

## ***Transformation Management at a University-Based Business School***

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This study focuses on the process of institutionalisation of a new management and educational system (MTBS) in a Malaysian top university-based business school, disguised as AGSB. Specifically, the study looks at the changes brought by MTBS transformation programme introduced by government. An explanatory case study method is used whereby data are collected through semi-structured interviews, document reviews, informal conversation and observations. Using Neo Institutional Theory and Institutional Theory of Educational Organizations, the data from this study reveal that MTBS created a legitimacy dilemma for AGSB and subsequently led to mere incremental changes in the management and educational practices. The main reason is that the MBTS holds a complex set of conflicting value propositions to be provided by AGSB. Regarding management, the MTBS proposes profit maximisation as the main value proposition for the management. As for education, the MTBS proposes multiple value propositions, including career-enhancement-salary-increasing, practice-based education, and scholarly- based education for developing intellectuals. This is from the normative policy making perspective. In real life situation, however, MTBS proved that it is not more than wishful thinking. Compared to the drastic nature of the change required, the apparent incremental changes made in the management and educational practices in AGSB are more or less negligible or even negative. This study has shown that the intention to institutionalise new management and educational practices may not materialise if there is no normative match between the assumptions, norms, and beliefs brought by the new system and the identity of educational organisations.

Keywords: MTBS, Value Proposition, Incremental Change

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## **1. Introduction**

In Malaysia, the development of business and management education is very much related to the socio-economic development. Considering the importance of university-based business schools in spearheading the efforts to instil commercialisation culture in public universities, a transformation programme, which was launched in 2008, was seen as necessary. The programme was named the Malaysian Top Business Schools (hereafter MTBS) and specifically written up to intensify the commercial orientation culture among the university-based business schools. The focus of the programme was to level the performance of business schools in public universities at par of their regional and global counterparts and thereby be global centres of excellence in business and management education. The programme was only targeted at business schools in public universities. At the initial stage of the transformation programme, the government conferred two business schools, disguised as AGSB and AGSM, the status of MTBS as starting point of the transformation programme. The then MOHE announced that the selection of the MTBS was based on the criteria of the World Top Business Schools and Asian Top Business School with eight domains namely, quantity and quality of academic staff, quantity and quality of research and teaching, quantity of postgraduate students, quality of postgraduate students, innovation, professional services and gifts, networking and linkages and support facilities. Furthermore, the government recognized that the new direction of business and management education requires different management and leadership style from the mainstream university administration. Therefore, the government promised to revamp the administration of business schools to ensure complete autonomy, transparency and accountability of the top business schools ([www.bernama.com](http://www.bernama.com)).

However, after granting the two schools the status of MTBS in 2008 concerns have been raised regarding how to evaluate the performance of the TBSs. The eight domains announced by the government when the TBSs were selected were merely guidelines for the transformation of the TBSs into world-class institutions. Therefore, the specific benchmarks for the transformation programme to be used in evaluating the performance of the TBSs were then considered by the government. In some way, the government is using the TBS instrument as a tool for transformation and expecting the business schools to become global centres of excellence in business and management education given the successful implementation of the programme. In this paper, TBSC, TBS instrument, and MTBS transformation programme are used interchangeably. In the literature of organisational change in higher education, the process of actually transforming AGSB into global centre of excellence means changing not only its structure and management practices, but also the thinking and the quality of interaction among the academic staff (Clanon, 2013). Thus, the focus of this study is to understand how the TBSC is used as a tool for organisational transformation and also how this transformation, if any, took place.

## **2. Explanatory case study method**

An explanatory case study was used in this research as there were no prescribed answers to the research questions because the meanings attached to the TBSC are expected to vary between various actors within and outside AGSB and, therefore, multiple realities are expected to emerge from the research. Consequently, understanding the process of business school's transformation, such the routinisation of TBSC is much deeper than the one obtained through the use of other research methods such survey or experiment. Furthermore, because there is no single reality in interpretive research, case study is the best method to unravel the

complexity associated with remarkable change, such the one related to the institutionalisation of TBSC. This type of study will also provide a rich and comprehensive description of the current situation as well as historical aspects such as the administrative and organisational context.

Semi-structured interviews were used in this research. The main contribution of semi-structured interview lies in the “richness of the data they provide, a strength that is sacrificed when data are reduced to numerical values” (Sankar & Jones, 2007). Therefore, as the objective of this research was to provide a holistic and in-depth understanding of the transformation process in the case business school, a complete set of data from prescription to implementation of TBSC was required. Hence, interviews were conducted at two levels of responsibility, specifically the ministry level and the School level. At the ministry level, the former Chairman of the TBS was interviewed twice. At the School level, 9 people from the management team, 6 academic staff, and 9 MBA students were interviewed. Collectively 25 people were interviewed some of them for more than one time and each interview took between 1 to 2 hours except for MBA students it took between 30 to 45 minutes.

The evidence from the interviews was further enhanced by other sources of data included documents review, informal conversations, personal observations, news about the School, and not to forget the personal experience the researcher was able to gain from being part of the School’s community throughout the data collection period.

### **3. Analysing the dynamics of MTBS transformation programme**

In order to explore the reasons for the dynamics of the transformation process, it is necessary to reconstruct the accounts given and the sense making by the alternative actors involved in the MTBS programme. This will be achieved following the tradition in the sociology of knowledge followed in previous organisational research in general (Slack & Hinings, 1994) and in educational organisations in particular (for example, Georg Krucken 2007). In the spirit of the neo-institutional theory articulated by DiMaggio and Powel is the process of institutional isomorphism through which organisations in an organisational field tend to become more similar over time.

The concept of institutional isomorphism refers both to the direct, power-based influence which may leave an organisation in a few-choices or even no-choice situation, and the softer, non-power-based influence which in informal ways transfers the characteristics of one organisation to the other, or operate from within the organisation itself (Bager, 1994). Towards this end, DiMaggio and Powel further suggested that there are three basic forms of institutional isomorphism. Firstly coercive isomorphism resulting from both formal and informal pressures exerted on organisation by other organisations upon which they are dependent and by cultural expectations in the society within which organisations function. Such pressure may felt as force, as persuasion, or as invitation to join in collusion. Secondly, mimetic isomorphism resulting from standard responses to uncertainty in such situation as organisational technology is poorly understood, goals are ambiguous or when the environment creates symbolic uncertainty. In such case, organisations may model themselves on other organisation being indirectly through employee transfer or explicitly through consulting firms or industry trade association. Thirdly, normative isomorphism associated with professionalization as reflected by the collective struggle of members of occupations to define the conditions and methods of their work, to control “the production of producers” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

When applying this general conceptual scheme to the specific case of TBS transformation programme in Malaysia, a restriction and an extension to the various types of isomorphism seemed to be justified. The restriction is twofold: the first relates to way in which the concept of institutional isomorphism is used. Isomorphic tendencies presented here are strictly limited to the question whether and why AGSB formally institutionalised the TBSC in its management and educational practices. No claims are made with regard to isomorphic tendencies as regard to the contents of the syllabus for example. In other words, whether the TBSC had led to changes in courses description or not is outside the scope of this study. The second restriction relates to the differential characteristics of the identity of university departments, such as AGSB, when adopting new programmes as the one presented by the TBSC. The latter is analysed from the lens of institutional theory of educational organisation and the premise of loose coupling (Meyer, 1980; Weick, 1976). The extension is also twofold. The first relates to the level at which mimetic and normative pressures has been felt. In this study, while coercive pressure is felt at the organisational level, i.e. the School, both mimetic and normative pressures are felt at the state level. The second extension relates to the carriers of the normative pressure. In this study, accreditation and industry are the main carriers of the normative pressure both of which are neither part of the state, and therefore exercise coercive pressure, nor led by AGSB, and therefore exercise mimetic pressure. This is unlike DiMaggio and Powel theory where the focus is on profession and professional organisations as the main sources of normative pressure.

The three types of institutional isomorphism, i.e. coercive, mimetic, and normative, intermingle in empirical setting, even though they tend to drive from different conditions and may lead to different outcomes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). From the analytical point of view, this is by no means what happened in the case of MTBS. Previous research in organisational transformation in higher education documented that organisational transformation will only be considered when the three sources of isomorphism are presented (W. Bealing Jr, Riordan, & Riordan, 2011; Krücken, 2007; Papadimitriou & Westerheijden, 2010).

To discuss the coercive isomorphism, two important facts were seen as prerequisite in this research. The first is that the coercive pressure is particularly for AGSB and the adoption of the MTBS programme is voluntary for other business schools, as explained by the then Chairman of the TBS committee:

*If you want to be a TBS, it is unclear what kind of incentives the government is giving; but actually if you asked me, even without the financial incentives, the branding value is very high. For this reason, the TBS is not mandatory for other business schools*

The second fact is that even though the penalty was not clear if AGSB violates the TBSC, AGSB has been selected to set the example for other business schools and therefore found itself in a position that it has to conform to the criteria that have been set by the regulator, as explained by the Marketing Executive at AGSB:

*The government wants us to be an example on how to continue, we have given a minimum fund by the Government and we have to serve our own funds and they want us as a TBS to show that we can survive without government funding.*

Furthermore, having the profile of world-class institution is defined according to how the MOHE views world-class business schools. For these reasons AGSB concentrates so much

on building its reputation through various industrial linkages and being part of the regional and global networks of business schools. On yearly basis, AGSB is required to report to the ministry showing the scores it made in each area of the TBSC. Moreover, TBSC was felt as, according to the responses of interviewees, “something that imposed by the government” and “the whole programme of MTBS was, in fact, a top down process”. Thus, in some way or another AGSB is being coerced to focus on new set of educational and non-educational measures rather than purely academic measures, while, on the other hand, it is also supposed to generate sufficient income to run the School independently. In short, the coercive pressures have shaped the management and educational practices in AGSB subsequent to its selection as MTBS.

Interestingly, the role of the leadership of the parent university is also of particular importance in the case being analysed. However, the pressure on AGSB by the parent university is a function of economic and academic factors. Economic-wise, because the parent university is also under pressure of being autonomous, cash flow and capital investment became an economic necessity for university administrators. In this sense AGSB, with its managerial expertise and marketable programmes, is very important for contributing to the financial bottom line of the whole university. Furthermore, AGSB was expected to set the example for other faculties within the university as well as to how to generate revenues out of their academic programmes. For this reason the Vice Chancellor of the parent university, who also used to be the ex-dean for the School, and his deputies fully support AGSB. As indicated by the Dean of AGSB:

*Even our VC is also interested in what happening in AGSB because to the University, AGSB should be an example for other faculties, because ultimately other faculties also have to be autonomous as part of the corporatization policy of public universities at the Ministry level. As such, other faculties are also supportive because they want to see and learn from the experience of AGSB to be an independent unit.*

Academic-wise, the parent university is also concern about the quality of education and research by academic measures. For this purpose, AGSB must conform to the university requirements in terms of teaching and research. This scenario of economic-academic dichotomy makes it difficult for AGSB to choose between the economic and academic objectives. Ultimately, this scenario also explains why the TBSC led to an institutional identity crisis for AGSB, as explained by the Deputy Dean of AGSB:

*The top business schools programme is conflicting because this is a research university, so we have publication criteria and so on, but you see these TBSC is more industry driven and it is not really pure academic KPI, so actually it is quite conflicting, so we are in the process in order to say ok: who want to follow the KPI of the TBS and who want to follow the research university KPI. So we have not decided yet on which part we are going.*

Thus, the coercive pressure by the government was also reinforced by the Vice Chancellor of the parent university which, in turn, have also shaped the management and educational practices in AGSB.

Regarding the mimetic and normative pressures, both of them took place at the ministry level. As for the mimetic pressure, the government objective of making business schools in public universities as centres of excellence by the year 2020 is ambiguous and as such it tried to

adopt the model of other regional and global top business schools. Therefore, in its essence, the MTBS instrument is nothing but an attempt to copy the best practices in business and management education at the regional and global levels. As indicated by the then Chairman of TBS “*the discussion of the TBS was mostly based on brainstorming but guided by what happen in the global scenario*”. In this sense, the mimetic processes here took place in a highly institutionalised setting. This is unlike the proposition made by DiMaggio and Powel that observation and imitation took place between organisations without communication with other similar organisations in the field.

As for the normative pressure, accreditation agencies seem to be the central carrier. Getting accreditation by MTBS is supposed to be the vehicle for internationalisation of business programmes and networking development. This scenario explains why AGSB embarks in the accreditation from the AACSB and hires one senior consultant especially for this exercise. The manifestation of the pressure exercised by accreditation agencies, basically from the AACSB, on AGSB’s behaviour is, according to the Senior Consultant for Branding and Marketing, justified by:

*Mainly increasing the visibility of the AGSB o the various stakeholder and thereby be able to commercialise its academic programmes and research outputs to the relevant users.*

**3.1 Breaking the rule of the game at case AGSB:** According to the institutional theory, there could be some coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism, which could lead to the institutionalisation of new educational and management techniques in AGSB. In its essence, the MTBS programme proposes an alternative model of business education that focuses on internationalisation and industry collaboration. On one hand, this model may make the business schools more akin to medical schools, where teaching, research, and practice are closely interrelated. On the other hand, the MTBS model may make the business schools ‘businesses’ in their own right whose purpose include generate revenue-for shareholders, for graduates, and for staff. Thus, this new model requires fundamental change in the educational and management techniques which, in turn, require a change in the way academic staff do and view things because it holds a different paradigm. How can an educational organisation such as AGSB, which has been so long adopting academic orientation, change to professional and economic orientations? How is the change done? In what ways do the culture and institutions enable or constrain the processes of organisational transformation?

According to Gornitzka and Maassen (2001), answers to such questions depend on whether there is congruence between the underlying norms and beliefs of the MTBS and the identity and traditions of AGSB as educational organisation. Therefore, the following two sections explore how the assumptions of the MTBS as policy instrument depart radically from the way things are done at AGSB and how this discrepancy shaped the management and educational practices at AGSB and eventually led to merely incremental changes in the management and educational practices.

**3.2 The institutional identity of AGSB:** AGSB could be described as academic unit operates within a leading research university with approximately 32 academic staff who constitute its major distinctive feature. In educational organisations such as AGSB, the focus of the deanery is on the educational processes rather than outputs or outcomes and as such there is a lack of feedback linkage from outcome back to inputs. The work processes are structured around various disciplines with relative or lack of coordination between them. Decisions

making authority is delegated to professors who possess the relevant expertise in specific areas. Lectures took place in unregulated environment where instructional activities are left for the individual lecturer. Research activities are made in silo with main focus on theoretical contribution to business and management knowledge. For academic staff, publications in peer reviewed journals are almost the main criteria of promotion. Weik (1976), John Meyer, Richard Scott, and Terrence Deal (1980) also found almost similar characteristics of educational organisations in their studies. These characteristics are by no means mostly governed by the conventional university and university departments with academic orientation and AGSB is no exception. The rules and regulations that exist in AGSB are the result of academic traditions, which basically focused heavily on the process conformity rather than output delivery or outcomes' respectability by different stakeholders. From the institutional theory of educational organisation perspective, these characteristics arise from structural strength rather than weakness. This is basically because the structures of educational organisations such as AGSB reflect environmentally created institutional rules concerning education and that these structures are decoupled from the technical work of education. In other words, the dean and the management team of AGSB has minimal control over instructional activities, design of instructional material, research practices by individual faculty members, evaluation of students' performance, and assessing the performance of individual faculty members all of which are the core functions of AGSB. Thus, the implication of the loose coupling on the management and educational practices in AGSB is that adopting new patterns of work, such as MTBS, the management team do not control the responses of the academic staff.

*3.3 The underlying norms and beliefs of MTBS programme:* According to Gornitzka and Maassen (1999), the analysis of organisational change in the context of government policies and programmes, such as MTBS, should delineate the background and nature of policies. This could be achieved by considering the national modes of policy making as part of the national state model and its influence on the policy formation process (Gornitzka, 1999). Thus, the analysis of the MTBS could be better carried out by relating the MTBS programme to the wider policy framework in higher education in Malaysia.

In responding to the growing demand for tertiary education coupled with the tight budgetary regulations since early 1990, academic orientation and its bureaucratic way of doing things in public universities had been criticised for being inefficient and ineffective. As response to this criticism, managerialism was promoted as new paradigm in higher education (Ka Ho Mok, 2007). The concept promotes the idea that public universities should adopt private sector management techniques in order to improve performance. In its essence, managerialism is a tool for shifting from a bureaucratic preoccupation with processes to a focus on results. This is exactly what is being promoted by the MTBS programme where business schools are judged based on the outcomes to the various stakeholders. Furthermore, among the three central values of managerialism, i.e. rationality, merit, and excellence, the concept of "excellence" is the most popular dimension (Santiago & Carvalho, 2012), and as such used as the edge of the MTBS. Therefore, coming from this macro analysis of public policy, MTBS programme could be seen as simply a "managerialism formula" for university department. Thus, MTBS carries new set of assumptions, beliefs, and norms about the management and educational practices in AGSB, and ultimately about the legitimacy of AGSB.

*3.3.1 Norms, values, and assumptions about the management practices:* From management point of view, MTBS promotes AGSB as for-profit organisation where the focus is on

efficient and effective allocation of available resources. Developing AGSB as autonomous entity has been defined based on the cash-generating capacity of AGSB. For this reason, it is understandable to find that one of the reasons behind the selection of the School as TBS is the expectation by government, and also by the parent university, that AGSB could set the 'example' for how to become autonomous entity, the major question in higher education in Malaysia (Sirat, 2010b). For the government, with the initial fund given to AGSB when selected as a top business school, AGSB is expected to set the example for other business schools on how they can be financially autonomous using self-generating income. This expectation was clearly explained by the Marketing and Communications Manager for the whole university and also The Marketing Executive and lecturer at AGSB:

*The government want us to be an example on how to continue, we have given a minimum fund by the government and we have to serve our own funds and they want us as a TBS to show that we can survive without government funding.*

However, the government set the conditions for AGSB to become autonomous entity as being able to cover all its costs. As indicated by then Chairman of the TBS:

*The best scenario will be the whole AGSB become a private body and if it is completely sustainable. In other words, it will be able to pay all the costs of facilities and operations. So the parent university will spin-off a private graduate business school.*

From the perspective of ITEO, the definition of AGSB as profit making organisation is based on erroneous assumptions about how AGSB is managed. Such assumptions are related to the overall focus of the management of AGSB, the governance structure, and the distribution of decision making authorities. As for the overall focus of the top management, MTBS require changing the focus of the deanery from educational processes to educational outcomes. This is a drastic change since it requires major change in the way the management team at AGSB view things. Central to this change is the focus on inspection of outputs, that is, the impacts of educational practices. From ITEO perspective, however, efforts to actually coordinate educational processes or inspect educational outputs would increase conflict with students, cause dissatisfaction among lecturers, and greatly increase the burden to administrators (Meyer, 1980). This scenario explains why AGSB lack any formal policy or binding instructions for academic staff to follow exactly the TBSC.

In terms of governance, the government promise to revamp the administration of the TBS was not made as yet. Only limited attempts were made by AGSB such as organising 'talks' sessions by industry peoples and having 20 peoples from the industry as advisory committee. The contribution of the industry advisory committee is confined to soliciting inputs for MBA curriculum without contributing to the performance of AGSB. This scenario may explain why the meanings attached to the TBSC by AGSB's academic staff are shaped by its 'academic' dimension as university department.

Regarding the distribution of decision making authority, the assumptions of MBTS relate to task differentiation and the efficacy of command-and-control mechanisms. The government expect that AGSB could be able to strategise for implementing the TBSC through allocation of tasks to academic staff based on their area of expertise. This expectation by no means requires replacing the former 'high trust' relations characterizing previous collegial forms of governance with 'low trust' relations. From the perspective of ITEO, however, this



assumption is misplaced due to the fact that the command-and-control management style of AGSB can only decrease the autonomy of academic staff, the most prominent feature of AGSB as educational institution.

All these assumptions and scenarios explain why AGSB struggles so much to develop new income-generating programmes such as executive development programmes and consultancy. Eventually, these scenarios may also explain why and how AGSB define its new strategic direction as business in its own right focusing mainly on profit. As indicated by the Dean of the School:

*It looks like a business now: generate revenue, pay the staff, our balance is profit as simple as that.*

The danger was that, AGSB identified its own academic staff as the biggest single threat to its new strategic direction, as explained by the Dean of AGSB:

*Our strength lies in our academic staff, but the way I look at it that is also our weakness because we are experienced, we are already research professors working within comfortable zone, now you want to shift into a new paradigm of doing business, now our weakness is to change the mindset and this is not easy.*

This is by no means explains the negative consequences of MBTS because what has been so long seen as the most valuable resource of AGSB as university department is now being downgraded.

*3.3.2 Norms, values, and assumptions about the educational practices:* From an educational point of view, the MTBS proposes practice-based learning where all instructional materials, instructional methods, research, and practice are intertwined. Relevant, respected, and referred business programmes have been defined from industry perspective. The mandate for AGSB has been set as, according to the then Chairman of the TBS “to solve industry problems”. For this reason, collaboration between AGSB and the industry was seen as the catalyst for developing and implementing the alternative business and management programmes. Towards this end, MTBS expect AGSB to bring in industry people to participate in teaching, research as well as the management of the School. The assumption is that business schools “must” not only change their mindset about what business and management education is all about, but to convince the top management in their parent universities that the MTBS is the “right” direction for them. This assumption is counterintuitive because the selection of AGSB as a TBS was made based on, according to the Dean, “its strong academic profile in terms of staff and academic programme”, a feature that is widely celebrated by academic staff in AGSB. This scenario may explain why AGSB has not decided as yet as to which strategic direction to choose between MTBS and the research university.

In terms of curriculum, the government expected AGSB to ensure that business programmes are tailored to industry. This requires knowledge about industry needs which, in turn, requires staff with sufficient industry background to design the curriculum. The real practices of curriculum design in AGSB proved that industry knowledge was confined to soliciting inputs from the discussions with the industry advisory committee. Curriculum design committee includes mainly senior professors in AGSB who are renowned for their rich academic expertise. For this reason, it is understandable to find that the progress towards developing

industry-related programmes was confined to introducing only loosely defined components in the MBA. Other than that the programme menu at AGSB includes academic programmes designed for what so called scholarly education for developing business intellectuals. This scholarly-based education is what actually being embraced and practiced by AGSB as *the* main value proposition. This scenario explains how the research university traditions shaped the curriculum development and constrain the progress towards industry-related programmes.

Regarding the pedagogical approach, the government expected the use of case study method as a platform where teaching, research, and practice are connected. From instructional point of view, the use of case method is supposed to inculcate not only the relevant business knowledge to the students, but also to inculcate other job-related skills such as communication, decision making, team work, and leadership. Furthermore, because the government also concern about the respectability of graduates by industry, the use of case study also expected to enhance the employability of business graduates, being in the form of career enhancement or salary increasing aspect of employability. This last expectation focuses on the value proposition that emphasis the career-enhancing-salary-increasing aspects of business education.

Concerning the research practices, academic staffs are encouraged to actively engage in case study research that focuses on solving real industry problems. The real research practices in AGSB showed that research practices are still focus on academic research where the focus is on theoretical contribution rather than practical contributions to real industrial problems.

According to the ITEO, the discrepancy between what was expected and what is actually being practiced, as far as curriculum design, instructional methods, and research activities are concerned, is due to erroneous assumptions about how teaching and research are done at AGSB. In educational organisation such as AGSB, any attempt to standardise instructional methods or research activities is beyond the control of the top management of AGSB. Ultimately, this scenario may explain why only incremental changes were made in the educational practices in AGSB.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The data from the case business school showed that the new transformation formula set by the MOHE was very much practically oriented to which business schools, as academic units, were not prepared for. This created uncertainty of the implementation of the new benchmark and in consequences academic staffs at AGSB try to resist the introduction of the new formula. At the end, the case university-based business school initiated some actions in response to this external pressure but the changes were merely incremental which was not helpful for the improvement of the quality of business and management education at the university level.

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