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# **Following the herd? To what extent can isomorphism conceptualise the positioning of universities in the delivery of Foundation Programmes in Business education.**

## **Abstract:**

Foundation Programmes (FPs) provide entry to undergraduate study and have grown in popularity in the past decade, particularly in Business. As the foremost example of this qualification type, the Business Management FP facilitates an insight into the ways institutions have responded to the opportunity of offering this level 3 qualification. This paper adopted an integrated desk research approach and reports on differing strategic positioning by universities. For a number of post-1992 institutions, the FP has become an important part of the curriculum and a recruitment asset. In contrast, many pre-1992 universities have chosen to restrict the FP to recruitment to shortage subjects or the international market rather than use it as a means of promoting widening participation for local, mature and disadvantaged students. This paper places the discussion of the FP within the theoretical framework of New Institutionalism and evaluates the relevance of isomorphic influences in policy formulation.

**Key words:** Foundation programme, Business education, Isomorphism, Accreditation.

## **Introduction:**

Clegg, Gordon, Hermens, Kornberger, Rhodes and Ross-Smith (2005), claimed that Business Schools were becoming increasingly characterised by 'institutionalised hypocritical isomorphism', but is this true? There can be little doubt that in response to widespread criticism of Business Schools, the curriculum is changing, but in what ways and for what reasons? This paper explores the positioning of universities in rolling out the Foundation Programme (FP), with a particular focus on Business education. For some universities, it has developed primarily from the wish to recruit international students, for others to broaden participation, and for some simply to generate a new income stream. This paper adopted an integrated desk approach to report on the provision of FPs. This research is informed by an underpinning principal research question: to what extent can isomorphism be identified in the ways in which universities deliver Foundation Programmes in Business? The findings suggest that our understanding of market positioning should be revised in order to recognise the influences engendered by competition as well as isomorphic behaviours.

### *Placing FPs in their context:*

Originally conceived as a means of entry to undergraduate programmes, and distinct from Access to Higher Education courses, FPs represent a potentially lucrative product in a changing Higher Education (HE) market. The period 2010-2018 witnessed rapid growth in this qualification as institutions sought to meet the expectations set out by Central Government for widening participation through a simple 'bolt-on' qualification to existing curricula.

## **INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE**

Figure 1. Growth of the FP in England and Wales, 2010/11-2017/18 identified by age/background and indexed to the academic year 2012/13 (source: Kernohan, 2019).

Figure 1 describes the growth in FP enrolment, especially mature students and those aged under 21 years from disadvantaged backgrounds. Nathwani (2019) reports that:

In England, the proportion of foundation year entrants from quintile 1 of the Index of Multiple Deprivation indicator (representing the 20% most disadvantaged areas) has grown from 25% to 32%. Conducting the analysis by age reveals that the increase is more profound among mature students. For this group, the percentage has risen from 29% to 41% in the time period being considered.

This data is instructive since it indicates that FPs continued to recruit larger numbers year on year across all four categories prior to the Augar Report of 2019. Moreover, there appears to be a significant increase after 2014/15 in enrolments from both categories of mature students, most notably those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Although FPs are represented across the disciplines, Business programmes are the most popular with 25,000 students enrolling onto variants in 2020/21 (Kernohan, 2022). This level of recruitment compares favourably to the numbers enrolled onto social science (6915), engineering and technology (5090), and subjects related to medicine (4620). FPs were originally conceived as being more generic and vocational in nature and the preponderance of these subject domains over others such as mathematics (475), historical, philosophical, and religious studies (445) and geography and earth and environmental sciences (20) is pronounced. This imbalance between subject domains may reflect how universities view the FP in terms of its purpose and linkage to degrees that do not appear to have an immediate vocational relevance. An investigation of Business FPs not only demonstrates the capacity of Business Schools to develop the curriculum in response to demand, it also is indicative of the reluctance of some disciplines to diversify their curriculum offer and attract a broader range of students.

## **Literature review:**

The discourse on organisational strategic positioning has tended to contrast the instrumental rationality as presented in New Institutionalism (Hawley, 1968; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) with the essentially subjective nature of decisions with Adaptation theory (March and Simon, 1957; Junot Hilburn and Mamiseishvili, 2016; Kamilla, 2017).

### *New institutionalism and the concept of an organisational field*

New institutionalism aims to explore the nature of interaction between an organisation and its environment. For Hedmo, Sahlin-Anderson and Wedlin (2006), the complex interaction of professional, competitive and regulatory pressures mean that Business Schools occupy a common field of activity. Indeed, Wilkins and Huisman (2012, p. 2) contend that 'as a distinct organisational field, Business Schools arguably compete for largely the same resources and legitimacy, and

operate under the same institutional framework in terms of laws, regulations, normative rules and cognitive belief systems'. For Clegg et al. (2005) such are the pressures inherent within this highly specialised organisational field, that Business Schools are induced to compromise their educational values in order to secure competitive advantages in the lucrative globalised HE market (Marginson, 2004).

In their development of New Institutionalism, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) claimed that organisations searched not only for competitive advantages within their field but also legitimacy and influence over other organisations. Moreover, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) considered that this search for legitimacy would engender field homogenisation, wherein organisations would adopt similar structures and practices. This process of homogenisation was explained in terms of three mechanisms: coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism. Dumitru, Stanciu, Dumitru and Feleaga (2014, p. 788) highlight the value of isomorphism as a theoretical construct, as it 'helps us understand the evolution of the curriculum, the choices and pressures exerted on the faculty'. Although Marginson (2004) has challenged the scale of homogenisation in the global HE market, he accepted the premise that social status legitimated the position of universities and that institutions were driven to maximise their reputational capital.

Coercive isomorphism is evident when an organisation is obliged to follow the directions imposed by a superior body. This mechanism was associated with the power of the State to determine the nature of regulated market environments as well as the Public Sector across the globe. In the United Kingdom (UK) the past four decades has seen the transformation of the State from the provider model to that of the regulatory state (Peters and Pierre, 2006; Ashworth, Boyne and Delbridge, 2007). However, despite this change, the State remains the primary policy driver in HE through its capacity to legislate, delineate the direction of policy and enforce regulatory frameworks. The Augar Report (2019) is a case in point with its recommendations to cut funding to FPs, which can only jeopardise its viability for some universities. The ways universities respond to a reduction in the fee level -from £9,250 to £5,197 (Hale, 2022) - will be indicative of how they see their mission and the degree to which widening participation is prioritised in strategic planning.

Mimetic isomorphism occurs when organisations search for assurance in an uncertain market environment (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In particular, mimetic practices are likely to be associated with a wish to follow the market driver, or one that commands high reputational capital within its professional field. League tables have become the foremost mechanism to identify high performing institutions, with those annually published by the *Guardian* and the *Times* viewed as measures of progress or failing by senior leadership teams. There are distinct advantages in imitation, in that it may reduce research and development costs and possible time-lags in roll-out, as well as legitimise their approach. This is especially relevant in relation to FPs, where for most universities they are relatively recent entrants to this niche market and aim to offer a marketable programme. Mimetic isomorphism in relation to Business Schools is evident in the prevalence of professional recognition of qualifications from the Chartered Management Institute (CMI), Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) or the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), or in the movement towards institutional accreditation from international bodies such as the Association of Advanced Schools of Business (AACSB, 2016), the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) and the Association of MBAs (AMBA), (Hedmo et al 2006, Smith, Barnes and Vaughan, 2017). Whereas Julian and Ofari-Dankwa (2006) argue that accreditation has led to a form of “accreditocracy”, with increased formalised systems of control that would approximate to coercive isomorphism, Romero (2008) contends that this process of external validation enables business schools to demonstrate their quality to external stakeholders. However, the problem for Business Schools as they look to market their FPs is that these qualifications are rarely mapped onto professional recognition at level 3, and so they are marketed as part of an integrated package that includes the following degree programme. It is in this sense that wider claims to recognition for the FP as a discrete qualification are limited and dependent on their linkage to a follow-on degree programme.

Normative isomorphism is displayed in networks where high levels of professionalism and shared codes of behaviour are evident (Dumitru et al. 2014). DiMaggio and Powell (1981) identified HE as a leading exemplar of highly developed normative behaviours. Universities are important as an exemplar of professional formation in two respects. Firstly, through the highly developed collegial code and

idea of academic identity that has traditionally characterised academe (Alu-Alruz, and Khasawneh, 2013; Miles, Shepherd, Rose, and Dibben, 2015; Feather, and McDermott, 2016), which informs professional networks and communities of practice such as the Foundation Year Network (FYN). And, secondly, through their role in awarding qualifications that provide entry to the professions and the attendant inculcation of professional values. It is within this context that we should view Business Schools as both consumers and producers of normative isomorphism. In particular, those educational goals that underpin curricula reflect both their designers' professional values as well as subject expertise. When placed within an environment with a high level of market intelligence, these normative pressures may well induce a convergence in terms of curricula.

As entrepreneurial organisations, universities aim to identify new markets and according to Amarante and Crubellate (2020) are influenced as much by external socio-cultural ideas as internal considerations. Resource Dependency theory highlights the relevance of limited resources and competing stakeholder expectations in the development of particular projects (Freeman, Dmytriyev and Phillips, 2021), and for some smaller Business Schools this may be a constraining factor on development. Kraatz and Zajac (1996) argue that there are limits to normative isomorphism as a satisfactory conceptualisation of how educational institutions behave. Whereas the idea of isomorphic behaviour is based on the drive for legitimacy, Kraatz and Zajac (1996) argue that institutions are driven to adapt by internal pressures such as values, or micro-political conflicts, rather than external concerns. Adaptation theory therefore rejects the idea of organisations as being preoccupied with the imperative of field legitimation and highlights the operation of organisational culture, as well as the importance of localised contexts for many educational institutions. This institution-centric interpretation therefore views curriculum development as essentially an endogenous rather than an exogenous process. Moreover, such a view challenges the idea of institutions being driven by instrumental rationality (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) in favour of one that is essentially socio-cultural and underpinned by a professional values-system (Ball, 2015; De Vita and Case, 2016). Adaptation theory provides an alternative

interpretation of how professional identity and values influence the positioning of educational institutions and therefore how these types of organisations operate.

### **Research method:**

This research project set out to address an underpinning research question: to what extent can isomorphism be identified in the ways in which universities deliver Foundation Programmes in Business?

The research methodology adopted represents a development of established desk research approaches in the form of integrated desk research (i-DR: Jallel and Prasad, 2018). According to Jallel and Prasad, 2018):

By combining traditional desk research with a mixture of quantitative and qualitative inputs, including new information channels such as social media, i-DR... can craft an intelligence mosaic. This can be used as a basis for actionable insights, well-substantiated business decisions, validation of existing inputs or guidance on in-depth research. (p. 3)

I-DR has been developed by strategic planners to analyse trends in data and movements within competitive environments, as such this approach is apposite for the exploration of isomorphism in organisational fields such as Business Schools. Jallel and Prasad (2018) highlight the importance of revisiting data, pattern recognition, and the adoption of structured forms of comparison in analysis. This methodological approach is appropriate when searching for possible clustering of institutions and explaining their strategic positioning. Moreover, this approach also takes account of the changing way information is created, shared and interpreted within academia (Carrigan and Jordan, 2022; Veletsianos, Johnson and Belikov, 2019). According to Chugh, Grose and Macht (2021, p. 997) 'little is known about academics in the context of the uses, benefits and challenges of social media, which points towards the need for increased attention from the academic community'.

Take, for example, the development in recent years in the ways in which social media is used by academics to promote their research and share ideas across a community of practice. The operation of a vibrant Twitter feed by the FYN is an illustration of how mimetic and normative influences can be conveyed through these evolving communication channels. On reflection, this source proved useful in generating qualitative data and rich insight into the discourse across the Foundation Programme community of practice.

Quantitative data was obtained through a desk-based review of institutional and media websites. This research approach is recognised as an established method in analysing Business School curricula provision (Navarro, 2008; Kars-Unluoglu, 2016; Stoten, 2019). A range of sources were identified that would infer some form of isomorphism, as described in Table 1.

**INSERT TABLE 1 HERE**

Table 1. An indicative alignment of research technique to isomorphic type.

The annual university rankings for the period 2019-20 to 2022-23 published in *The Guardian* proved a pivotal resource as it led to further lines of enquiry that explored other quantitative measures such as entry requirements, numbers of students enrolled and institutional dependency on local undergraduate students. Although access to league tables provides a range of data on universities, their validity has come under scrutiny. Ever since the first league table was introduced by *The Times* in 1992, the methodology used by newspapers and the wider media to report on performance in universities has been challenged. Yorke (1997) questioned the validity of the data in league tables citing their unreliability, errors in weighting and potential for manipulation, and Maw (1999) also reported concerns over the value of league tables. For Hazelkorn (2011), league tables merely reflect a highly differentiated market and serve to legitimise existing disparities. Indeed, for Christie (2017), league table provide a form of illusory transparency that fail to take account of institutional missions and internal measures of success. The commercial dimension to league tables has also been commented on by observers who recognise that these constructions of contrived reality are ultimately intended to increase sales (Bowden, 2000; David, 2016).

However, despite the limitations associated with league tables, those published by *The Guardian* were chosen in preference to *The Times* in order to provide a statistical base from which to work. In order to establish a consistent reference point only one source was therefore chosen. *The Guardian* was chosen in preference over *The Times* as its data was more easily accessed and linked to subject disciplines. Albeit productive, this approach should be recognised an illustration of the pivotal role of the researcher in generating data from which to draw conclusions. Just as the presentation of data by universities has been questioned (David, 2016), we should acknowledge that the choices made in deciding upon a data source is itself a process that is open to bias and distortion (Corlett and Mavin, 2017; Jamieson, 2023).

The data generated by The Guardian was then supplemented through interrogation of university and sector-specific research websites, such as [www.hesa.ac.uk](http://www.hesa.ac.uk) and [www.Wonkhe.com](http://www.Wonkhe.com). One issue that arose, however, was the lack of specific information on Foundation Programmes compared to Foundation

degrees and other undergraduate programmes. For example, data on Foundation Programmes provided by Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) is often subsumed into other groupings. Indeed, in their response to the Augar Report, the FYN (2019) argue that there are major problems in how data is presented and that policy is poorly informed.

### **Findings:**

The data generated indicates a variety in the approaches taken by universities towards Foundation Programmes. The data is presented in Tables 2 and 3. In general, the data relates to FPs in Business and Management, although in a few instances another FP has been selected in order to represent the general position taken by a university.

**INSERT TABLE 2 HERE**

Table 2. Ranking by largest number of enrolments to Foundation Year Programmes.

### **INSERT TABLE 3 HERE**

Table 3. Local geographic comparison of numbers on FYPs enrolled in 2021

#### *The key findings:*

- There is clear evidence of clustering in provision at both ends of the spectrum. The top 20 providers are all post-1992 universities, with some, such as Anglia Ruskin, originating in the polytechnic sector and others, such as Christ Church Canterbury, in the college of HE sector. In contrast, many of those that recruit relatively low numbers to FPs are pre-1992 'research-intensive' universities, such as York and Newcastle.
- A second finding is the localised nature of supply of FPs in many areas, often with one provider dominating a city region. In many instances, but not all, it was the post-1992 university that recruited most students to FPs. So, for example, Leeds Trinity recruited over 2,000 more FP students than the University of Leeds, and Northumbria's intake was 1400 compared to that of 40 at Newcastle in 2021.

- A simplistic analysis of the data may, however, misrepresent institutional missions. For example, although Sunderland recruited 800 FP students in 2021 and Durham 85, the entry policy for Durham is aligned to clearly defined criteria linked to social disadvantage rather than A level points.
- There is evidence to suggest that an institution's dependency of local domestic students is tied to the provision of FPs. Buckinghamshire New (95%), Suffolk (89%), Bolton (89%) and Wolverhampton (89%) and Christ Church Canterbury (96%) and Leeds Trinity (99%) all recruit a high proportion of domestic UK students.
- The data also infers that those smaller institutions that cater for specialised degree programmes related to agriculture, such as Hartpury (95 students), Royal Agriculture (30) and Harper Adams (55) or music, such as Leeds Conservatoire (75), are less inclined to recruit students to FPs, and certainly not in Business. This may be related to the market and career contexts to these subject disciplines or their capacity to deliver viable FPs.
- The entry requirements vary according to a range of factors not least the ranking of an institution and the vagaries of annual recruitment success or failure. For some institutions, there are very few formal entry requirements. For some universities such as Manchester, entry is decided on an individual basis. For the larger recruiters, the need to set entry requirements for large cohorts is understandable and these may range from as low as 32 to as high as 104 UCAS points for a typical FP in Business Management at a post-1992 institution.
- There is evidence of universities offering only a limited range of FPs, excluding Business, to recruit to particular disciplines. This is prevalent in the sciences and engineering, where recruitment may be problematic. So, for example, Cardiff, Newcastle, and York offer FPs in engineering- albeit with entry requirements of AAB/ABB, AAB, BBB respectively
- A number of universities offer a preparatory FP for international students. These may include Business within the curriculum, such as that at Newcastle and Nottingham. Often these International 'pathway' programmes are outsourced to another provider, as in the examples of Northumbria,

Nottingham, and York, but others, as in the case of Leeds are taught by university staff.

- There is significant commonality across Business Management FPs in terms of modules and structure. A core curriculum across the sector appears to contain introductory modules in Business, personal and career development, academic skills for Business, and project work. Where an institution offers a module on Law (Brighton, Christ Church Canterbury), Marketing (Leeds Trinity, Solent) or Finance (Birmingham City, Solent), this may reflect pragmatic resourcing preferences.

## **Discussion:**

The data infers that there is a mixed economy in which Business FPs are provided for a range of reasons. For some, there is some correspondence to their mission in widening participation, and this is most pronounced in relation to post-1992 universities. This position is also influenced by market forces and Business FPs are used to bolster recruitment to undergraduate degrees, especially where there is a goal to attract local students. In general, the pre-1992, 'selective' research intensive universities tend to adopt a different approach. In some instances international FPs are offered as a way of expanding into the lucrative international market, and these can be delivered in-house or outsourced to another provider. In other examples, these universities may only offer FPs where there is a shortage in recruitment, as in the case of engineering. In such circumstances the prominence of Business is relegated to wider issues pertaining to market positioning, reputation and resource constraints. Whereas the agenda for many post-1992 universities is to recruit directly onto Business, and indeed other degree disciplines, for many pre-1992 institutions the goal is simply to recruit to the university.

Although it is clear that universities exist in a highly competitive marketised environment, there is also evidence of isomorphic behaviours that are indicative of other policy drivers. Market position informs mimetic behaviours through homogenisation in provision, particularly in relation to Business FPs. The preponderance of post-1992 universities in the FP market is indicative of a similar

analysis of their strategic context and corporate mission. As universities with a tradition of 'applied knowledge' delivered through a vocational curriculum, these institutions tend to appeal to a wider demographic than many pre-1992 universities who may recruit a less expansive cohort. It is in this context where we see the growth of numbers of mature students to vocationally-oriented FPs, such as Business. The prevalence of 'Business Management' across post-1992 universities serves to accentuate this homogeneity in terms of the same title, content and marketing. In contrast, the mimetic behaviours of pre-1992 universities are evident in the provision of international pathways where Business is one of several subjects, where they offer FPs in shortage disciplines, and through less recruitment of students.

The coercive power of Central Government policy may well be the determining factor for the future of FPs in many universities. The ramifications of the Augar Report are inescapable, particularly in terms of funding methodology and where Government sees future provision of such programmes being delivered. In steering institutions through changing expectations and funding, the State is able to redefine the viability of FPs. This coercive power is likely to generate mimetic responses across the sector. For those pre-1992 institutions for whom a cut in funding is judged to be detrimental to the wider university, and who view domestic FPs as peripheral, then the future of FPs is called into question. It may be that for these institutions, future FPs may be intended solely for the international recruitment market. For the post-1992 universities, the problems posed by the Augar Report are more profound. Since many of these universities depend on FPs to feed into their degree programmes, they may feel obliged to maintain the FP in order to protect their wider undergraduate curriculum.

The ways in which institutional policy is formulated in response to these coercive and mimetic forces will be influenced by normative pressures both within and across the sector. These normative influences will be conditioned by a combination of prevailing values, mission statements and position-taking. It is within this maelstrom of social contestation that vested interest groups such as the FYN will lobby to maintain the FP as a viable qualification within the HE sector. However, although a

community of practice such as the FYN, may be able to provide contextual insight into the merits of the FP, such groups do not make institutional policy. Ultimately, senior leadership groups across the sector will make decisions on the future of the range, scope and viability of FPs. This response may well demonstrate mimetic behaviours as institutions search for common solutions, and we may see a new wave of clustering in terms of strategic goal-setting for FPs.

## **Conclusion:**

This paper set out to address the research question: to what extent can isomorphism be identified in the ways in which universities deliver FPs in Business? Since the FP in Business Management is by far the most common programme offered across the HE sector, it serves as an indicator of the how universities view this level 3 qualification, as well as its wider appeal to potential students. The findings point to the continued growth of the FP as a means of entry to university and to its contribution to the widening participation agenda in Business Schools. The Augur Report exemplifies the coercive power of the State to induce change in the HE sector through its funding methodology. As a result, the HE sector is now confronted with some important decisions about how their value this qualification and how it fits into their wider curricula and marketing, and widening participation strategy.

The nature of the response to the Augur Report will continue to illustrate the extent to which universities are driven by isomorphic influences. This paper reports on how universities are induced to adopt isomorphic behaviours based on their ranking and status. In exemplifying mimetic isomorphism, institutions appear to gravitate towards clustering behaviour. The largest providers of FPs are the post-1992 universities and these are often characterised by the recruitment of local students. Interestingly, there also appears to be a division in the provision in city regions, with one provider dominant. Although a few pre-1992 universities do offer FPs on a large scale, these are often marketed for international students, and include Business only as part of a broad-based curriculum. As research-intensive

rather than teaching-centred institutions, many pre-1992 universities are wary of being too closely associated with a level 3 qualification and prefer to use FPs to recruit to a few shortage subject areas such as engineering or science. There is clearly a mixed economy in the provision of FPs, with providers responding to differing drivers.

The future trajectory of the FP will be determined by a confluence of drivers, including implied understandings within institutions as to their mission and capacity to deliver. In this respect, we need to understand that policy will be the outcome of normative values both within institutions and across the sector, as well as the constraints imposed through limited resources. It is in this context that we should acknowledge the contribution to this analysis of Resource Dependency and Adaptation theories, as well as New Institutionalism. This paper contributes to the discourse on widening participation in HE and how New Institutionalism can inform our understanding of the positioning adopted by universities. In providing an illustration through the Business FP, it also provides an insight into how Business Schools are contributing to widening participation, which is rarely reported on.

### **Disclosure statement:**

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