

Differences Between Management Teaching at Universities and the Used Practice

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Abstract: This study investigates the differences between what is taught at business universities and what is used in practice by SME managers and owners. The research involved 11 semi-structured interviews with teachers of general management courses, specialist management courses, SME managers and SME owners in the Czech Republic. Based on their responses, a difference diagram was developed. The diagram derived from the study's findings visually represents the gap between academic teachings and practical applications, particularly emphasizing areas such as cost-cutting strategies and ethical management, where significant divergences occur. This visual representation not only clarifies the extent of these differences but also underscores the importance of bridging the gap through a more practice-oriented curriculum in business education. The answers show that there are big differences between the curriculum of general courses and management practice, but if we look at other specialized subjects like Operations Management or Project Management, the differences become significantly smaller. Thus, if a student takes a comprehensive management education, and not just the basic general courses, the student should have a sufficient knowledge base to function successfully in practice.

Keywords: business schools; management practice; differences between teaching and practice; relevance of teaching

JEL Classification: A2; I2

1. Introduction

Business schools are institutions that aim to provide education to students seeking to enter the business world. The content of business school curriculums is designed to equip students with theoretical knowledge and practical skills that can be applied in real-life business settings. However, several scholars have raised concerns about the effectiveness of business school education in preparing students for the challenges of the business world.

Many books have been written about the poor teaching of management in schools, such as "Shut Down the Business School: What's Wrong with Management Education" by Parker (2018), "Nothing Succeeds Like Failure: the Sad History of American Business Schools" by Conn (2019), and "The Golden Passport Harvard Business School, the Limits of Capitalism, and the Moral Failure of the MBA Elite" by McDonald (2018). It could be perceived that education (not just management education) is in bad shape from the reactions to articles in the mainstream media, where comments like "What good is this school going to do them?", "Another graduate to work in a Maccas." arise (Šára, 2023; ČTK, 2023).

This study has focused on finding the key differences between what is taught in management classes and how managers act in practice. It is used to understand whether the teaching is out of touch with reality or in line with it, and whether as a whole it is fulfilling its function of preparing the student for their future profession.

2. Theoretical Part

Harrison et al. (2007) acknowledge that the pressure on colleges teaching business to make their curriculum both vocational and relevant is overwhelming. However, they see academia as having a huge advantage over, for example, management institutes and consultancy centers. According to the authors, the advantage of universities is their multi-disciplinarity, and the aim of universities should not be to adapt 100% to the real environment but to educate versatile students who have good critical thinking skills and are familiar with paradigms so that they can make good decisions in their management practice. This is why they call for more collaboration between business universities and other disciplines such as philosophy, art, and sociology. Shoemaker (2008) argues that business schools need to stop focusing on narrow technical skills and instead focus on interdisciplinarity and critical thinking, ethical leadership, and social and environmental responsibility. He calls for a more holistic approach to management education that incorporates insights from disciplines such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, and sustainability and prepares graduates to address pressing global issues such as climate change and inequality.

Also speaking positively for universities is the research of Paton et al. (2014) who ask what relevance even means. They warn against sudden changes in approach and teaching just to make everything momentarily relevant. The way forward, the authors argue, is to stay with scientific theories and blend them with the world of practice. The authors tested and analyzed their approach using the principle of a long-term partnership between a UK university and a multinational corporation. They also introduced the notion of "relevate", which means that from seemingly useless rigorous theories that are not useful for a normal life, we create relevant experiences by linking them to practice and showing them in real life (Paton et al., 2014).

Recommendations for business schools to follow to minimize scientific rigor and increase relevance were put together in a model. This model is based on management being taught by so-called executive professors, i.e. people from the field. Even working with managers has its pitfalls; in their model, for example, they caution against not having an executive professor actually teach courses that they understand and that meet expertise; furthermore, someone must be dedicated to these executive professors to teach them, help them with syllabus development, or see that they fulfill all administrative duties (Clinebell & Clinebell, 2008).

In contrast, Antonacopoulou (2010) sees the way forward in a more critical approach. The author focuses on a reflexive critique based on the so-called phronesis, a type of practical wisdom that emphasizes ethical and political aspects. The article suggests that such an approach can help business schools develop a more nuanced understanding of business and society and can lead to a greater impact on the world. Phronesis can help with ethical decision-making, leadership, innovation, social responsibility, and strategic thinking. Thus, Antonacopoulou puts a more global worldview and an emphasis on ethics and geopolitics in

the classroom, which will then help students in the real world. Ma et al. (2020) also agree with a greater approach to critical thinking and ethics.

These studies show that concerns about the relevance of teaching in business-oriented universities persist and are, according to some authors, justified. At the same time, however, there are two streams of thought, some such as Antonacopoulou (2010) and Ma et al. (2020) see the path more in critical thinking and ethics, while Clinebell and Clinebell (2008) and Paton et al. (2014) aim at involving practitioners in teaching and linking theories to practical examples, approaches that are of course not mutually exclusive.

But is this the reality? How big is the gap between teaching in schools and the work that graduates encounter? That education can never be completely relevant to the environment is understandable, programs have to be approved and what was valid at the beginning of the studies may not be a complete reality at the end of it, thanks to technological innovations our world is rushing forward ever faster.

This research has focused on identifying specific factors where management teaching and management practice diverge. The purpose of this study is to describe the key differences between the curriculum delivered by management teachers and the priorities perceived by managers. The study answers the research question: What are the key differences between what is taught about management at universities and what practitioners in the field use in practice?

3. Methodology

Based on the literature search and previous research, a form of qualitative research using semi-structured interviews was chosen to help identify key differences between what management teachers at universities teach and perceive as important to convey to students, and conversely what top managers and business owners use and perceive as priorities in practice. Qualitative interviews were judged appropriate in this case because the content of the research is not intimate that the interviewee might be reluctant to answer; instead, the aim is to obtain facts, reasons, and causes for certain practices (Kvale, 2008).

First, an interview guide was developed following the methodology described in Arsel (2017). This guide included the research question, interview objective, sample, topics, and outline of the questions. The interview was semi-structured, so the questions were mainly used to discover themes and to ensure that themes weren't missed during the interview. While non-scripted questions surfaced according to the respondent's answers. Due to the nature of the research and the two groups that the research compared, two versions of the guide were also created - one for managers and one for teachers. The interview first included warm-up questions, for the teachers, e.g. what subjects they teach, what they enjoy most about a particular subject; for the managers and owners, it was a question about their experience and the company where they work. This was followed by questions used to identify key differences between what teachers consider important and teach, and what is important to managers and business owners. In the end, participants were given the opportunity to revisit any topic or share anything else they felt was important that I had not covered in the interview.

The context of the research is also important because much of the research on the relevance of teaching or differences in teaching and practice is from the UK or the US, where the education system is diametrically different opposed to, for example, the Czech Republic or Germany, so experiences and practices may differ. It is therefore important to say that these are differences in teaching viewed in the Czech Republic and all respondents were from the Czech/Slovak origin and living in the Czech Republic (Wilson, 2008).

A pilot interview was conducted in December 2022 to check that the questions were understandable and, above all, relevant to the topic. Due to feedback from the interview, the questions were modified and further expanded to include several additional topics. Then, in January 2023, 4 interviews were conducted with management teachers from the Department of Management at the University of Economics in Prague, and in February 2023 interviews were conducted with 4 top managers /business owners, these were SMEs. Based on the results of the interviews, 3 additional interviews were conducted in February 2023 with teachers of Operations and Project Management from the Department of Management at the Prague University of Economics and Business and Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem. Table 1 describes the sample size in more detail and the professional focus of the respondents as well as their codes; 11 interviews were conducted in total. The interviews lasted on average of 45 minutes. Three interviews were conducted online via the MS Teams platform due to the time constraints of the respondents, where it was more convenient for them to be interviewed in the evening from home.

Table 1. Sample Size

Academics		
Number of respondents	Specialization / Focus	Code
3	General management (basics, principles)	T1, T2, T3
4	Specialized Management (Project and Operations Management)	T4, T5, T6, T7
Managers and owners		
Number of respondents	Specialization / Focus	Code
2	Owners of SME (e-grocery store; manufacturing company)	M1, M2
2	A top manager in SME (marketing agency; accounting)	M3, M4

Semi-structured interviews were recorded with the consent of the respondents, then manually transcribed and transferred to MAXQDA software where they were coded. The coding was done in the lean coding of Creswell (2012), where the 10 most important codes (e.g., negative attitude towards firing employees or cost is a company priority) emerged at the beginning, these codes were then expanded and concretized, and finally reduced to 6 categories (cost is a priority, ethics in cost reduction, technological innovation as a key to cost reduction, dealing with competitors, competitors as a friend, sharing know-how) containing more detailed sub-codes. Analysis of the codes and the content of the interviews led to the development of the diagram described in the following section.

As a complement, the syllabi of the subjects taught by the questioned respondents were also analyzed - namely Principles of Management, Management for Computer Scientists and Statisticians, Operations Management, Project Management, Management and Organization in Material Culture, and Management of Immovable and Movable Cultural Heritage. At the same

time, observations were made in 2 lectures and 2 seminars of Operations Management (15 February and 22 February 2023) to determine how practice is linked to theory, thus verifying the veracity of the interview answers. Finally, the PROJEKŤÁCI AND PROJEKŤAČKY Facebook group was also analyzed based on the interview responses in February 2023 to see if there is indeed an active pooling of project managers to share know-how.

4. Results

The differences between the thinking of teachers and managers/owners were already apparent after the first set of interviews. However, it turned out that there is a big difference in the subjects that a given teacher teaches. Therefore, three additional interviews were conducted with Project and Operations Management teachers. The general management courses include Principles of Management, Management for Computer Scientists and Statisticians, and Management and Organization in Material Culture. Other topics were also discussed in the interviews, but the different groups could not find a consensus on them, these topics are discussed at the end of this chapter.

4.1. Differences between General Management Teachers and SME Managers/Owners

The most significant differences can be found in Figure 1. Diagram of differences, which shows the greatest mismatch between the priorities of General Management teachers and SME managers/owners, with the addition of the Project Management teachers segment described in the next subsection. The data and statements in the model are those where all respondents had the same or similar opinions.

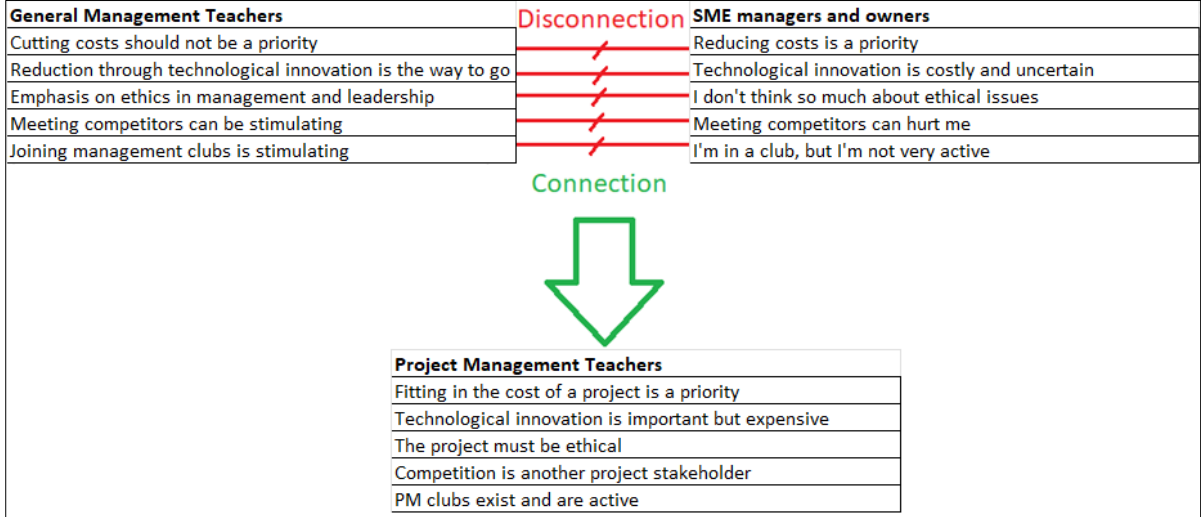


Figure 1. Diagram of differences

A very prominent issue for both general educators and SME managers and owners is costs. Teachers view cost reduction as a last resort, they see reducing staff, reducing product quality, or the quality of the production itself as very problematic, which can result in e.g. higher air pollution. Teachers' views are comprehensively represented by the following answer of respondent T1:

"It's always at the expense of something else, somebody gets a pay cut, somebody gets fired, even if the amount of work stays the same, so I think it's a wrong problematic practice."

Respondent T3 then highlighted the detrimental results of the constant pressure to cut costs in the effects it has on staff. According to them, an employee often has to cover the work of several people because the number of staff is being cut, only to be caught out by health problems such as a heart attack or burnout syndrome. On the contrary, technological innovation, in the form of a more modern production line, retraining of employees, and buying more durable materials (less scrap), seems to be a suitable alternative.

Managers and owners, however, struggle with costs in their daily practice, and their answers show that costs are indeed a priority and something they monitor regularly. Respondent M3, a manager working in services, described how he regularly monitors new systems and PC programs to make work easier for employees, i.e. reduce the cost of time, or watches the prices of these applications, always trying to get programs like Adobe Photoshop or Microsoft Office at a discount. Respondent M1, an owner of an e-grocery store, monitors costs every week because he is constantly communicating with both suppliers and distributors, and this whole logistics chain is trying to reduce costs and in turn, maximize its margins. It is a priority for him to know where he is cost-wise, where he needs to tighten up, and where he needs to cut back. For technological innovations, the participating managers and owners always imagined something big in the form of a new plant or a completely new product, acknowledging that it is something necessary. They have a neutral attitude towards it, and their answers showed a great deal of caution and even distrust towards technological innovations, as in the answer of M2:

"Do you know how much it would cost me to invest in a new line? It's tens of millions, no one knows if it will pay off before it gets up and running before people learn with it. We have an older line from Holland, it's proven, it has a higher failure rate, but everyone here knows what to do with it."

A second very strong theme that resonated through virtually all the general management teachers' responses was ethics, whether it was about cost or competition, teachers always emphasized that everything had to be within the bounds of ethical behavior. The inclination towards ethical issues in the Department of Management of the Prague University of Economics and Business is evidenced by an internal document on the expertise of individual teachers in the department, 5 out of 20 lecturers (25%) identified topics such as moral reasoning and decision-making, dishonesty and cheating, corruption, applied philosophy and ethics, business and managerial ethics, ethical challenges as their main priority and their specialization. Managers and owners see the topic as rather grey, the term ethics only came up in the interviews when they were directly asked about it, while teachers included it as an important pillar right in their initial answers. Managers and owners were aware that ethics and moral behavior were important, the boundaries of ethics in this case were different from those of teachers, for example, cutting costs through redundancies did not seem unethical to them, it was part of business in their view.

As far as competition is concerned, in the Principles of Management course teachers do not define themselves in relation to the competition and rather show students the tools they can use to compare themselves with the rivals. They have strong reservations about price wars and similar practices on the edge of the law. On the other hand, if they were to advise students to be in contact with competitors and to act in a friendly spirit, they certainly see this as a promising opportunity. Managers are very skeptical about communicating with competitors and negative emotions were evident from the responses, respondent M4 said:

"So of course, we are not mean to each other, but I can't imagine writing to Miloš over there from a rival agency: "Hey man, what are you doing tonight, let's go for a beer and talk about how business is going?" I don't think that's realistic, if I got a message like that, I'd think he was trying to get some important info out of me."

A final theme that resonated strongly between the two groups was that of networking and sharing know-how. The teachers interviewed see great potential in various associations such as the Chamber of Commerce, and various business and management clubs. Although the managers and owners were able to acknowledge that there is certainly potential, they admit that they do not have time for such meetings, or even are members of an association, but are very inactive, do not attend meetings, or participate only as passive actors. At the same time, there was a feeling of motivation to receive, i.e., to get their tips and know-how from others, rather than to share their experience, which in practice would lead to the dysfunctionality of such clubs.

4.2. Specifics of Project Management Teachers

The differences or inconsistencies described above are well brought together and reduced to the compromise in Project Management, which is much more practice-based. Students who choose Project Management at the Prague University of Economics and Business take 5 courses, one of which is a direct internship. The introduction from Project Management then includes working closely on a project with a company such as ČSOB (VŠE, 2018, 2023a and 2023b). Teachers themselves are aware of their differences in the academic field, as stated by respondent T4:

"I will probably give you completely different answers than other colleagues. Project management is mainly about working with people from practice because you are not alone on a project, but you communicate a lot with the project owner, with the sponsor, with the stakeholders."

Teaching project management is consistent with Clinebell and Clinebell's (2010) research, with project management teachers having only part-time positions at the school and being dedicated to their project management profession. In contrast, general management lecturers admitted that they do not have work experience in management positions in a corporate or SME environment.

The Project Management approach to the above differences is as follows. Project costs must be accurately calculated and then, once the project is approved and commissioned, they must be kept. Any changes must be justified and approved. Therefore, working with costs is important

and a normal part of a project manager's job, but there is not the pressure to cut costs that is described by general management teachers or felt by managers and SME owners from non-project backgrounds. Rather, it is about selecting the most appropriate project delivery method at a reasonable cost. The compromise position is perceived by the interviewees teaching Project Management also in technological innovation, for the projects themselves innovation is very important and must be taken into account. As for project management itself, innovation in the form of new and better software may be the answer. However, they acknowledge that technological innovation is very costly and unless it is the very purpose of the project, for example, to introduce a new production line, it may not fit into the project budget.

A very interesting position is maintained by Project Management teachers towards the competition. For them, they are "just" another stakeholder in the project who needs to be observed, and watched over and you should also maintain relationships with them. Price wars or similar practices are out of the question for Project Management teachers. Instead, they address price and associated costs in ROI, which is one of the leading metrics of project success when it comes to, for example, the mentioned installation of a new production line.

As for joining clubs and sharing know-how, like the general management teachers, the Project Management teachers recommend this practice and even give an example of a working practice. There is a group called PROJEKŤÁCI AND PROJEKŤAČKY on Meta's Facebook, which has over 1,800 members and brings together project managers, see Figure 2. The platform is used for questions, tips, and organizing meetings. In this way, it fulfills the objective of sharing know-how.

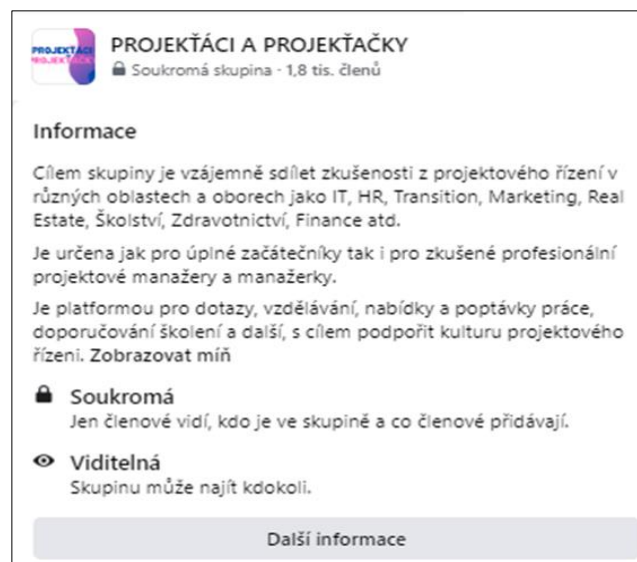


Figure 2. Screenshot from Facebook group PROJEKŤÁCI A PROJEKŤAČKY (own screenshot, Facebook, 2023)

4.3. Operations Management and Other Topics

A very specific subject is e.g., Operations Management, from the interview with 1 respondent teaching this subject, the analysis of the syllabus, and the observation of two lectures and two seminars on this subject, it is clear, that this subject behaves much more in line with the beliefs of owners and managers. For example, given that the course content is to impart the knowledge needed to determine production lot size or lead time to students; it

looks at these facts from a practical perspective. It was also evident from observations during a lecture that tips and cases from practice are included in the teaching, where much less emphasis is given to theory as to the actuality and reality of application.

The interviews conducted also sought to uncover other important themes, each respondent, whether manager or teacher, viewed them quite differently. The topic of donations and financial support was viewed as controversial, whether it was support for political parties, culture, or sponsorship. In this question, teachers and managers raised opinions such as T1:

"I think it is legitimate, but there is a question of degree. I think even organizations should understand that if they send 50 million to someone, it's probably not okay and they are gaining power over them, even though they might have meant well. For me it has room, it's a company thing, of course, it's their marketing and a bit of lobbying as well."

Or as T2:

"It's still specific to us in that I assume most companies are just daughters of foreign mothers. So that the manager is accountable to shareholders and to his superiors who are completely outside the region. He has no connection to that local community; he doesn't need it and he doesn't do it. I think it's the same in England, the factory is in a small town, the manager lives in London, or even worse the factory is in Bangladesh, and he doesn't know what's going on there. So, then you have to make it terribly complicated and non-local and think I've got a CSR and I'm going to make a corporate foundation and it becomes professionalized. Someone through the Foundation will do my applications... And then there is the non-profit sector, which is also professionalized and is non-local."

Other topics on which there is no consensus include lobbying and the manager's responsibility for the economic well-being of the Czech Republic.

4. Discussion

The results show that systematic differences between teaching and practice do exist, but it is important to distinguish between levels. At the level of general management, the differences are indeed large and irreconcilable, general management teaching focuses on paradigms, ethics, and critical thinking, which fulfills the relevant objectives of teaching according to Shoemaker (2008). Reflecting on their call for interdisciplinarity, the study recommends incorporating insights from various disciplines, including ethics, to prepare students for complex decision-making in business.

The divergence in ethical perspectives between academia and practice resonates with Antonacopoulou's (2010) emphasis on phronesis, or practical wisdom. The study highlights the need for business education to integrate ethical decision-making within the context of real-world business dilemmas. The differences are visible in the approach to ethics, costs, and competition, where teachers see a more normative to utilitarian approach (Rachels & Rachels, 2012); while managers and owners are more pragmatic and do not exclude choices such as firing employees.

In contrast, specific courses such as Project Management or Operations Management are close to the ideal according to Clinebell and Clinebell (2008) and Paton et al. (2014), where the "relevance" principle is used, theories are shown through practical examples, teachers are so-called executive professors, and internships and close collaboration with specific companies are also involved in the teaching.

5. Conclusion

This study has illuminated significant disparities between the theoretical management teachings at universities and their practical application in the business world, particularly within SMEs in the Czech Republic. The semi-structured interviews with educators and practitioners have revealed a complex landscape of divergent priorities, approaches, and understandings of management that led to the creation of a diagram of differences.

A critical divergence was observed in attitudes toward cost management, technological innovation, ethical management, and competition/networking. These differences are overcome in the form of specialized courses such as Project Management and Operations Management.

As can be seen from the theory and the results, to want to mix both approaches – a broad outlook, critical thinking, paradigms, and ethical sensibility on the one hand and collaboration with practitioners on the other - in one course would probably be impossible. It is essential to look at the management curriculum as a whole and to observe the overall composition of the program, and only then to evaluate it because taking only one subject out of context will never encompass the whole complexity of the management field.

It cannot be forgotten that the topic has another actor that was not included – the students themselves. It would be interesting to triangulate the research through interviews with students. How does teaching management affect them? What teachers think they are communicating may be received differently by students and they may see different meanings in it. Conversely, another possible research may be to look at students' views during their time at school and a few years after school when they become managers or start a business and see if their views have changed over that time and, more importantly, what the reasons were for that change.

This research, while providing valuable insights into the disparities between management education in universities and its practical application in SMEs, particularly in the Czech Republic, is subject to several limitations. These limitations should be taken into account when interpreting the findings and considering their implications. A larger and more diverse sample might have provided a broader perspective and could lead to more detailed conclusions. The qualitative nature of this study, primarily based on interviews, introduces an element of subjectivity in the data interpretation. Different researchers might derive varying interpretations from the same data, which could influence the overall conclusions of the study. Concentrating on the Czech Republic provides a detailed local context but also limits the applicability of the findings to other geographical regions with different economic, cultural, and educational environments. While these limitations do affect the scope and applicability of the study's findings, they also open avenues for future research.

Conflict of interest: none

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