

“On Commitment” A case study of the ‘learning commitment’ of student-managers undertaking a ‘corporate’ MBA programme: the implications for Higher Education (0102)

Black Kate¹, ¹*University of Chester, Chester, United Kingdom*

Research domain: Learning, Teaching and Assessment

Thematic area: Learning

Background and Focus of Enquiry

With managers recognised as a key occupational group within the UK, manager education has become an organisational priority. Through learning new core competencies and a proficiency to innovate, these managers will improve their own performance and that of their teams. Manager education has therefore become a major growth area in formalised learning provision within higher education. Accordingly, 18% of all students and 26% of all post-graduate students within UK HE undertake studies within the Business and Management field, amounting to 11% of all academic staff.

However the transferability of classroom learning to practice has been widely questioned across the disciplines; manager education, especially the MBA, have taken centre-stage in this debate. Despite this, and alongside the current economic climate, uptake of this qualification continues to rise. With UK enrolments increasing to over 18,000 in 2008/9 (HESA 2010), it is the fastest growing postgraduate degree programme globally.

Traditionally the preserve of private sector managers, there has been recent recognition that public sector managers also need specialist education in the MBA's core areas to enable them to lead and manage more effectively. As such, MBAs have become, for some public sector organisations, a key element of their manager CPD, and a pre-requisite for senior level public sector appointments.

However whilst these managers may be motivated to undertake further learning as a means to improved career prospects or to help secure their current roles through maximising their value to their organisation, arguably generating real organisational value, requires ‘learning commitment’.

Under-researched, both empirically and theoretically (Tsai et al. 2007:161), definitions of this construct are lacking. With ‘commitment’ being a psychological and social intrinsic attachment to an activity (Kanter 1968) ‘learning commitment’ may therefore be defined as a ‘want to develop professionally and to be successful in it’. As such it can be argued that learning commitment will vary due to personal and professional developmental and socialisation factors. It may be differentiated from ‘motivation’ to learn by its longevity and endurance.

This research aims therefore to explore the ‘learning commitment’ of public sector managers from a local unitary authority undertaking an accredited ‘corporate’ MBA programme in partnership with a post-92 university.

In filling noted gaps in the empirical and theoretical research, the paper has four objectives. Firstly, to consider why these middle managers commit to further accredited formal education. Secondly, to examine the degree of 'learning commitment' these managers display and how this is manifested. Thirdly, to consider how aspects of work commitment influence 'learning commitment'. Finally, to consider the implications of variability in 'learning commitment' for both the individuals and for education-management practice.

The paper argues that, rather than demonstrating 'learning commitment', student-managers are either motivated to undertake education for job security/enhancement or are often 'required' to do so by their organisation. This results in only 'surface' or at best, 'strategic' learning rather than 'deep' learning (Entwistle 1988). Their intention is therefore to achieve the highest grades through the superficial retention of information and through writing to their perceived preferences of tutors. This fails to stimulate long-term retention, critical analysis - a 'transforming', 'deep' approach - which would provide them with both an active engagement with, and long-term retention of, concepts that they relate to previous knowledge and experience, and may draw upon for workplace problem solving. I contend therefore that without 'learning commitment' and a subsequent interest in the subject for its own sake, such manager education programmes may be ineffective in their purpose of improving organisational performance.

Research methods

The research works within the interpretivist paradigm using a sequential mixed-methods case-study approach. An initial survey is assumed through an internet-mediated questionnaire to student-managers undertaking the 'corporate' MBA at University "x". Comprising open and closed questions it draws upon pre-established scales, including Tsai et al. (2007), to examine the degree of 'learning commitment' and 'organisational/work commitment', also the factors influencing these. Exploration of statistical trends in the data and the recognition of relationships and differences between variables uses SPSSv17.0.

Subsequent in-depth interviews with a self-selected sample of student-managers verify the emergent survey data, whilst also securing a deeper empirical understanding. Recorded data is transcribed, with both content and narrative analyses undertaken within NVivo8.

Anticipated results

With the research still in progress (completion Autumn 2010), full analysis of the survey findings will be presented in December. Providing a lens on an area that is at present empirically under-researched, it is anticipated that this empirical work may challenge the dominant pedagogy of management-education, with its emphasis upon curriculum over practice. It will question the meaning of, and re-shape, manager-education within higher education and has therefore significant importance for higher education academics.

References

Entwistle, N. (1988). *Styles of Learning and Teaching* London: David Fulton. Available online at <http://www.tla.ed.ac.uk/resources/EoL.html>. [Accessed 13/7/10]

HESA (2010) Student qualifier data table: Subject. Available online at http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/component/option.com_datatables/Itemid,121/task,show_category/catdex,3/ [Accessed 14/7/10]

Kanter, R. (1968) Commitment and social organisation: A study of commitment mechanisms in utopian communities. *American Sociological Review*.**33**: 499-517

Tsai, P. Yan, N., Huang, L. & Huang, I. (2007) A study on motivating employees' learning commitment in the post-downsizing era. *Journal of World Business* **42**: 157-169