

The Third Level of Relevance in Management Education: A Society-oriented Approach to Designing Management Programs

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ABSTRACT: *This paper looks at the impact of national factors on management education. It examines the significance of the societal factors on the content of management education in a country.*

In this research, we build on a decade of survey data focusing on management education needs in Iran to conduct a longitudinal analysis. We then proceed to a cross-national analysis, comparing the results of our longitudinal analysis of the data from Iran with those of other surveys in three Western developed countries, i.e. Canada, the USA and UK. Through this study we find evidence that management education needs are contextually relevant and not 'national context free'. Building on a comparative classification of management education approaches, we introduce three distinct categories: product-oriented approach, market-oriented approach, society-oriented approach. Derived from the specifications of the three approaches and based on our findings we outline implications for business schools when developing management programs. Our findings suggest the need of business schools to stress a society-oriented approach while designing and implementing management programs locally or globally.

KEYWORDS: *Management Education, Survey of Needs, MBA, Business Schools, Socio Cultural Studies, Cross-cultural, Designing Management Programs, Relevance in Management Education*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Business schools have come under attack for the irrelevance of the contents of management education in recent decades (Paton et al., 2014; Iwowo, 2015; Rubin and Dierdorff, 2009; Gosling and Mintzberg, 2006; Sambrook and Willmptt, 2014). Davis and Hogarth (2013) suggest rethinking of management education and state:

It [Management education] is in danger of becoming irrelevant unless it can respond to the evolving needs of the business community. (p. 1)

The criticisms and debates to date have been concerned with three levels of irrelevancy of management education with the learners' needs. In the first level, management education is criticised for ignoring the individual's needs. At the second level are those criticisms blaming management education for its failure to meet organizational needs. In the third level, which has not been considered as much as the two former in the literature, there are those criticising the negligence of the needs of nations in management education. Addressing the third level of irrelevancy, Saks et al. (2011) write:

Management training and development is based upon a Western business model and delivered by Western institutions in a way that takes insufficient account of cultural differences. (p. 180)

Accusing business schools running international and transnational MBA programs in Thailand, Pimpa (2009) also states that:

[Thai] students reflected that the Western concepts can be complicated and impractical in the Thai business context. This is the key point raised by a few Thai students who questioned the transferability (and values) of Western business concepts to the Thai business environment. (p. 273)

A presumption of universality in management, and consequently in management education, has led to rather limited studies of questions directed to the third level, i.e. the irrelevancy of management education with the nations' needs.

Accusing business schools of neglecting national differences and adopting a universal approach in their programs, Iwowo (2015) states:

Business and social culture around the world is diverse, and therefore a universal 'one size fits all' approach is flawed. (www.europeanbusinessreview.com/?p=7310)

Iwowo discusses why this approach is fundamentally flawed, arguing that management knowledge is not absolute, objective and universal, but rather more subjective, socially constructed, contextual, and culturally contingent.

Peterson et al. (1995) also point out that:

In recent years masters of business administration (MBA) programs with syllabi like those used in North America have become widely available in Eastern Europe, Russia, China, and elsewhere. *But do managers in different countries face settings that truly require similar skills?* (p. 430; emphasis added)

Some recent scholars like Lancione and Clegg (2015) suggest that this duplicating model is not effective anymore. They state:

Once upon a time, not so long ago, the image of what a global research-based Business School should be was largely shaped according to various US norms, whether the model was Stanford, Wharton, Harvard or elsewhere. Today, this is no longer the case. (p. 280)

In this regard, Fang (2010) also states:

Asian management researchers need to learn from the West but at the same time need to have self-confidence and courage in using indigenous knowledge to make contributions to theory building with global relevance.

Addressing the third level of the relevance, there is a debate about universalism and relativism of management education. The debate is an attempt to answer the following questions: Do management education programs need to meet national requirements? Is management knowledge national contextually defined? Answering these questions is important for management schools to make learning relevant and effective to their students.

The increasing internationalisation of business has generated a need for international managers leading to the need for internationalization of business schools and management education. Business schools implementing an internationalisation strategy need to be aware of the national characteristics of each country when designing programs in or for a particular country.

The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of a longitudinal study aimed to examine the irrelevance of the contents management education at the third level addressing the following questions:

- Is the content of management education 'national context free'?
- Are the educational needs of managers in a country influenced by its national characteristics?

Using a longitudinal research method two surveys are conducted among the involved members of executive MBA programs in Iran to monitor their management education needs over a decade. The comparison between the results of the two surveys indicates any changes of the managers' education needs over a decade influenced by changes in the country's national factors.

A comparative analysis of the results in Iran, as a less developed eastern country, with those in three developed western countries, i.e. Canada, USA and UK, is also implemented to provide more insight into the impact of national factors on managers' education needs.

II. MANAGEMENT EDUCATION APPROACHES

To date there is no generally accepted, all encompassing theory of management yet a variety of ways exist in which management programs are designed. Generally speaking, all the different approaches could be classified under three major domains as follows:

- Production- oriented
- Market-oriented
- Society-oriented

Whereas *production-oriented* programs are more concerned about management education on its own and it is more characteristic of university-based and, particularly, pre-employment management education, the *market-oriented* programs care about the result of education and its applicability. On the other hand, a market-oriented approach, in comparison to a society-oriented one, is concerned more about the market needs - that is the subjects which managers need to know to manage their organizations successfully. According to Hawrylyshyn (1978):

[Management Education is aimed] at developing a broad range of abilities based on appropriate knowledge, attitudes and skills to enable managers to cope with a large variety of organizational or situational contexts. (p. 85).

This definition is rather a market-oriented approach to management education which suggests that it is a link between management schools and the business world to assure a better match between schools' contributions and the business community's need.

In contrast, in the society-oriented approach, the program designers also care about the factors which can help managers to manage their organizations effectively in such a way that involves the growth, development and prosperity of their society as well. In other words, the needs of society are also under consideration of a program designer in this approach. Iwowo (2015) takes the society-oriented approach into account when she writes:

Leadership is contextual and culturally contingent, and this means that leadership practice cannot be divorced from the specific socio-cultural context within which it occurs. Leadership development must begin to make contextual sense to its recipients, and to the social contexts in which they will be practicing as leaders.

III. METHODS OF DESIGNING MANAGEMENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Under the three major approaches discussed above, the methods of designing management education programs according to Hawrylyshyn (1983) are classified as:

- Schools of thought
- Survey of needs
- Analysis of tasks

- **Schools of thought**

Historically, three rather different philosophies have emerged as to what management education should be. These three main schools can be described as *pragmatic*, *behavioural*, and *mathematical* (Hawrylyshyn, 1983).

Pragmatic school of thought

Based on the *pragmatic* school of thought, what matters in management are results, and desired results can be achieved only if correct decisions are made. Therefore, the key activity of managers is decision making which should be based on sound judgement. Perfect judgement can normally be developed only through experience. Thus, education should be practice based. This thought led to a very distinctive, widespread model of management education that is the case study. A well-known example of this approach is the Harvard Business School.

Behavioural school of thought

The *behavioural* school of thought is rather more recent. Its key propositions are as follows: Management is the process of getting things done with and through other people. What can be crucial then for a manager is the skill of people management. Human skills are, therefore, what the managers need to be erudite in. Thus, these skills can develop by the study of human behaviour subjects, such as psychology, sociology, and applied anthropology.

Mathematical school of thought

In the *mathematical* school, the most recent school of thought, the key task of managers is decision-making. However, it is argued that the decision-making procedure should be a rational, logical one. The skills thought to be most important in management are the analytical skills, the abilities to quantify, to build models, to simulate alternatives, to assign probabilities, to evaluate, to choose rationally among various alternatives. It is further argued that such skills can be fully developed through formal educational process, so that one can eliminate the need for practical experience.

While there is no management school representing a pure mathematical model of management education, there are schools which are very heavily oriented in this direction. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is reputed as a follower of this approach.

- **Survey of needs**

In this method, the program designer assumes that the objectives of the programs can be influenced, if not fully determined, by the studies of perceived needs and wishes of prospective program participants.

The needs can be extracted from questionnaires and interviews, or other methods, with managers, their superiors, their peers, and subordinates. Also, data can be obtained by distilling educational needs from performance appraisals, particularly if they are linked to a Management by Objectives (MbO) Scheme. Another approach for determining educational needs is linked to corporate objectives whose procedure can be briefly determined by: first, set corporate objectives, then analysing the gaps between present and required capabilities, finally plan gap-closing educational activities which clarify the educational needs. It seems that the two recent methods are more applicable to specific organizations, whereas the first one can be more generally applied.

- **Analysis of tasks**

Educational needs vary greatly according to the nature of the responsibilities and tasks of managers. These, in turn, are strongly related to the position in the hierarchy. Therefore, varying composition of skills required as managers move up the hierarchy.

Approaches supporting the methods of designing management education programs

Whereas the schools of thought are more production-oriented, the other two methods, i.e. survey of needs and analysis of tasks, are more market-oriented, or can possibly be society-oriented.

The methods of designing management programs and the assumed approaches behind each one are summarised in Table 1:

Table 1: Methods of designing management programs and their supporting approaches

Methods	Emphasis	Assumed Approaches
<i>Schools of thought:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pragmatic • Behavioural • Mathematical 	Case study Human skills Analytical skills	Production-oriented
<i>Survey of needs</i>		Market-oriented, Society-oriented
<i>Analysis of tasks</i>		Market-oriented, Society-oriented

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the present study, the survey of needs method is applied to study national management education needs in Iran, as an eastern developing country. Employing a longitudinal research method two surveys were conducted among participants of EMBA programs over a decade.

Research instrument

A self-report questionnaire was developed and used as a means of data collection. The questionnaire includes a list of twenty one topic areas (subjects/courses) typically taught in Iranian or other countries' business schools at graduate levels. The respondents are asked to select and rank ten priorities from among the topic areas. It also provides the opportunity to write in the names of areas not listed. Each topic has a brief explanation of issues covered in MBA programs. The scale used for this part of the questionnaire is a comparative scale which is a process whereby the respondent is asked to compare a set of objects directly against one another.

A first draft of the questionnaire was drawn up and pilot tested with a group of 19 management program course members, and a focus group of eight management academics and practitioners. The feedback and comments from the focus group, pilot test, and authorities were used in developing the final version of the questionnaire.

In order to test the reliability of the questionnaire, a test and retest were administered in one of the classes in target samples. Spearman's rank-correlation coefficient for the sums of the topic areas on the two runs (test-retest) is a positive .95 (very close to +1 indicating a positive perfect association). It implies a strong association between the rankings on the two runs conducted among 21 respondents. It indicates stability of the respondents' responses over time. From the small observed significance level of .0000 we can conclude that a significant rank correlation exists between rankings in test-retests. Thus, the reliability of the questionnaire can be concluded through this perfect significant correlation.

Sampling design and administration of the questionnaire

The target population for the surveys was the participants of executive MBA programs in Iran. The reason for choosing executive MBAs as the target population was their qualification as respondents. The participants of executive MBA programs are most likely to have some experience in senior levels, and most likely to be familiar with managerial academic wordings and terms. Besides, it is assumed that their education need drew them to the programs. Thus, they are qualified to identify some needs. For these reasons, they are seen as ideal 'informants' for a survey assessing managers' education needs.

At the time the first survey was being carried out in 1997 by the first author, there were altogether ten executive MBA programs running in Iranian management schools/centres. 20-30 participants were studying at each course. Since the population was not large, and the potential informants were expected to be reached at most up to 300 persons, a census rather than sampling was done. For the final administration of the questionnaire, copies of the questionnaire were distributed (by the researcher personally) to 223 members of executive MBA

programs on offer by three management schools/centres. 174 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 78%. Thirty one were deleted due to incomplete responses, leaving a sample of 143 used in the survey. In the longitudinal survey, conducted in 2006 by the second author, 132 questionnaires were distributed by the researcher personally among participants of seven executive MBA courses. 121 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of about 92%. Nine were deleted due to incomplete responses, leaving a sample of 112 used in the survey.

V. FINDINGS OF THE SURVEYS

This section describes the results extracted from the questionnaire on the two runs of surveys including the profiles of the respondents. This brief profile of the respondents describes the characteristics of the managers surveyed. It indicates whose needs have been examined in this study.

Most of the respondents participated in the first survey were middle-aged managers (90.9% between 30 to 50 years of age) with an average of 10 years managerial experience. The majority (73.5%) were from the public sector. The symmetrical profile of the respondents in terms of the size of organizations shows that they came equally from small, medium and large organizations.

The results of the second survey show that again the majority (69.7%) of the respondents were aged between 30 -50, with an average of 10.8 years managerial experience, and 75.9% were working in the public sector. The symmetrical profile of the respondents in terms of the size of organizations shows that the majority (54.6%) came from medium-sized organizations and the rest equally from small (23.6%) and large (21.8%) organizations.

The ranking and portfolio analyses provide a preliminary picture of the respondents' pattern of needs.

Ranking and portfolio analyses

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the respondents were asked to rank their first ten priorities from the topics considered important to business, giving 10 to the first priority and 1 to the tenth priority. The values of 1 to 10 were allocated to the ten priorities determined by the respondents. For the topic areas not selected in the table of ten priorities a value of zero was allocated. The sums and means of ranks and the Relative Importance Weight (RIW) for all topic areas were calculated. RIW can be obtained through the SPSS using the Weighted Frequency Command, and is calculated via the following formula:

$$RIW_a = \left(\frac{Mean_a}{S_{means}} \right) \times 100$$

(S_{means} is the sum of means)

Based on the sums of the rank scores, the topic areas were ranked as shown in Table 2. Since Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance is significant the table indicates the true ranking of the topic areas and the best estimate of the true ranking of them is that Organization Behaviour (OB) is the most needed area and General Management the next one, and that English Texts in Management and Business Law are the least needed areas.

As the table indicates OB, General Management, Management Information System (MIS), and Human Resource Management (HRM) are ranked first to fourth respectively, followed by Finance, Strategic Management, Economics, Statistics, Accounting, and Entrepreneurship as the ten most-needed topic areas.

Table 2: Rank order of the perceived needs for the topic areas based on the sums of ranks

Rank order	Topic areas	Sum of the ranks	Mean of the ranks	Relative Importance Weight(RIW)
1	Organization Behaviour (OB)	763	5.61	%10.3
2	General Management	762	5.60	%10.3
3	MIS	615	4.52	%8.3
4	HRM	597	4.39	%8.0
5	Finance	557	4.10	%7.5
6	Strategic Management	502	3.69	%6.8
7	Economics in Management	453	3.33	%6.1
8	Statistics Analysis	311	2.29	%4.2
9	Accounting in Management	302	2.22	%4.1
10	Entrepreneurship	279	2.05	%3.8
11	Computer	277	2.04	%3.7
12	Business/Mgt. Communication	269	1.98	%3.6
13	Current Affairs in Management	269	1.98	%3.6
14	Operation & Production Mgt.	253	1.86	%3.4
15	Operation Research	240	1.76	%3.2
16	Research Method	204	1.50	%2.7
17	Marketing	201	1.48	%2.7
18	International Business/Mgt.	193	1.42	%2.6
19	Technology Development	143	1.05	%1.9
20	English Texts in Management	121	.89	%1.6
21	Business Law	116	.85	%1.6
	Total			%100

Comparative Analyses

In the light of longitudinal and cross-national studies, the contextual reasons of some particular social patterns within a country and across several countries can be clarified. In case of the present study, a longitudinal survey of Iranian managers' needs over a decade and a comparative analysis of the results which emerged from the surveys in Iran with those of three other surveys in Canada, the USA and UK, can be of a help in clarification of the national factors which involve in formation of the education needs pattern reported.

Longitudinal comparative analysis

To compare the results extracted from the first run of the survey, conducted in 1997, with longitudinal results from the follow-up survey, conducted in 2006, a longitudinal comparative analysis is carried out here. Table 3 indicates the results taken out of the two runs of the surveys. Comparing Iran's top five national needs over a decade, we can see one major change has happened in the managers perceived education needs. A perceived need for "Finance" in 1997 has been replaced by "Strategic Management" in 2006. The reasons interpreting the observed change can be explained as follows:

- Need for "Finance" in 1996: After an eight year war, organizations needed for financing to get back on their feet.
- Need for "Strategic Management" in 2006: Organizations needed to enter to international markets.

Table 3: Rank orders of the management education needs in four countries

Rank order	Iran Latifi, 1997	Iran Kiani, 2006	Canada Banff Centre, 1986 (Blake, 1989)	USA Porter & McKibbin, 1988	UK Leggatt, 1972
1	OB	General management	OB/HRM	Accounting	Man-management* (OB/HRM)
2	General management	Strategic management	Strategic management	Finance	Finance
3	MIS	MIS	Business-Government relations	General management	Marketing
4	HRM	HRM	Technology management	-	Business Policy** (Strategic management)
5	Finance	OB	Marketing	-	Accounting

*Considering the date of study, presumably, Man-management was similar subject to what we call Organization Behaviour today.

** Strategic Management used to be called Business Policy.

"_" = not available

Cross-national analysis

A cross-national study among some countries, of course, demands a set of completely similar studies in the countries. In the absence of such a study which includes Iran, an attempt is made here in form of a comparative analysis, to compare the results extracted from the surveys in Iran, as a developing country, with those of similar studies carried out in the same field in Canada, USA and UK, as developed countries.

Criteria for the matched studies

The criteria applied in finding the matched studies in the literature, were as follows:

- Date: as close date as possible to the date of the current survey.
- Respondents: familiar with MBA programs, with managerial experience.
- Sample: vast enough that results could stand for the country.
- Instrument: questionnaire.
- Question: asked for "most useful subjects/topic areas".
- Subjects/Topic areas: typically taught in a MBA program.

Comparison of perceived needs across the nations

Table 3 compares the results of the current studies and the three matched studies in Canada, the USA and UK. In Porter and McKibbin's study, only the top three subjects were reported. Thus, it was decided, only the top five subjects indicated in the study reports, were compared. The subjects are indicated in the table for the four countries.

Similarities

- Organization Behaviour (OB) and Human Resource Management (HRM) (or Man-Management) is among the five top priorities in Iran, Canada and the UK.
- General Management is among the top three priorities in Iran and the USA.
- Strategic Management, previously known as Business Policy, is the fourth priority in the UK. In case of Iran, Strategic Management is the sixth priority in 1997 and the second priority of the Iranian managers in 2006.

Differences

- A main difference can be seen in money-related subjects. Finance and Accounting (managing money) are the highly perceived needs in the US and UK. In case of Iran, Finance is in the fifth place and Accounting is ninth. Neither Finance nor Accounting is also among the top ten priorities of the Canadian managers.

Justifying reason: The results may be that there was no stock market in Iran at the time. Also, comparing to the US and UK, Canada is closer to a socialist economic system rather than a capitalist one.

- Marketing which is among top five priorities in the UK and Canada was rated poorly (17th) by the Iranian managers.

Justifying reason: The demands for goods and services exceeded the supplies at the time in Iran.

- There was a distinctive need for "Business-Government Relations" in Canada.

Justifying reason: Canada's economy is both capitalist and socialists. In this mixed economy some allocation of resources is made by the market and some by the government. Doing business in a mixed economy, Canadian managers need to know how to work collaboratively with the government.

- Technology management in Canada and Management Information Systems in Iran were highly rated.

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In management schools in general, there is a widespread tendency toward replicating teaching approaches and programs developed in some certain countries, rather than making them more suited to the users' context (Report of the AACSB International, 2011; Pimpa, 2009; Srinivas, 2009, 1994; Bruner and Iannarelli, 2011).

The cross-national and longitudinal comparative analyses presented in this paper provided evidence that the perceived education needs of managers are influenced by national characteristics. This includes the societal changes happening over time in a country. Therefore, we can conclude that the content of management education is not 'national context free'.

Across the world, managers deal with managing people, money, technology, market, information and environment in one way or another. For this reason, the topic areas taught in management programs are essentially universal as the issues which managers involved with are more or less the same all over the world. The current study indicated that despite the universal nature of the management tasks, education needs of managers are relativized in terms of national differences between countries.

As table 4 depicts, to meet the diverse education needs of their international students, business schools require to follow the society-oriented approach and employ the method of “survey of needs” or “analysis of task” to find out the students’ management education needs in each specific country at a certain time.

Table 4: The impact of different management education approaches and methods employed on designing and implementing management programs

Approach	Product-oriented	Market-oriented	Society-oriented
Subject			
Philosophy and supporting belief	Product quality assurance	Meeting customer needs (Quality is defined by customer)	Meeting society needs (Quality is defined by community)
Method	Schools of Thought	Survey of Needs or Analysis of Tasks	Survey of Needs or Analysis of Tasks
Basis of Program Design	Benchmarking	Customer survey of needs	National survey of needs
Implementation	Implementing the program	Implementing the program	Implementing the program
Outcome	?	Meet customer needs	Meet national needs
Evaluation	?	Organizational development	National and global development

Table 4 summarizes the three main management education approaches, i.e. product-oriented, market-oriented and society-oriented approaches, the philosophy and belief supporting each one, and the different methods employed to design and implement management programs. As the table indicates, business schools following a production-oriented approach come up with an unknown outcome and impossible evaluation. While those business schools perusing a market-oriented or society-oriented approach may come out with an outcome meeting either customer needs or national needs. These two latter approaches permit the program designers to evaluate the outcomes of the management programs whether they could end up with an organizational development or a national or global development.

The slogan of “internationalize or die!” causing business schools to rush to international markets without pausing how. The findings of the present research can be another alert to the business schools that expansion into world-wide markets requires an effective grasp and understanding of other values and cultures, and that designing a "national" program is not simply duplicating a program conceived in a country for another country, but that programs need to be customised carefully to meet the individual needs of each country. The overall finding of the study recommends that business schools need to take the socio-cultural factors into consideration and follow the society-oriented approach while designing and implementing management programs in global and local markets.

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