA programmes be depicted in a particular way (i.e. close to practice). On the other hand, this creates a problem for these programmes in that they perceive that they have to de-couple from that depiction and related expectations.

*The content... the knowledge are not directly relevant in terms of managerial solutions to specific problems but are more relevant in terms of managerial thinking. It takes them (students) a while to get used to that".* **Business School B Executive Director**

*"The balance is not right in terms of the direction of movement of the programme. 90 to 99% of students arrive with a tools oriented expectation....The student expectation that if I acquire these tools I'm going to be a success is totally wrong. It's all about communication... it's not about mastering the tools it's about mastering your experiences".* **Business School F Managing Director**

There is also some evidence in the interviews that provides good illustration of Beech's (2006) point about the limited scope for MBA differentiation in a mature market. From an institutional perspective it seems that there are inherent contradictions within the market logic. The desire for difference can be seen as consistent with flexibility of means as discussed by Sahlin Andersson and Sevon (2003). However, the market logic is also used to indicate limits of scope for those means. The incorporation of such deviations away from traditional content is likely to be rejected, as they do not match the expectations of what a MBA should be like. The driving forces for differentiation come from within the supply side but the restrictive forces emerge from both within the supply side and from the demand-side.

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*We have some flexibility with regards to electives but the electives have to be germane to business topics.... you cannot be doing theatre or media or something like that".* **School A Director**

In our last quote, the Director seems to indicate rather limited space for such 'alternative' content, with strong normative and cultural-cognitive anchors in terms what is regarded as legitimate to teach. The Dean of Business School E discussing the wider economic context and the need for innovation and creativity within the US economy, stresses the way in which the market logic defines the scope and opportunities for variation within the parameters of this logic. He laments the extent to which "*MBA programmes both look and sound the same*". Linked to this, he expresses a desire for introducing content less familiar to the traditional MBA configuration, such as from the arts and history, so that their offering is differentiated from the competition. However, the likelihood of incorporating such content is constrained by likely resistance from faculty. When asked how such non-traditional management education subjects/content could be introduced he sees a peripheral role. The Managing Director of Business School F variation from traditional content is difficult due to demand pressures.

*"Maybe arts can help with creativity....Embedding that into the core of course I don't teach....that's too big. There are faculty issues... you know how faculty are.... Furthermore, there are also strategic reasons for this emphasis on innovation because I need to keep making sure that the xxxx programme is different from the competition".*

*"After they get strategy or economics.... they get the meat then you can play around a little and then you can throw in some arts some history, some military history".* **Dean Business School E**

*"I'm a big fan of the arts and humanities and I would love to teach leadership using Shakespeare for example but the problem is how to sell this when students come into class with a tools expectation".* **Managing Director Business School F**

## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE HOME BASE AND THE LOCAL CONTEXT**

Artefacts and interviews from schools A, C, D, and E stress a strong attachment to their home base programmes and a market logic, thus displaying isomorphic tendencies, with minor consideration for the local context, again echoing Sahlin Andersson and Sevón (2003).

*"We had done the exact same thing in Europe and our leadership said... It's based on ACSBSP and it's supposed to be identical, **identical but nothing is identical (Laughs)**. The Chinese do everything in a second language. Language is the top rated obstacle".*

*"We, essentially to get accreditation.... we had to show that everything we do, **in every place was about the same** (interviewee emphasis. I have almost no flexibility from home. Meaning I take it (the MBA) as a package ".* **Director Business School A**

*"We wanted to be global... you can't be in the MBA world without being global, that is teaching beyond our borders. Also, for school rankings, being global is a major part of that".*

*"The same MBA programme, ...content and faculty are the same. It is important for all of our MBA students to feel like they are part of our MBA programme. We can't advertise our MBA program as being top ranked, if it only applies to one of our MBA programmes".* **Director of Executive Programmes Business School C**

*We use the same cases as in the US.... primarily it is the same programme in terms of content ".* **Executive Director Business School D**

*"The faculty that teach in China are 100% xxx faculty. Early on we wanted to use some of our Chinese faculty- some of which are superstars but they (local partner) insisted against this. They essentially wanted an American MBA ".* **Dean Business School E**

What is apparent in the above is how the language of the market logic is used to justify the configurations of these programmes in China, with strong emphasis on adhering to a template on key aspects of delivery. The driving forces seem to be accreditation and rankings, with the portability and transferability of the programme to different locations emphasised as a selling point for students. Internal organisational factors are an important factor in terms of the configuration in China, but the driving forces behind the lack of variation are due to effects of maintaining accreditation and rankings that leads to an emphasis on alignment with the home configuration to maximise potential benefits from the portability of the programmes.

Business School F promotes conformity and adherence to the home base in its artefacts, but the Managing Director attempts to decouple from that position.

*"We are no longer closely synced with what is taught on the US programme. The meta experience in what we are trying to do with the students is different. In the US you have typically late career individuals - here virtually everyone is a line manager- not so many late stage managers".* **Managing Director Business School F**

Business School B is the sole outlier in that it rejects conformity to the home based programme outright in the interviews and artefacts as being incompatible with the reality of the local context. The Associate Dean of Business School B emphasises his school's different approach that drives significant adaptation and translation. However, interview data suggests that this may largely be aspirational and has not yet been realised on the ground.

*"Our approach is to work with Chinese Faculty and educators to assist them in determining their definition of a Chinese MBA. Educational materials in China need to be developed based on Chinese practice, not on Western practice. For this reason, we do not transport xxxx to China; we consider the approach of establishing Western schools in other countries the missionary approach".* **Associate Dean Business School B**

This rationale is enacted operationally with the partner institution with claims only local faculty from the partner institution deliver the core modules of the programme. The Business School also operates a faculty development programme for Chinese faculty from the partner institution. If the above intentions are taken at face-value, then the interpretation of this by the partner school and their faculty is pivotal in terms of achieving the aims of Business School B and also operationalizing these aims. However, the brochure for this partner programme stresses standardisation and accordance to the Business School B programme rather than significant change.

*The curriculum of the programme is carried out in accordance with the curriculum of xxxx The curriculum of the xxxx program implements many advanced teaching methods. Curriculum design, teaching materials and cases are kept in pace of those in xxxx.* **Business School Brochure**

Interestingly, Business School B does not seek to ensure that the programme delivered by its partner is significantly different. Further insights into the strategy of Business School B suggest that subtle market logic may be driving the particular configuration. Rather than imposing a model on the partner, the reputation and branding of Business School B seems to provide the basis for the partner to ensure that they seek to emulate the model of Business School B. The Executive Director of the partner school stresses the necessity of this given the relative youth of management education and business schools in China, but also makes clear the pay-off for Business School B.

*"At the beginning of Chinese ME project we desperately needed some help.... to have something like a model, something to imitate. We thought that their branding, their image was important and their reputation can help us a lot".*

*"They (Business School B) do not charge us anything monetarily **but they have been rewarded** (emphasis by interviewee). They have donated lots of textbook and cases but it is*

*small money for them.... They are rewarded with reputation. They collaborated with first tier universities (in China) and they have been very clever with their co-operations with top schools. These schools cannot say compete with xxxx for at least another 15 years but these schools for the last 13 years have done promotion and marketing; all using the name of xxxx and so they do the marketing of xxxx without xxxx doing the marketing".* **Executive Director Partner School B**

In Business School B, the Executive Director of the partner school suggests that there is a high degree of closeness, but with some derivation in terms of pedagogy and case study examples.

*"What we mean by being in accordance with xxxx is that the specific courses, the syllabus and design is very much the same but not exactly the same. 85% of our faculty members have trained there..... We use the term like co-develop because when our faculty members stay in xxxx they get some ideas. Like.... oh! I think that in our school and to Chinese students and in the Chinese cultural context maybe that is not relevant. So what they mean on the website is that the structure, the building process even the content is very similar but with own Chinese element generated from us".* **Executive Director Partner School B**

### **Content and Pedagogy**

With regards to content, a more straightforward process of isomorphism is clearly present in all participating business schools. For example all of the programmes are supported by Anglo-American (primarily US) textbooks. In all of the artefacts reviewed, there appears to be little reference to the China context of the programmes apart from some geographic details and location descriptions. No mention is made of how these programmes are affected by this context or how this context is integrated into the programme offerings. Many of the business schools frame their programmes for the Chinese context with the terms international and global. However, this seems to preclude China's international status, which is seemingly contradictory. China clearly has a huge influence on contemporary business and management. Its absence from the programmes dilutes the claims that the programmes are of an international character and design.

Underpinning Anglo-American assumptions are mostly either taken for granted and has never been considered as an issue, or rationalised in terms of the Anglo-American approach being perceived as international, and therefore subject to transfer irrespective of the context. Claims of an international focus seem to solely involve the analysis of the local business environment with Anglo-American conceptions and tools, in a way that down plays specific features of the local socio-economic polity. There are no indications of discrete Chinese conceptions of management and organization being used on the programmes. This reminds us of Kumar and Usunier's (2001) argument that is a problematic situation to suppose that an international component (etic) can be incorporated within the underlying model, which is culturally specific (emic). It also resonates with Usidiken's (2007) argument that content flows more readily than educational forms, due to widespread domination and penetration of Anglo-American approaches to the researching and teaching of management. In the pedagogical realm we see some allowance for the local context of the students but the centrality of the established practices is still privileged above that of issues from the local context. The following interview extracts are typical views on these issues.

*"Not much other than looking for examples. We bring a lot of China questions into the programme."* **Director Business School A**

*"We have always included Chinese/Asian cases but we have a stuck to a US-centred educational approach because we are offering US degree...".* **Director of Executive Programmes Business School C**

*"So it turns out that China is different but not that different. There are idiosyncratic contextual issues in China that affect the problem you are looking at but the concepts unpack that problem just as well. Some of the problems are universal"*

*."When the door closes the classroom experience is the same as in the US. It's a mixture of lecture, breakout sessions and discussions etc and that cycle repeating. We on-board them (students) to our pedagogical model...".* **Managing Director Business School F**

Given the stress that the Managing Director, above, puts on local realities, it seems quite inconsistent to then orientate students towards Anglo-American pedagogy and universal management education content. This reflects hypocritical isomorphism (Clegg et al., 2005). The Executive Director of the partner school B however gives some indication of cultural insensitivity and discomfort of Business School B's programme that was led by a Business School B professor.

*"OB, leadership ethics, communications... kind of soft skill courses... we think very much relies on the cultural basis and also the understanding of your history. If they think it is irrelevant then they don't come. So the first class...they may come but not the second. So the professor gets frustrated with that".* **Executive Director Partner School B**

This echoes the findings of Currie (2007), who suggests that an embedded ethnocentrism in MBA content and pedagogy buttresses cultural asymmetry, and this, then proves to be an unpalatable experience for some Chinese students.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Our paper reflects the findings of Mazza et al., (2005), but develops analysis of variation in MBA programmes through applying the lens of institutional logics. There appears to be two central organising logics -- the market logic that underpins and anchors how MBA programmes are structured and delivered, and a transnational logic that privileges the Anglo-American model as a template that co-opts elements of the market logic. Our study supports the view of the MBA, articulated by Korpiaho et al. (2007), that it embodies a traditional model of management education in which the latter is regarded as a practical activity. There are consistently strong pushes and pulls from both the supply and demand side of the diffusion process of the MBA. The main institutional carriers of the market logic are symbolic systems, relational systems, routines and artefacts. In particular, the interaction of rankings and accreditation in the normative sphere tends the MBA towards homogenisation, universalism and rationality (Loya and Boli, 1999).

In our study, MBA programmes appear to project the same aims, with instrumental pay-offs for their customers. The above findings that suggest the primary aims of the programmes (close to practice) are driven by an underpinning logic that stresses the nature of the management education entity as essentially a private good, where MBA education has reached the status of an instrumental means of production and consumption that privileges

the student and business organisation as core stakeholders (Welsh and Dehler, 2007, Khurana, 2007). The main tendency in these artefacts is for MBA education and managerial practice to be un-problematically linked in a way that conforms to conventional technicism/managerialist orientations of management education and this is indicative of strong normative/taken for granted institutional conformity. The debates over the extent to which the close to practice model produces transferable learning is an issue that links back to the work of Meyer and Rowan (1977) who argued that organisations often deploy ceremonial procedures that owe more in terms of signalling conformity with external expectations than the achievement of a technical purpose.

This also resonates with some of the comments by respondents who cite unease with rankings, but nonetheless still commit to participation in them. This continued participation reflects conformity with external expectations, which override any internal agency. Jepperson (2001) argued that formal organizational structure takes on a ceremonial function by signalling and reassuring external groups, as well as internal organisational members that the organisation is legitimate. This signalling imperative is regarded as a strategy for organisational survival. Jaffee (2001) further amplifies the fundamental issue here by suggesting, "customers may be reluctant to do business with an organisation that is different of deviant" (p. 229). This explains why those that lament the rankings and the close to practice model, nonetheless do not risk presenting different signals to the external environment. It is worth recalling that those respondents who were critical of the rankings and the close to practice configuration, often discussed how their credibility and legitimacy was achieved in the external environment by rankings and the close to practice configuration being in line with expectations of stakeholders. So in this sense the need for normative legitimacy is paramount. The Managing Director of Business School F makes it clear that external credibility is the base of legitimacy. This, he believes, gives him some room for manoeuvre in the internal sphere of his programme but at the same time, he must accept the sting in the tail from the rankings as well as their pay-offs. So he can articulate and deploy agency, but only so far as it is within those external parameters of the market logic. This is most likely due to the effects of rankings in producing transnational templates for management education, with the market logic (via the rankings) serving to limit the scope of autonomy (Engwall, 2007; Wedlin, 2004, 2006). This is in line with the work of March and Olsen (1976) who suggested that institutional logics decide what problems are attended to by aligning their importance in terms of legitimacy.

There are also indications of the marginalisation of academic logic in our study. However, there are some indications that the academic logic is still present, albeit less significant. The Dean of Business School E talks about faculty resistance (in terms of disciplinary cultures) as a barrier to the wider incorporation of non-traditional business subjects. We should note that there is some alignment of the market logic with some elements of the academic logic in that the focus on the close to practice configuration owes much to the perceived domination of economics and its positivistic universal nature (Khurana, 2007 and Starkey and Tempest, 2009).

Our analysis deviates from Usidiken's (2007) analysis, that business schools have responded to the market logic by the partially incorporating market inspired elements (indicative of loose coupling) to signal ceremonial conformity with external environment, but also to buffer academically slanted elements from these external pressures. This research finds that the opposite is occurring. For example, the increasing prominence of enhanced MBA offerings with the accent on extra curricula activities that serve to satisfy students with networking opportunities and more exposure to practising business managers is deemed to indicate an increasingly deeper penetration of the market logic.

There is variation in terms of the how the programmes are projected in relation to their US anchors. However, upon closer inspection, one particular dominant narrative becomes apparent. Some programme variations and deviations are due to the nature of the local context. Reflecting this, Fan (1998) and Newell (1999), taking a relative cultural position, argue that that western management education programmes do not easily transfer in the Chinese context and argue that what is required is not just translation but adaptation and reinterpretation. Yet the tailoring of content is fairly limited and does not displace the central Anglo-American cultural underpinnings. What is of further interest here is that none of the respondents outside of the Executive Director of the partner of Business School B report any rejection of their content on a cultural basis. This requires further investigation as this may be due to several different reasons. Lohrbiecki warns against the overplaying cultural factors that lead to “crude simplifications and national stereotyping” (p.279). Wang and Wang (2006) have cited MBA students speaking in very positive terms about their MBA experience for example. Fan (1998) also points to economic development asymmetry between China and the west as being an important factor in the process of transfer or connecting with management practice. The implication of this is that the MBA may be more and more and acceptable as China's economy further develops.

All of the programmes, based on analysis of artefacts and interviews, posit their focus as international, yet closer inspection suggests that this international focus is rather more transnational in character. Consistent with Kumar and Usunier (2001) and Kedia (2006), there is evidence to suggest that these schools have failed to internationalise their curricula and offer primarily rhetorical commitments to internationalisation. Certainly, the programmes are presented to fit with demand side expectations in a way that privileges the MBA's Anglo-American origins. If we accept the arguments of Whitely (1992) and Biggart and Guillen (1999), that the distinct social construction of markets and unique patterns of economic development mediate diffusion across borders, then we should expect the diffusion of the Anglo-American model to be heavily mediated by the local context. However, a certain level of congruence is evident on the demand side that, at this juncture, makes it possible for these MBA programmes to diffuse without a great deal of adaptation to the local context.

In a similar vein to Sturdy and Gabriel (2000), this research conceives that limits to market based, consumer perspectives determine programme configuration, and reveal deeper power relations. The market logic is fused with a transnational logic, driven by the convergence of supply and demand side factors that privileges the ascendancy of the Anglo-American model. The recent historical development of management education in China, with an emphasis on management science, could be perceived as facilitating the diffusion of the close to practice configuration. This echoes the work of earlier institutional diffusion studies by Westney (1987) and Cole (1989), who suggest that diffusion is mediated and enabled by compatibility with pre-existing cognitive models and norms in the local context. Wider economic development on China may also ease the diffusion of MBA programmes underpinned by the market logic. Students in China may be more influenced by rankings and the badges of quality that Business Schools project than pedagogical configuration (Currie, 2007).

In sum, the principal contribution of this research is that it uses the concepts of diffusion, translation imitation and institutional logics to re-appraise variation that is present in the delivery of Anglo-American MBA programmes in China. It demonstrates how these variations are driven by central organising logics. Anchored by market and transnational logics, resultant MBA configuration is perceived as a consistent response to specific contingencies at the different Business Schools. The variations are perceived as innovations

that do not disrupt or displace the central market logic, but rather as examples of the scope and depth of the logic. This seems to be a selective process that is affected by factors specific to individual schools. Business Schools are seemingly selective in terms of what is imitated and translated with some elements maintained through imitation and some divested or translated. However, there is consistency of market logic driven ends (i.e. close to practice configurations), but divergence in the delivery of this. Within the pedagogical realm, we see that some of the translation is fairly straightforward; i.e. the incorporation of China in the deployment of teaching case studies, whilst still maintaining the core analytical frame of western rationalism. These slight contextual adaptations suggest that ethnocentric aspects of these pedagogical devices have remained more or less intact and embedded in a transnational logic. Certain demand side elements have to a degree made this possible. When exogenous pressures are combined with endogenous forces, the outcome seems to be one that confirms, more or less, the dominance of the market logic that privileges an Anglo-American MBA model. So in tandem with Üsdiken's (2004) argument it supports the view that content diffuses more easily than form and deviates from Mazza et al., (2005) appreciation of the significance structural variation (2005).

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