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Future scenarios for management education

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Management education has seen an impressive rise in stature since the 1950s, driven in part by the popularity of the MBA and the infusion of scientific rigour in management research. In the last decade, however, there has been no shortage of criticism of management education, emerging largely from the perception that business schools have failed to keep their eye on the ball (the proverbial “ball” being the purpose and value of management education). Critics have pointed out that the momentum from pursuing scientific rigour has swung business schools too far down the path of rigour at the expense of relevance (Augier and March, 2011; Khurana and Spender, 2013). Teaching has also suffered as a consequence as schools fail to adequately prepare students to deal with real-world management problems (Datar et al., 2010; Mintzberg, 2004). A widening gulf between practical management and academic management characterises the state of affairs at business schools today.

At the same time, a number of external factors pose threats to business schools. The most significant of these, arguably, is the decline in public funding of higher education, precipitated by the global financial crisis of 2008 (Peters and Thomas, 2011; Thomas and Peters, 2012). The budgetary cutback faced by schools, in combination with the shortage of faculty members with doctoral degrees and the concomitant rise in faculty salaries, has left some schools struggling to cope with the constraints. At the same time, US business schools have served as the model for success, leading to the emergence of business schools around the world, from China and India to Afghanistan, that have adopted what is essentially the US model of management education. The outcome of this is greater competition for space in journals that publish discipline-centric rigorous research, for faculty members, and for students in the MBA arena. New learning technologies throw yet more complexity into the mix. The advent of massive open online courses (MOOCs), has generated debates about whether online learning will supplant traditional face-to-face learning environments. As a low-cost alternative to conventional programmes, MOOCs has the potential to democratise education, but at the same time could threaten the existence of universities (Bradshaw, 2013).

Against this backdrop, one might ask what the future of management education might look like. Bleak as the situation might seem, heightened awareness of the dangers on the horizon might well prompt action and lead to innovations in business school models. On the other hand, given the inertia that tends to characterise business schools, management education might find itself sinking in quick sand (see Thomas et al., 2014, Chapter 7).

In this paper, we examine the possible future scenarios for management education. We begin by reviewing the literature on this topic; in particular, the works of Starkey and Tiratsoo (2007) and Durand and Dameron (2008). We then turn our attention to primary data that we collected to better understand the future as perceived by a panel of experts – 39 leading experts drawn from the field of management education. The data were obtained through a two to three hour open-ended interview of each member of the panel. The results reported here represent a subset of the

results obtained and a fuller report of our findings can be found in the authors' book *Securing the Future of Management Education: Competitive Destruction or Constructive Innovation* (Thomas et al., 2014).

Possible future scenarios described in the extant literature

Starkey and Tiratsoo (2007)

The starting point of Starkey and Tiratsoo's (2007) vision of the possible futures for management education is a context where schools are beleaguered by many of the challenges described earlier – that of greater competition, falling funding and uncertain demand for an MBA degree. Given this, they propose three alternate possibilities for what the future might look like, depending on how management education as a whole responds to the challenges.

The most obvious possibility for how things might pan out is one where schools continue on their current trajectory, with attempts to cope with the stresses but with no fundamental shifts to their operating model. Starkey and Tiratsoo refer to this as simply “going with the flow”, a situation where the hyper-competitive environment will likely draw schools towards increasing their income by adding new masters programmes, cultivating alumni donors or cutting staff costs.

There are daunting roadblocks, however, in each of these responses. Starkey and Tiratsoo note the improbability of supplanting the MBA with a new programme that would be as much of a “killer product” as the MBA proved to be. There is also the fact that, outside of top-tier American schools, coaxing contributions from alumni would first require a fundamental change in mindset away from one that regards education as a public good to be provided for by the state. Cutting staff costs, on the other hand, could have the undesirable downstream consequences of increasing the student-faculty ratio, lowering the quality of education and depressing faculty morale.

Simply going with the flow clearly does not present the best of outcomes. The alternatives, according to Starkey and Tiratsoo, involve more proactive responses to the challenges and they fall broadly into the spheres of either moving closer to the practice of management or moving closer to the traditional notion of the academy.

The former would essentially be an emulation of professional schools such as law and medicine where there are clear expectations of the kind of knowledge that those who work in the field must have and where certification by an organisation that represents the field is part of the induction process. Faculty would have strong links with real-world practitioners (or would be practitioners themselves) and research would be guided by the need for relevance[1].

To be sure, there are also significant hurdles to this approach, including the fact that there is as yet no strong umbrella organisation that can serve to represent the field of management and no consensus as to the set of knowledge and skills that a manager should have, and ultimately, what management really means.

Starkey and Tiratsoo also foresee that the forging of partnerships with businesses could be fraught with problems of conflicting objectives and loyalties and a “contamination” of the research process by commercial interests. This could devolve into a situation where academic research is co-opted into the business of chasing profits.

The alternative of moving closer to the academy model would entail a “back-to-basics” focus on knowledge creation, a path that follows the mantra of “knowledge for knowledge's sake” and not bowing to the pressures of immediate practical relevance. On the teaching side, rather than simply imparting “tools of the trade” a more scholarly, intellectually rigorous approach would be taken. On the research side, there would be investment in PhD programmes and theoretical research[2].

This approach, however, also has its difficulties; not least of which is the fact that management doctorates are in short supply these days. The defence of research without practical applications, or worse yet, research findings that do not hold up in the real world because of flawed assumptions, can be but a feeble one. To ignore the chorus of voices calling for research that is relevant, not arcane, would be to bury one's head in the sand.

Durand and Dameron (2008)

The future scenarios of Durand and Dameron are presented from a European perspective and take as a reference point, the dominant American model of management education.

The European situation bears some semblance to the American context, in that there is significant competition for faculty, and this is exacerbated by a fall in doctoral enrolment and an increasing number of retiring baby boomers among current faculty. On top of this, a significant pay disparity between European and American business schools gives the latter the upper hand in faculty recruitment. Relative to their American counterparts, there is persistent under-investment in European higher education and attempts at raising funds through increasing tuition fees have been met with significant political hurdles and public outcry. European business schools have traditionally also had weaker links with businesses compared to their American counterparts. Based on this context, Durand and Dameron propose the following five future scenarios.

The first scenario is what they label "drifting away" and represents a situation where current trends persist – public funding continues to be low, difficulties filling faculty positions remain and the quality of teaching suffers. American business schools sustain their dominance and continue to draw top MBA candidates and business executives to their shores. Only the leading European business schools are able to break away from the pack to improve quality. In this scenario, research moves further away from the practice of management and becomes firmly anchored in the world of academia.

In the second scenario, European business schools are revitalised by increased funding from EU governments, motivated by the need to compete more effectively in the world economy. Some autonomy is granted to universities thereby allowing business schools greater control over admissions criteria, tuition fees charged and how they attract faculty. As an academic career becomes more attractive, the demand for doctoral education increases, more Europeans join the ranks of the academy and European management education develops a more distinct identity. As a point of differentiation to the dominant American model, some European business schools move closer to the practice of management. This bridging of the academic and the practitioner worlds has the desirable side-effect of drawing interest and funding from businesses.

The third scenario proposed is one where technology causes a paradigm shift in the value chain of management education. An unbundling occurs where faculty become knowledge creators in their design of content and universities become vendors of this content. Affiliation to one's home university weakens as such faculty market their content to multiple universities and some may go as far as to operate on a private basis outside the confines of a university. Other faculty may choose instead to focus on classroom teaching and become, in effect, distributors of content created by others. This focus on e-learning content as the product makes it possible for non-academics to enter the market with their own versions of packaged knowledge, effectively blurring the lines between academia and practice. Management education would be corralled into a model where commercial interests become dominant and the traditional notion of the university as a knowledge hub would be undermined.

In the fourth scenario, competition puts the spotlight on the need to gain visibility through size, to have an international profile and to reap economies of scale. In order to achieve this, mergers and acquisitions, joint ventures and alliances become the instruments of choice. Networks of campuses/schools emerge out of this. By gaining strength through size and visibility, sourcing funding (both public and private) becomes an easier task. The greater

financial flexibility afforded in turn allows business schools to improve the situation regarding hiring and quality of teaching and research. Their enhanced position ultimately allows them to reinforce their legitimacy as knowledge creators and commercial thinking becomes more muted.

The fifth scenario is one that Durand and Dameron refer to as “reactive adaptation”. In this scenario, business schools look to multiple avenues to increase funding (by increasing tuition fees, building executive teaching programmes, seeking out donors, building partnerships with companies and so on). Improvements to quality are reaped slowly but surely and are dependent upon institutions’ resourcefulness in sourcing funding. Closer ties between business schools and industry are forged but without crowding out the role of the academy. While the gap between European and American business schools is narrowed, the dominant model for management education is still very much the American model.

Summary of scenarios

The set of scenarios envisioned by Starkey and Tiratsoo and Durand and Dameron are of course quite different, motivated as they are by different concerns and challenges. Starkey and Tiratsoo’s scenarios are largely a response to the criticism that business schools have lost their relevance and they reflect the consequent tension in philosophical inclinations between those who believe in the unfettered pursuit of knowledge and those who believe that management education should serve a utilitarian goal. Durand and Dameron, on the other hand, consider a larger set of forces that confront European business schools, chief among which are inadequate funding, difficulties in attracting and retaining faculty and the emergence of e-learning technologies. Nonetheless, their scenarios are also represented in terms of differing degrees of rootedness in scholarly activity as opposed to a focus on practical relevance. It is this dimension that they have in common with the scenarios of Starkey and Tiratsoo.

Future scenarios generated by our expert panel

Participants

As we noted earlier, there were 39 experts on our panel, the majority of who were presidents, deans, associate deans or directors at business schools. There was, however, also representation from businesses, professional organisations and the media.

Method

Each of these in-depth interviews, which were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed with the consent of the interviewees, followed a semi-structured design to guide key thematic areas and to allow respondents the flexibility, and spontaneity to expand on issues they found relevant and important to the discussion. Among the questions asked were three that are the basis of the findings reported here. We asked respondents to describe three scenarios – best, most likely and worst – that would cover their perceptions of the breadth of possible futures for the field in the next decade. Thus, these scenarios are not forecasts but rather a mapping of possible long-term outcomes based on a range of trends, events and pathways.

What emerged overall were three scenarios that we have described as “muddling through” (for most likely), “shakeout” or “stagnation” (for worst-case) and an “ideal” scenario (for best-case). The characteristics of each scenario are outlined in Table I and then examined in detail using selected quotes from our interview experts to explain these scenario characteristics.

	Descriptive labels	Characteristics
Best case	"Ideal" Inspiring Innovative Valuable High quality Practical	Improved pedagogy – how and what is taught Purpose – seen as valuable in defining and justifying the role of management Closer to practice Aligned with public and private management Global – instilling cultural and contextual intelligence High-quality positioning
Most likely case	"Still muddling but not yet through"	Follow the market trends Incremental change – market-led portfolio management Practical relevance Market saturation – elite schools win Competition – particularly private competition Disaggregation of the value chain
Worst case	"Shakeout" "Stagnation" "Knee deep in the big muddy"	Irrelevance to businesses and society "Sink to the bottom" "Head in the sand" – ostracism "Cash cow" becomes "Starved cow" for universities

Table I. Characteristics of future scenarios generated by interviewees

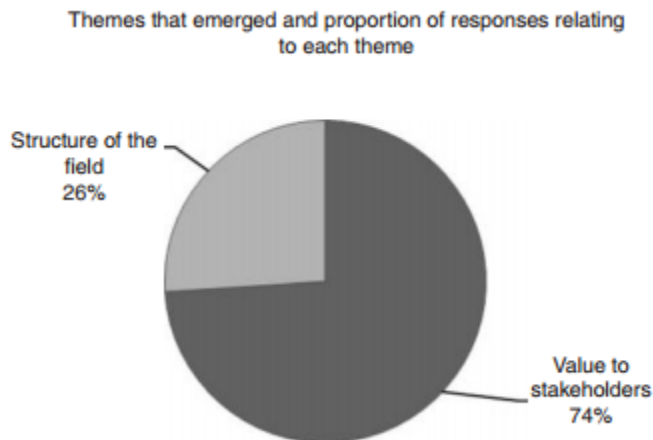


Figure 1. Best-case response map

Themes	Distinctive characteristics	Count of mentions	% of respondents highlighting characteristic (35 respondents)
Value to stakeholders	Pedagogy	13	37
	Purpose	12	34
	Move closer to practice	12	34
	Improve quality	3	9
Structure of the field	Become global	8	23
	Structure of business schools/universities	6	17

Table II. Best-case scenario: themes and distinctive characteristics of scenario

Best-case scenario: “ideal”

When asked about the best-case scenario for management education over the next ten years, responses corresponded to two broad themes. As shown in Figure 1, almost three-quarters of responses stressed the creation of more value for stakeholders, while the remaining 26 per cent of responses covered issues related to the structure of the management education field (note that this is the proportion of overall responses rather than the proportion of respondents; each respondent can have responses that relate to more than one theme).

The best-case scenarios for management education over the next ten years involve significant differences from the status quo. The scenarios articulated by our respondents were often quite far removed from the way that business schools and their offerings are currently arranged. They represent, in essence, an “ideal” or aspirational scenario seeking to inspire and drive innovation in management education.

From the two broad themes of creating value for stakeholders and the structure of business schools in the management education field, we identified characteristics that represent a change from the current state of affairs (see Table II). While some respondents focused their responses on a specific area, others identified a combination of areas in presenting their views.

As can be seen from Table II, the characteristics most frequently discussed by respondents concerned the nature of pedagogy in business schools. A third of respondents discussed refocusing the purpose of management education and a third talked about bringing schools of business closer to management practice.

Around a quarter of respondents said that adapting to the global landscape was a key characteristic of the best-case scenario for management education. For 17 per cent of respondents, issues of structure relating to the relationships among business schools, universities and the competitive environment would be significantly different from the status quo. Finally, a small number of responses indicate that the quality of management education in the best-case scenario would be significantly higher than current levels of provision.

Value to stakeholders: better managers and greater relevance

Pedagogical improvements

In total, 37 per cent of respondents mentioned pedagogical improvement as a characteristic of the best-case scenario. Pedagogy involves the teaching and learning process within management education and encompasses both the content of the body of knowledge disseminated in business schools (what is taught and learned) as well as how it is delivered (the methods by which management education is delivered and how students interface with the subject).

There has been criticism from writers such as Mintzberg (2004), Khurana (2007) and Schoemaker (2008) about whether we have yet identified the body of knowledge that should be taught in management schools. There is still ferment about curricula over-emphasis on business and analytic skills and under-emphasis on skills such as leadership, problem framing, problem solving and integrative thinking. In other words, critics ask whether we have achieved a curriculum balance between domain knowledge and those skills of problem solving, criticism and synthesis that are necessary to operate in an ambiguous and multi-disciplinary management environment (Thomas et al., 2013, Chapter 3).

There is a strong belief expressed by our respondents in the development of a broader, more “holistic” and integrated approach to management education. For example, they stress the need for managers to write and communicate well, and for educators to nurture the ethical and moral aspects of the management task:

Ideally there would be a stronger consensus towards a strong paradigm and a “holistic” approach to management education. This conceives of management as an integrated discipline and suggests that such a curriculum should foster continued profitable growth of business schools, given the underlying demand for business and management training.

Respondents also envisage a much closer partnership between academia and business to enhance relevance and promote awareness of innovative and entrepreneurial skills:

I think a blended partnership between academia and business focused on designing relevant programmes of education and training is important. It would equip managers with the ability to think critically, with a good knowledge of society in general and knowledge of the leading edge of business. I also think that we need to work harder at making our managers much more innovative, entrepreneurial and risk taking.

There is also the view that the change initiatives of a major business school or the ideas of a highly respected management educator might generate, and stimulate, important curriculum changes:

The most transformational and innovative development would be if a major player or role model in the sector “pulled off” the design of a kind of integrated curriculum as suggested by Professor Teece [University of California, Berkeley]. I think if that were to happen people would pay attention.

Wilson and Thomas (2012, pp. 374-375) point out that teaching should “develop a strong norm of learning” and inspire students, and Thomas and Thomas (2012, p. 359) also note that business schools must embrace e-learning and blend technology-enabled learning with more conventional face-to-face models of instruction. Our respondents endorse this increased focus on new, more flexible teaching models and approaches.

(Returning to) the purpose of management education

The respondents certainly feel that proper reflection and review about the purpose of business schools in particular and management education in general is required. This sense of the search for an “ideal” purpose is clear in the following quotes:

I keep coming back to this purpose. To me the ideal scenario for business schools in the future is that they are viewed in our society, our world, as fundamentally important for the future of the world.

Our more pragmatic respondents ask whether we really understand our “end product” and whether we feel confident that we are producing good managers. Do we as educators have the appropriate toolkit?:

We should be more aware of the things we need to do in order to produce graduates who are good at managing organisations but we need a better understanding, a better narrative, of why what we do in management education is actually producing good managers. And we achieve this with confidence so that it’s not just the best business schools that are creating successful managers but it is true everywhere in the world. Thus in business education we’re actually producing managers who are really running things well.

Moving closer to practice

Our respondents feel strongly that the best-case scenario would involve business schools moving closer to practice and mimicking the activities of other professional schools:

We would have a closer relationship with the business world. The closer relationship means that our research is more relevant to the business world and our graduates are highly regarded and welcomed by the business world. The business world [would] in turn really respect the business school and they would [then] like to sponsor and support business school events and projects.

Improving quality

There are concerns about whether there is an adequate supply of high-quality human capital (management faculty) to ensure the continued quality improvement and growth of management education:

Idealistically, business schools would be populated by really inspiring academics who are broad-based thinkers and who are able to look way beyond their subject areas. It's not things like technology – that will come. Resources will be attracted – that will happen. I am much more worried about the human aspect than the physical.

Structure of the field: becoming more global, market-responsive, cooperative and innovative

Structures that promote greater market-responsiveness, cooperation and innovation

Just over a quarter (26 per cent) of responses to the question of the best-case scenario relate to the structure of the sector. This comprises two aspects of management education: the organisation of business schools, often as part of a university system, and the capabilities of schools. In the case of the former, respondents indicate that the best-case scenario would be one where business schools that are part of a university get greater autonomy and thus have greater agility in responding to market conditions. The latter relates to the development of structures that facilitate different forms of co-operation among business schools and encourage innovation rather than mimicry or mere attainment of standards imposed by an external agency (such as an accrediting body):

[Schools] can also use their profits to gain some independence and autonomy. I think that business schools are different from other faculty areas within universities. They have a different, more market-oriented approach in terms of what scholarship and success means to them. For example, there are few other areas where there is such a marketplace emphasis on getting your students into good jobs. Because doing that attracts good students to come to the school which builds reputation and which then attracts good faculty.

Becoming more global

Our respondents take up the challenge of making management education a truly global discipline. They stress that the rise of players in Asia and Latin America provides strong diversity and the creation of a range of different models of management education:

I believe that the great [...] global corporations cannot just go to the very few business schools that [...] are global. Believe it or not, everybody claims to be global but there are very few business schools in the

world that are global. [Being global] has to do with the geography but [it also] has to do essentially with the mentality of people becoming globally aware. Therefore, I believe that there are many big companies in the world that need management education. However, they will not always find in business schools as much global capability as they need for a management education.

Most likely scenario: “muddling through”

It is interesting to note from Figure 2 that in the most likely scenarios respondents place far greater emphasis on the structure of the field (45 per cent responses concern structural aspects of the sector) than in either best- or worst-case scenarios. Competitive pressures (24 per cent of responses) are also seen as playing a strong role in how respondents perceive the future unfolding while value to stakeholders (19 per cent of responses) and no change (11 per cent of responses) receive less attention.

For each of the four broad themes of “structure”, “competition”, “value to stakeholders” and “no change”, we identified distinctive characteristics that differentiate the most likely scenario from the status quo (see Table III).

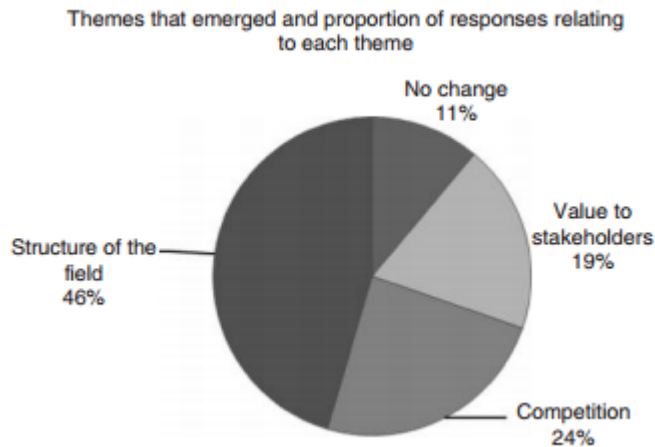


Figure 2. Most likely case response map

Themes	Distinctive characteristics	Count of mentions	% of respondents highlighting characteristic (35 respondents)
Structure of the field	Specialisation of schools	7	20
	Globalisation	6	17
	Private providers	5	14
	Technology driven change	3	9
	Changes to faculty structure	2	6
	Stable elite	2	6
	More corporate degrees	2	6
	Reduced state funding	1	3
Competition	Increase in competition	8	23
	Decrease in demand	4	11
	Shakeout	2	6
	Greater importance of rankings	1	3
Value to stakeholders (good and bad)	Increase in relevance	7	20
	Improvement in teaching	4	11
	Less relevance	1	3
No change	No change	7	20

Table III. Most likely scenario: themes and distinctive characteristics of scenario

Structure of the field: greater differentiation and specialisation among schools

Our respondents believe that more schools will attempt to differentiate themselves by moving in different strategic directions. This may involve internationalisation strategies, more specialised (niche) strategies and adoption of lower-cost provision by private providers as they reinforce their market entry strategies:

I see in the developed world a stronger specialisation. We will have a stronger push for business schools to be more specific on their positioning and their specialisation. I think the growth of portfolio-type business schools will increase this pressure very heavily. So competition will push things, at least in the most developed countries in which our selling market is more mature [...] towards a kind of specialisation.

One of the key elements in discussions of the structure of the field is the decline in government-level funding for management education and the consequent struggle for financial resources that results:

The most likely outcome is that there's going to be a continuing decline in government support. I don't mean just public universities. Even the private universities will be affected. For example, Stanford is a private university. However, if you extracted all the government money or grants, we'd close up half the university. The engineering school and the medical school would go. The business school could probably still operate but they wouldn't get any university support. So I think that the issue is how fast government funding will decline. And it is important to recognise that the government, with declining funding, will probably meddle more than they currently do.

This lack of funding is seen by our experts as leading to a disaggregation of the value chain. This will lead to strong review of such elements as technology enhanced learning and a thorough questioning of the “bricks and mortar” model:

A likely scenario is a fragmentation of education outside of the university – I think that if the universities can act as a sort of gravitational hub around essentially different levels of management education, we will encourage diversity: some people doing self-study, some people consuming shorter programmes, some people providing and finding ways of flexible degree certification.

Competition: increase in competitive pressures

There is a widespread view that competition, particularly from new private competitors, is increasing, thereby creating strong competitive pressures in the most likely scenario. The most obvious threat is the shakeout of weaker schools because of poor pedagogy and under-investment in teaching:

The most likely is actually the worst scenario, frankly speaking. That is because business education [...] can be done very cheaply. You get a classroom, a few computers and a few breakout rooms and let the students work hard. Further, with a few teachers from industry, you can offer a programme that looks credible. That doesn't mean they're good programmes but they are quite easy to organise. That competition could be very strong, and some of the Apollo Group type of programmes (and also NIAT in India because they are so strong in IT training) could deliver very good, well-organised programmes, and my fear is that this will create huge difficulties for the financial model of many middle-of-the-range business schools.

Our respondents feel that the increased competition will intensify market segmentation and drive schools to search for distinctive, differentiation strategies:

I think that there will be a continuation of the tendencies of the last couple of years, which means more international competition, including the negative side, which means playing tricks in order to be good in the reputational rankings. More strategic alliances will also occur. Whether or not they are strategic is questionable but at least for the school's letterhead they are strategic, particularly if you can partner with a strong school on another continent.

Finally our respondents note potentially strong competition from for-profit providers, such as Apollo and Hult, who will likely stake a claim in the low-cost, high-quality segment of the field:

I think that the most likely case is that proprietary [for profit] institutions are going to be stronger, they are going to deliver better and better content, and they'll deliver it in better and better ways and better channels [...].

Value to stakeholders: greater relevance

Our respondents believe that the value proposition of the research-driven business school will come under increasing scrutiny. University-based business schools will be forced to justify their positioning and clearly rationalise what they do. This will likely focus attention on issues of relevance (in research and teaching) and the need to provide value in a sustainable way, given increasing competition from efficient, low-cost providers:

I think that within the business schools themselves the whole publish-or-perish mentality is going to have to be looked at. The process of spending two years studying something and having it published four years later in some journal that is often not read [...] you would think that the researchers or the schools or companies who are funding it would say: “Wait a minute, why are we doing this?”

There is also a sense that university/research-based schools are “smart enough” to make the switch to a relevant mode of management education and are in a better position to do that than large-scale for-profit providers:

I believe that the industry has survived this long [and] that it will make the changes to be distinctly relevant versus the low-cost providers.

No change

Some of our respondents indicated rather pessimistically that the most likely scenario in the next decade would not be different from the status quo:

My mean scenario is business as usual with some frills. I think that my mean scenario also implies one or two, but not very many, institutions getting reconfigured significantly in their business and management schools so that they no longer are just business and management; they may be on to something else or merged with an equivalent group in engineering. But I think that that is at the margin. In general, it is a combination of business as usual and muddling through.

Worst-case scenario: “shakeout” of “stagnation”

The worst-case scenarios for management education presented by respondents were grouped around four main “problem” themes: no change, that management education fail to provide value to stakeholders, that intense competition damages the field and that the field’s structural qualities undermine its effectiveness. Of course, these are inter-related and complicated issues, which is possibly why some respondents gave accounts of scenarios that involve a combination of issues that span these themes (e.g. that continuity of the current model of management education creates little value for stakeholders).

Just over a quarter of total responses (26 per cent) were related to the problem of no change and over one-third (36 per cent) were concerned with not providing value to stakeholders in management education. The former showed broad consensus around the lack of change (40 per cent of respondents asserted that no change was the worst-case scenario), whereas the latter represented a constellation of factors that undermined the value of management education. Close to a fifth of responses (19 per cent) discussed concerns about the damaging effect of competition within the sector and the same proportion of responses (19 per cent) indicated that structural issues in the sector would underpin the worst possible case for management education (see Figure 3).

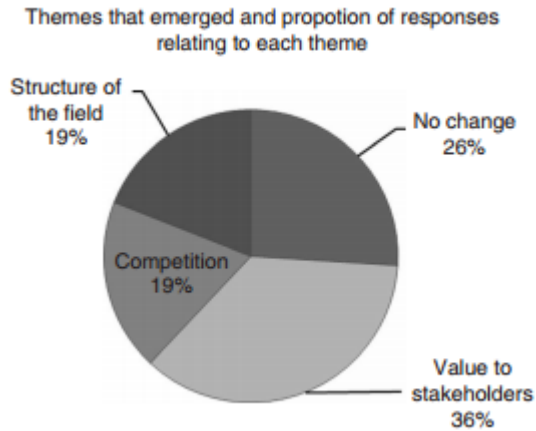


Figure 3. Worst-case response map

We focus next on the intricacies of each of these four themes to deepen our understanding about areas that trouble our expert panel.

No change

A scenario where there is no change to management education over the next ten years was mentioned by 40 per cent of respondents as a worst-case scenario. This is a complacent, inertial, “head in the sand” scenario characterised by adherence to the status quo and resulting in inevitable decline. For these respondents, maintaining the status quo is inappropriate and a future scenario without change is undesirable:

The worst case is that we continue to be where we are. That would be awful!

If we just keep going the way we are. The worst case is the “head in the sand” case. You know, we’ll just keep going and we see if we can make this work, see if it will come back and see if we stay here long enough.

In addition, change is also perceived as essential in business school programmes:

Churning out programmes that have not been revised, updated or redesigned since 20 years ago is unacceptable. There are many schools today that operate on the same philosophy every year.

In one – perhaps extreme – example, one respondent commented that business schools must “[...] change or they will die”.

Value to stakeholders: lack of value and relevance

In total, 43 per cent of respondents think the worst-case scenario would be one where the value of management education would be an issue. The concern that the value proposition is not articulated well for stakeholders is a more nuanced and multi-faceted argument than the argument that there would simply be “no change” in the worst-case scenario (see Table IV).

Themes	Distinctive characteristics	Count of mentions	% of respondents highlighting characteristic (35 respondents)
No change	No change	14	40
Value stakeholders	No value to stakeholders	7	20
	Lack of relevance	3	9
	No legitimacy	2	6
	Specialisation and fragmentation	1	3
	Lack of quality	1	3
	Question of purpose	1	3
	Too broad	1	3
	Too narrow	1	3
	Too much rigour	1	3
	Lack of specialisation	1	3
Competition	Competition	4	11
	Shakeout	5	14
	Race to the bottom	1	3
Structure of the field	Business school/university structure	4	11
	Powerful faculty	3	9
	Become agents of business	2	6
	Switch to private schools	1	3

Table IV. Worst-case scenario: themes and distinctive characteristics of scenario

The perspective that management education presents limited value to stakeholders is clearly evident in the responses. This lack of value leads ultimately to a situation where stakeholders choose to ignore or substitute the content of management education. Hence, without a credible value proposition, business schools become somewhat redundant in both business and academia:

The absolute worst, and I don't know the probability of this, would be that the MBA and or other [business] education models are finally dead. So people come to the conclusion that we really don't need this anymore, it's not something that is relevant and not worth what we're paying for it. And I see cracks in that already. The notion of over-shooting, and I think as an industry we have overshot the value, [is evident in the fact] that the price has gone up so much [...].

I think you'll see schools disappearing. Pity the poor school in the UK that can't charge £9,000. I don't know how they are going to survive.

Competition: damaging effects of competition

Competition presents two types of threats – one arises from the strategies private providers are likely to use and how these strategies will affect the competitive dynamics in the industry. The second focuses on the competition for scarce resources that occurs, particularly in the realm of universities. In the latter case, this predominantly concerns competition for students and faculty, as more global players develop and as schools in some countries make the transition away from a state-funded model. As a result of these competitive forces, financial sustainability and ultimately survival becomes an issue, leading to a shakeout in the field:

I said that competition was on the horizon. I think that it is very threatening because you get competitors with a very different kind of financial business model and there is a risk that this drags business education down to a sort of basic commerce training. Because of that competition, we drag down the whole sector

and we end up with a few elite institutions who can charge whatever they want because they have a great brand – and lots of bad institutions.

Structure of the field: constraints imposed by parent universities

It is argued that business schools are often constrained by the academic structures within their parent university and hampered by resource competition from other schools within the university. Hence, continued survival becomes problematic:

Actually we have a race to the bottom: business schools, because they provide a convenient source of resourcing to their parent universities and so on, start trying to up their volume and cut their costs and in so doing meet BPP, Apollo and other private providers going the other way. They find they've got themselves on a treadmill, which means that they increasingly find it difficult to legitimise their role as genuine academic knowledge providers, as opposed to just low-cost professional development providers.

Summary of future scenarios

SecStarkey and Tiratsoo's scenario of "going with the flow" and Durand and Dameron's scenario of "drifting away" convey a sense of despondence or lackadaisical response to challenges that are unfolding. The sentiments of our respondents when it comes to the worst-case scenario bear similarity to these two scenarios. The dominant theme in the worst-case scenario is one of "no change", suggesting a sort of strategic drift that permits existing challenges to prevail. Management education becomes increasingly irrelevant to stakeholders under these circumstances.

The best-case scenario, on the other hand, can be summed up as one where attention is paid to developing individuals holistically to become not just good business people but good leaders with strong ethical values. There would be more flexible models of education as a pure bricks-and-mortar approach is superseded by approaches that leverage technology. At the same time, there is a move closer to practice as research becomes more applied and management education is seen, in fact, as producing good managers.

Thus, interviewees' conception of the best-case scenario resembles Starkey and Tiratsoo's scenario of "moving closer to the practice of management" and contains elements of Durand and Dameron's scenario that predicts an unbundling of the value chain brought about by e-learning (except perhaps to a less seismic extent).

The most likely scenario to interviewees is a future where competition is intense or, as described by Starkey and Tiratsoo, an era of hyper-competition. The biggest threats would come from for-profit providers with the capabilities to offer the same product or even a higher-quality one at a lower cost as well as increasing numbers of international players. While the top schools might continue to thrive, others will scramble to differentiate themselves to survive (probably by specialising or internationalising) while still others will be casualties in an industry shakeout. There would also be a greater push towards ensuring the relevance of business schools, such as by re-orienting research towards problems with practical implications. In this scenario, we once again encounter the presaging of a movement towards real-world management.

This is evocative of the fourth scenario described by Durand and Dameron, where visibility, having an international profile and reaping economies of scale are an imperative for survival.

Conclusion

While the most likely, best-case and worst-case scenarios, as perceived by our panel of experts, have been presented in a descriptive way, there are clearly prescriptive implications in our findings. The fact that the worst-case scenario is described as one where there is a lack of change suggests that our respondents see addressing current criticisms and challenges as vitally important to the future of management education. When we contrast this to how the best-case scenario is described, the direction that the field ought to move towards becomes apparent. Our respondents see the need for the field to secure its future by going back to the fundamental purpose of management education – that is, to produce effective business leaders and to conduct research that has impact on the practice of management. The most likely scenario described by our respondents can be construed as a projection of what they perceive to be current trends in how schools are responding to competitive pressures. The greater differentiation strategies among schools that our respondents anticipate is a call to action to schools that have yet to clearly define their differential advantage. Without a sharpening of their positioning, schools risk becoming drowned out in the cacophony of competitive marketing.

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