The Rise and Fall of Interdisciplinarity in Management Education

Dr Suzanne Ryan

Newcastle Business School, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, Australia

Email: Suzanne.Ryan@newcastle.edu.au

Associate Professor Ruth Neumann

Macquarie Graduate School of Management, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

Email: Ruth.Neumann@mq.edu.au
The Rise and Fall of Interdisciplinarity in Management Education

ABSTRACT

Results from a longitudinal study of Australian business academics are used to examine the impact of government policy and institutional change on engagement in interdisciplinary teaching and research. Management education is a multidisciplinary field where, despite continual pleas for greater interdisciplinarity in teaching and research from scholars and practitioners alike, the attainment of interdisciplinarity remains elusive. While disciplinary identity is a common barrier to interdisciplinarity, the nature and culture of graduate business schools were potentially able to overcome this barrier until the introduction of a national research measurement policy along with subsequent institutional restructuring revived disciplinary silos.

Keywords: Management Education, Disciplines, Academics, Graduate Schools of Business

Within a university context management education has held a controversial position. Unlike other professional faculties such as law and medicine, the body of knowledge associated with management lacks clear definition. Definitions of management focus on its multidisciplinary nature, rather than its contribution to knowledge or practice. Initially holding a promise of moving from a multidisciplinary to an interdisciplinary field (Knights & Wilmott 1997), it has been described as "a very diverse range of sub-disciplines [and melding together] complex differences in types of knowledge and research paradigms" (Palmer 2002:127). Unclear professional status combined with its multidisciplinary nature have prevented management from fitting into university structures and the academic community, both of which rely on a discipline base for governance and identity (Becher 1989).

This research examines interdisciplinarity and barriers to its development within the field of management education in the first decade of the 21st century in Australian graduate schools of business. The data are from semi-structured interviews with academics from three autonomous graduate schools of business (GSB) undertaken at two separate times, 2002 and 2008. The paper firstly provides an overview of management education within the context of disciplinarity and briefly outlines the Australian higher education environment impinging on universities and their management schools. It then discusses the study, its approach and the context of Australian graduate schools of business. The third section examines the development of interdisciplinarity in management education and barriers to its expansion by drawing on findings of the empirical study of management academics. The 2002 findings show an initial disposition toward the need for interdisciplinarity within the
business school and progress towards its development, in particular through the multidisciplinary Master of Business Administration (MBA). However by 2008, the constraints of disciplines had been strongly reinforced by a proposed national research assessment measurement that strengthened institutional performance management and reward systems, thus favouring more conservative disciplinary judgments and thereby thwarting the development of interdisciplinarity.

**DISCIPLINES, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND MANAGEMENT EDUCATION**

As a relative ‘new comer’ to the university, with its established disciplinary organizational structure, the field of management, remains low in the hierarchy of knowledge and contested in terms of its disciplinary status. It is important to acknowledge that disciplines have long formed the key organizing structure within universities and embody different knowledge forms reflecting both epistemological approaches and the social aspects of knowledge communities (Becher 1989; Clark 1983). While disciplines are both resilient and accommodating to change, they have a number of recognized features, including an accepted body of knowledge, accepted theories and methods for theory testing and replication, established communication patterns and a recognized progression for the development of researchers and teachers (Neumann 2009). Alongside increasing disciplinary specialization is an emerging concern for the need to counteract the forces of such specialization through interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinarity. The distinctions are pertinent to this discussion of the development of management education. Interdisciplinarity involves two or more disciplines interacting in research or learning and together producing an outcome which could not have been achieved in any one discipline on its own (Gordon & Lawton 1993). Multidisciplinarity, on the other hand refers simply to the co-existence of several disciplines with no necessary interaction between them. This would be the typical situation of several disciplines offered as part of a combined degree (Rowntree 1982). This, it is argued, is the case of management education, while interdisciplinarity, the integration of different disciplines to form something new, is the ideal for management education as it better reflects the complexities of management practice.
Compared to the traditional disciplines, there are three criteria that make management problematic: disciplinarity, classification and focus (Palmer 2002). First, management is not a single discipline with its own clearly defined body of knowledge and knowledge verification methods. Rather, it comprises elements of other disciplines, co-existing alongside each other. It is therefore multidisciplinary in nature. Second, management does not slot into any specific classification of knowledge such as hard pure, soft pure, hard applied and soft applied (Becher 1989) and is thus “low status in the epistemological pecking order” (Macfarlane 1995:3). Third, focus and professional acknowledgement can also ensure academic status. For example, medicine, like management, has neither independence of discipline nor epistemological ranking, but enjoys a higher status than management. Becher (1989) explains this through the degree of convergence or divergence between the disciplines, the more convergent or focussed the various disciplines within the field, the more status within academe. In medicine, the disciplines converge, while in management the disciplines diverge as there is no specific focus apart from a broad concern with ‘management of business’ at a number of levels: individual, group, firm, national and global.

Despite epistemological and professional weaknesses, management education has proven highly marketable. The MBA industry has been described as “one of the great (economic) success stories of the past 50 years” (Viten 2000: 183). As governments throughout the western world, and increasingly in the East, have positioned universities as tools of economic growth (Jarvis 2001; Olssen & Peters 2005; Parker 2007), the global popularity of business studies has made business schools an obvious ‘business’ within the university (Kirp 2003). In many countries, the rise of business schools and the globalisation of higher education have been a response to declines in government funding to higher education (OECD 2007). Management education, because of its international and local marketability not only produced phenomenal growth among business schools but led to a reputation as institutional ‘cash cows’ (Ryan, Guthrie & Neumann 2008a). Being an international commodity subjected business academics to pressures from being part of a global and competitive market place, pressures not often felt by colleagues outside business faculties.
THE STUDY CONTEXT AND ITS APPROACH

This study examined disciplinary connectivity among academics in Australian autonomous graduate schools of business (GSB) over two time periods 2002 and 2008. This timeframe falls within what has been termed the fourth wave of funding reform in the Australian Higher Education Sector (AHES), a period of greater efficiencies, compliance and quality measurements (Ryan et al. 2008b). Impinging particularly on business schools and management academics were the pressure to increase fee income through recruitment of international students and development of a national government research performance scheme. Organisationally, an autonomous GSB is a separate academic unit within a Faculty, or a Faculty in its own right, that is considered as a profit centre within the university. Autonomous Australian GSB share several common characteristics. They are multidisciplinary and generally smaller but better resourced than their undergraduate counterparts. Because there are fewer academics in a GSB, they tend not to have discipline groupings, or if they do, they are not a strong influence as the major focus is around the MBA program. Graduate business schools are highly commercial, relying wholly on non-government sources of funds, especially student fees and fees from executive training courses. Teaching periods operate over a variety of semesters, trimesters, terms and blocks over the 12 calendar months and at various hours of the day and evening, over all seven days of the week. Academics teach in a variety of modes across a number of different sites in Australia and overseas.

The data are from semi-structured interviews with 21 academics from three autonomous GSB in 2002, representing 25% of the full-time academic population of the three schools. No attempt is made to compare or contrast the three schools. Academics from all schools are viewed as the one sample, hereafter referred to as ‘the School’ or the ‘AGSB’. Interviews were undertaken in two phases, the first in 2002, prior to the proposed national research assessment exercise, and the second in mid 2008. Respondents were selected to reflect the disciplines, age, academic ranking and gender composition of the school population. In 2008, 18 of the original 21 academics participated in the follow-up study, however only five of the 18 were in the same graduate school of business. Most participants had left
to join another business school, but not a graduate school of business, and three had left academic life, although they continued to teach on a casual basis. For further details of the method for this research, see (Ryan et al 2008a). This paper confines itself to the topic of disciplinarity and the analysis of the findings draws on seminal work on disciplines and interdisciplinarity (Becher, 1989; Nowotony et al., 2001; Neumann, 2009) and academic identity (Henkel, 2005).

The summary of research findings reports on the characteristics of the participants and their perceptions and experiences of working in a multidisciplinary school, including the facilitators and constraints to interdisciplinarity. The findings are organized according to evidence of the presence of interdisciplinarity in the AGSB and constraints against its development in 2002. Against each of these factors, changes are noted from the 2008 research.

**FACILITATORS AND CONSTRAINTS ON INTERDISCIPLINARITY**

The findings highlight factors that either facilitate or constrain the development of interdisciplinarity. Important facilitators are the academic profile of management academics attracted to the AGSB and also the nature of the student body. Further the smaller size of the AGSB compared with a Faculty structure encourages communication and integration as well as promoting a collegial environment for the development of new ideas. Each of these is discussed below.

**Facilitators**

The majority of AGSB participants hold undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in disciplines other than management. Sixteen of the 21 academics hold postgraduate qualifications in a discipline unrelated to their undergraduate qualification. However, just over half of participants had at least one of their qualifications in general management. Importantly, most participants had industry experience prior to becoming a full time academic. The mixture of undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications

---

1 Direct quotations from the interviews are identified by a participant number (PN) code to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.
combined with the proportion of those with general management qualifications and industry experience, would indicate a predisposition toward interdisciplinarity and relating theory to practice as suggested by Agarwal & Hoetker (2007).

The nature of the AGSB student group promoted attitudes and interactions between academics and students that encouraged interdisciplinarity. In 2020, the presence of mature aged, postgraduate students who paid substantially high fees was regularly cited as an important pressure on participants to reflect real world complexities beyond specific disciplinary theory in their teaching. “You have to lift your game as the students have strong bullshit detectors and much higher expectations” (PN 0401201202-04). Students, both in MBA classes and in executive programs, were often viewed as partners in learning as well as being “involved in the research or providing research or consulting links and research/industry links” (PN 0703250603-11). By 2008, attitudes toward students were less positive as entry standards had been lowered and the number of international students enrolled in management programs had increased. “The level of students has been reduced with the impact of foreign student cohorts who seem to lack the business experience of the domestic students” (PN 0103030603-03). “Standards have indirectly fallen as a result of adaptations made to cope with the inability of students to communicate effectively in English…. my attitude towards students, although still mainly positive, has diminished over the years. This is mainly due to the increased internationalization, increased numbers, and frustration of the problems and pressures resulting from this” (PN 0201151202-01). For those who had left the AGBS and were now teaching undergraduates, there was little stimulation to be gained from the relationship. “Teaching undergraduates is not my idea of teaching, there is no longer a ‘bearpit of ideas’. Now I have to drag ideas out of the students. It’s easy didactic teaching but not rewarding” (PN 0403120603-10).

AGSB environment with its smaller staff size compared with a faculty structure and its distinguishing graduate program enabled a proximity and interaction with colleagues from other disciplines. In turn this created a stimulating and challenging environment, it was “a highlight to have the input of other disciplines and views” (PN 0701090103-07). “There are also challenges from colleagues in other
disciplines which makes you more rehearsed and thoughtful about why you are here. .. the tension [in sharing a course] gives you perspective in that you realise that neither you nor your discipline is God's gift to the world” (PN 0302080403-02).

In the 2008 interviews, over two thirds of participants had left the AGSB thus social and professional relationships had changed. New performance management systems “had made colleagues distrustful of each other….Increasingly those academics who have been less or even non-collegial are seen to be rewarded” (PN 0103030603-03). “Therefore some feel alienated because the high performing individuals are seen as a problem …. People deal with this mainly by withdrawing (PN 0503120603-010). “Social activities have largely been reduced to farewell functions for the increasing numbers of faculty leaving….. this makes the rest of us feel increasingly isolated” (PN 0103030603-03). Those who had left the AGSB commonly remarked that their relationship with their new colleagues lacked the intensity of the AGSB. “The quality of colleagues is not as high as it was at the AGSB… despite there being less pressure here than at the AGSB, there is also less satisfaction, it is less challenging, less stimulating” (PN 0402090403-04).

The attitudes of the participants to interdisciplinarity were overwhelmingly positive in 2002. In phase one of the research, without exception, all participants affirmed the necessity of interdisciplinarity in a business school. “[Being interdisciplinary] has to work … [the GSB] must be interdisciplinary….it’s the nature of business” (PN 0403120603-10). They were also stimulated by working in a multidisciplinary unit closely related to practice. “I love it because it is the real world where the important issues are not unidisciplinary. They are gestalt, it is hugely important” (PN 0203030603-07). Many of the participants viewed themselves as interdisciplinary in their outlook. However, despite their enthusiasm for interdisciplinarity, respondents were also aware that it was “more ideal than real” (PN 0101151202-06), but “it is more possible [in the AGSB] than in any other environment” (PN 0203030603-07), “we have the potential to make it happen” (PN 0603170603-09). “At [AGSB] we are seeing more and more innovative subjects but it is still hard to break away from functionalism. There is room for a lot more cross functionalism” (PN 0703250603-11).
When interviewed several years later, not one participant referred to an increase in interdisciplinarity. In fact, all respondents bemoaned its loss. For those who remained in the AGSB, they pointed to the “increasingly discipline based nature of the School” (PN 01030306-03). “There’s hardly any interdisciplinarity here anymore, we talk about it but nothing happens” (PN 030303060-07). The reasons given for the decline in interdisciplinarity are many but well summed up in the following quotation: “interdisciplinarity was promoted by the smallness and close communication and strong leadership that fostered integration. Once the leadership changed, the focus changed to divisions between people and the introduction of KPIs – the communication stopped and we retreated into our own work” (PN 0701090103-07).

**Constraints**

Alongside the positive signs encouraging interdisciplinarity in 2002, pressure to research and publish along with time pressures from workload constrained further development of interdisciplinarity. By 2008, continual tensions stemming from the strength and nature of the wider university disciplinary structures were reinforced by the proposed Research Quality Framework (RQF) and later Excellence in Research Australia (ERA) with an increasingly performance-based external environment promoting more rigid and narrow institutional performance rewards and creating a risk-averse university.

First, in 2002, the institutional imperative to research and publish was a common constraint to the development of interdisciplinarity. While respondents were equally divided on whether being in a multidisciplinary environment was good or bad for research, it was generally seen as good for promoting innovative research but such research was also risky in terms of promotion and performance recognition. There was common agreement that the need to produce research suitable for publication in the existing top journals meant a return to the disciplines regardless of “whether your research is meaningful or not …[and] the irony is no-one cares” (PN 0503120603-01). Most participants were cynical but realistic about the link between publication output and rewards, including career advancement. “Research makes or breaks you regardless of the quality, it is just a quantity game so the longer your CV the better” (PN 0503120603-01).
Second, in 2002, time pressures were a limitation on the development of interdisciplinarity. Participants acknowledged that authentic development of interdisciplinarity takes considerable time. “You need sufficient freedom and time to test new paradigms, to be allowed to fail, to work, within a long term view without the here and now pressures or the short term view that comes from annual performance reviews” (PN 0703250603-11). Hence, limited time due to workload pressures combined with growing institutional processes for quality assurance, performance review and promotion were major constraints to building interdisciplinary courses and research programs.

By 2008, the perceived constraints to interdisciplinarity had magnified in the cases of research imperatives and institutional policies and processes. Perceived non-essential activities were avoided: “Academics have withdrawn and only look after themselves, they work from home and their first reaction is to say no to extra work” (PN0803100603-04). Disengagement from the life of the AGSB was a constant theme. For those who had joined large business schools, an absence of interdisciplinarity was the result of large academic units with strict disciplinary groupings within them. “Interdisciplinarity was good [in the ABSB] and you pick up the various languages, this could never happen now in a large faculty” (PN 0503120603-01). “Disciplinary is very strict here. The curriculum is based on strict disciplinary lines. There is no attempt at interdisciplinarity (PN 0402090403-04). “Because of my time in the GSB with non economists, I am a different economist now. I was more interdisciplinary than now because people want to pigeon hole me as an economist again” (PN0501201202-02). Further, “the focus on accreditation and having academics with PhDs means not a lot of people risk going outside their discipline” (PN 0401201202-04).

The nationally proposed RQF had significantly redirected priorities so that “research is now overwhelmingly valued in preference to teaching” (PN 0103030603-03). As a result structural changes in favour of larger business schools incorporating undergraduate and postgraduate students had destroyed intimacy among multidisciplinary colleagues and undermined ownership of programs and school governance. “There is more emphasis on research because the large discipline group approach produces a mob mentality where you must perform under group pressure (PN 0501201202-
“RQF has changed the game from individual opportunities to an organisational approach with a new set of rules that we have no idea about except that it is not about teams, not about pragmatic research and not about long term projects. Now getting a grant is more important than the outcome of the grant. Applying for a grant that you know you won’t get is more important than writing a good journal article (PN 0203030603-07)”.

Institutional policies and processes were intensified to match further government reforms of higher education and align with the RQF. Increased demands from quality assurance and performance review systems created resentment, “now there is even more bureaucratic rubbish than before from the university and the government. For example the record keeping; processes for quality, performance management – all take time and affect everyone. The bureaucracy makes it difficult to do your job” (PN0803100603-04). Promotion systems were a source of constant stress having downgraded teaching and professional experience. “I feel much more pressure to research and feel my job is on the line if I don’t perform. Teaching has diminished greatly in importance. This causes me frustration as you want to do a good job in this area but you know that you are only hurting yourself to go the extra mile” (PN0201151202-01). “Pressure to publish is stronger than ever. Indeed, I feel it is job threatening and I am constantly stressed by it. Performance management reviews increase this pressure” (PN 0201151202-01).

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The changes between 2002 and 2008 are remarkable, reflecting the impacts of major change in the wider higher education system. Overall, the 2002 findings reflect a group of academics well disposed towards interdisciplinarity, both in the personal orientations and in their environments. There is little suggestion of disciplinary silos, but rather cooperative and accepting attitudes toward colleagues from differing disciplines with a common focus on the multidisciplinary MBA along with an acceptance of being in learning partnerships with mature aged and motivated students. Nevertheless, the realities of pressure to publish and achieve workload expectations militated against the further development of interdisciplinary knowledge. By 2008, the emergent possibilities of interdisciplinarity had all but
dissolved under higher education reforms, especially preparations for the proposed national research assessment exercise with its concomitant shifts in priorities, managerial processes and structures. The continuing imperative for business schools to generate revenue from international students’ fees played a further role in extinguishing the potential for interdisciplinarity.

First, the effect of reforms emanating from the proposed national research assessment exercises, was to give greater credence to research rankings that in turn encouraged universities to further prioritise research and types of publication output over all other scholarly activities. An institutional priority on research was realised through institutional reward processes such as recruitment, reward and promotion which in turn by linking to publication outputs strengthens the power of disciplines (Bessant et al. 2003; Guthrie & Neumann 2007; Howard 2008; Starkey & Tiratsoo 2007). Related to preparations for a national research measurement exercise was the merging of small departments into large schools with identifiable disciplinary groups. This was done in the belief that if sufficient critical mass could be achieved in a discipline research cluster, the amount of research activity would increase. In turn, disciplinary groupings were reinforced by recruitment and reward systems as disciplinary leaders tend to recruit and reward those who share their own orientation (Knights & Willmott 1997; McGrath 2007). For the AGSB academics, the dissolution of their School to form part of a larger disciplinary based business faculty left them without the personal proximity and focus on the multidisciplinary MBA that allowed them to engage in interdisciplinary conversations.

The second effect of higher education reform on management education was the ongoing imperative for business schools to generate institutional revenue (Ryan et al. 2008). The business schools’ response to was to increase revenue from international and part-time postgraduate students by lowering entry standards and lessening course load and program completion time to attract even more students of diverse backgrounds and abilities (Marginson 2006; Smith & Frankland 2000). A perceived diminution in the quality of their students compared to earlier student profiles had lessened the impetus for interdisciplinarity. As mature aged, practicing managers, students were able to contextualise what they heard and question single disciplinary perspectives forcing academics to
engage with practical issues (Hopgood 2008; Knights & Willmott 1997; McGrath 2007). But this changed as student numbers were increased and student age, work experience and language abilities were lowered to attract more students and more fee income. Students no longer held the status of learning partners, they were no longer in a position to bring a sense of interdisciplinarity into the classroom based on maturity and work experience.

The effect of these reforms has not sat comfortably with AGSB academics. The institutional shift away from teaching to almost exclusively research, created cynicism and feelings of being unvalued. A sense of optimism toward their work and workplace in 2002, was replaced by cynicism and disillusionment. Perhaps the 2002 results were an aberration and 2008 represents a more ‘normal’ situation. The fact that business schools have several decades of graduates without allegiances to a single discipline potentially should have undermined the reproduction of narrow disciplinary allegiances and provide greater disciplinary integration (Knights & Willmott 1998; Agawal & Hoetker 2007). However, once in place, disciplines have a power and resilience to change. In this study, non-disciplinary based participants no doubt contributed to engagement with interdisciplinarity. Additionally attitudes to academic work in 2002 were contrary to the established view that academic identity is derived from disciplinary roots (Becher 1989). Both disciplinary and institutional influences are exercised at the level of the academic unit to mould academic identity (Henkel 2005). In 2002, AGSB academics appeared to be more influenced by the culture of their school and relatively immune to external disciplinary and institutional influences.

When disciplines have been diluted, institutional counter forces emerge to protect disciplines and shore up academic identity especially when the academic unit culture is weak so that individual behaviour is more amenable to the influence of institutional rewards based on disciplinary research and time limited institutional processes such as performance reviews (Henkel 2005). Henkel’s argument may explain what happened with the AGSB. Unable to cope with the onslaught of institutional forces brought about by wider higher education reforms, the School culture weakened
and individuals either left or changed focus to fit institutional demands and in doing so, the promise of interdisciplinarity disappeared.

REFERENCES


