

1 European management education meets business school rankings

INTRODUCTION

Ranking lists of business schools and management education programmes are flourishing in newspapers and magazines around the world. National and international media, specialised business magazines, and general news media companies are all involved in producing and publishing rankings and league tables of business schools and of MBA and other management education programmes. London-based *Financial Times* published a ranking list of European business schools and MBA programmes in 1998, which was followed by an international ranking list the subsequent year (*Financial Times*, 1998-01-19; *Financial Times* 1999-01-25; *Financial Times* 1999-05-17). This ranking was one of the first attempts to produce an international ranking list comparing schools from the United States and Europe, primarily, in a single ranking list. This international profile has since been picked up also by other rankings. In 2000, *Business Week* published a separate ranking of seven non-U.S. schools together with their biennial ranking of U.S. schools, and, for the first time, included European and Canadian business schools in their survey (*Business Week*, 2000-10-02). In April 2001, the *Wall Street Journal* followed suit and published their first ranking of business schools, which also was an international ranking that included both North American and European schools (*Wall Street Journal*, 2001-04-30). During 2002, the *Economist* presented their first international ranking list comparing schools on a single ranking scale. Other prominent international ranking lists have featured in *Forbes* and the *International Herald Tribune*.

Although business school rankings are prominent in business media, rankings are not restricted to management education, but follow instead a number of national or regional efforts to rank universities and higher education organisations: for instance, *Maclean's* in Canada, *Der Spiegel* and *Stern* in Germany, *India Today* in India, *The Times* in the UK, and *the Good Universities Guide to Australian Universities* in Australia.

Should we love them or should we hate them? For a large number of European management education organisations, the proliferation of rankings and the starting of international rankings, such as the one produced by the *Financial Times*, has meant an opportunity to be included in business school rankings for the first time. Faced with such

ranking lists and league tables, business schools feel the need to participate and, in their own words, “play the rankings’ game”. The reactions to rankings among business schools are ambivalent, however, and it is not always clear what it means to play this game. Are business schools pleased with a good ranking or disappointed with a poorer ranking than expected? Disappointed not to be ranked, or pleased that they don’t have to bother, their minds or their resources, with involvement in such wasteful and useless practices? Clearly pleased, Dean Gabriel Hawawini at INSEAD business school in France commented the results of the *Financial Times* ranking on the school’s web page:

We’re in a competitive business and rankings are very important. We are pleased that the survey confirmed our leadership position in global business education, and our place among the best in the world. (<http://news.insead.fr>, 2001-06-22)

But the debate about the usefulness and effects of rankings in the management education community has more nuances than this; all business schools and business school representatives are not pleased. The existence as well as the methodology of rankings have been widely discussed and heavily criticised in various settings and situations. The issue of rankings was for instance debated at an efmd MBA directors meeting in the fall of 2001, and the grapevine has it that debate was intense and that the criticism of the *Financial Times* ranking from some European business schools was heavy:

When the group turned its attention to rankings, it became clear that we were waving a red flag at a bull! The journalists who joined us [...] knew in advance that they were venturing into the lion’s den, but bravely sallied forth to defend their point of view both eloquently and vigorously. [...] If we had chosen to allow it, this thorny topic could have taken over the whole meeting. (efmd Bulletin, February 2002)

The business education community is thus battling to understand what these ranking lists are, what they represent, and what the game of being ranked in these lists entails for participants. Rankers and the media, faculty and deans at universities and business schools, politicians, students and others all take part in discussions of these issues, debating the criteria, the methodology, and the very existence of rankings—in order to make sense of what is happening. What are rankings and why are they here? What impact does the introduction of rankings have on business schools and on management education?

Facing rankings – problems of identity and insecurity

The increase of media rankings and of media coverage for business schools and programmes has led to a number of attempts in research to understand the importance of rankings for business schools and universities. In their study of the consequences of the *Business Week*

rankings for American business schools, Elsbach & Kramer (1996) consider league tables and rankings as “organisational identity threats” for business schools, and describe the anxiety and “identity-crises” that the rankings create among members of the schools. Drawing on identity theory (e.g., Albert & Whetten, 1985; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), the authors claim that the rankings threaten both the perceptions of highly valued, core identity attributes and the perceived position of the school relative other schools. This is shown to cause distress and identity dissonance inside the business schools (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996, p. 464). The study also shows that schools responded to these identity threats by using other means of comparison and categorisation tactics that created a positive social identity by emphasising their preferred characteristics and placed them in a more favourable position towards other schools (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996, p. 456).

These authors point to the role of rankings in efforts of business schools to make sense of themselves and their environments. Linking rankings to the identity-formation of business schools explains some of the uncertainty and anxiety of business schools in meeting and participating in rankings noticed above. It can, for instance, be assumed that similar processes of identity formation and threat to valued identity features identified by Elsbach & Kramer (1996) are causing anxiety among European business schools as reactions to the current rankings, and are invoking protests and encouraging debate about the rankings. However, their study does not give any leads as to why the rankings pose threats to business school identities, what the rankings are, and what the ranking number represents, which may in turn give additional insights into the responses to rankings.

In another study of the American rankings, Dichev (1999) asks the pertinent question: How good are business school rankings? He investigates how the results in the rankings vary over time, and whether changes in the two prominent rankings, *US News & World Report* and *Business Week*, correlate. The results of his study show that changes in ranking, in both magazines, have strong tendencies to revert, meaning that a school that has moved up in the ranking one year is most likely to move down in the next ranking issue, and the reverse. There is also a noted lack of co-movement between the two ranking lists. The author suggests that these features are due to the incorporation of noisy information in the rankings rather than due to any substantial changes in the performance of schools, and concludes that the rankings should not be viewed as comprehensive and efficient measures of “school quality” (Dichev, 1999, p. 209). Similarly, in a study of the core and concentration areas chosen in American MBA programmes and their respective ranking in the *Business Week* ranking, Segev et al (1999) show that there is no relation between a certain structure of the MBA programme and

the ranking of the school. Each of the five top-ranked schools belongs in a different cluster of schools in terms of the core courses and concentration areas offered in the MBA programme. They conclude that there is no one “best” structure of programmes that yields a high rank in the ranking lists (Segev et al., 1999, p. 562).

We can thus argue that the volatility of the rankings and the problems of measurement are causing insecurity and uncertainty among business schools about how they should relate and respond to the rankings, increasing the identity dissonance and anxiety in response to the rankings. The fact that rankings are no clear measures of quality, and that there are no clear linkages between a good rank and a specific model or approach to management education, may enhance uncertainty for business schools and increase their identity anxieties. But even with insights about identity threats and uncertainty in relation to rankings, it is difficult to understand exactly why rankings are so powerful and what kind of influence they have on the business schools and their work.

The questions raised above suggest that there is another side to the story of rankings. To frame them as influencing and being part of the identity formation of business schools is not enough; we also need to understand why they have developed and how they have become so powerful that they influence the identities of schools. The studies referenced above take the rankings as given, without questioning their existence. Segev et al (1999) consider the development of rankings a “key institutional change”, and treat them as externally imposed on the field, but the development is not farther problematised. Taking this notion of institutional change seriously, I will argue for another approach, one that considers rankings as part of larger developments in society and in education. I will ask why are they here, and why seemingly so powerful in the minds of business schools. To understand this we need (a) to investigate how and why they have developed, and (b) to consider the fact that they may have implications beyond threatening individual organisations’ identities. To fully understand the expansion and development of rankings, there is thus a need to look for the context in which they have developed and consider them as part of a management education field.

The aim of studying rankings

The empirical studies of business school rankings referenced above all have an American focus (Dichev, 1999; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Gioia & Corley, 2002; Segev et al, 1999; Trieschmann et al., 2000). Contrasting this emphasis on the United States, this thesis will take a European approach and investigate the European field of management education and the development of rankings from a European perspective. Segev et al (1999) argued that the

study of rankings in the United States in the early 1990s provided opportunity for a “naturally occurring experiment”, since rankings were new to the field and it was possible to trace and explain performance effects of strategic change in relation to the rankings (Segev et al., 1999, p. 550). Without taking the argument quite this far, I believe the European field of management education is a particularly good place to study the introduction and impact of rankings because the rankings are reasonably new to the field and the reactions to the development have been extensive. The development of the *Financial Times* ranking of international business schools, which began in 1999, is used as a particular example of this European development. It is hence possible to study the development of the rankings early in its beginnings, and to follow discussions about the rankings. The study does not, however, take a “before and after”-approach and does not seek to explain performance effects of rankings. I do not want to suggest that the rankings are the only reason the European management education field is undergoing change.

The overall purpose of this study is to analyse the development of rankings within the field of European management education. This contributes to our understanding of how rankings work as well as to our understanding of the construction and functioning of organisational fields. Empirically, the main purpose of this thesis is to answer the following questions:

- How and why have business school rankings developed in Europe, and why have they become so prominent in the field of European management education?
- What are the possible effects of rankings as classifications within the field of European management education?

In the following section I will elaborate on these research questions, and discuss the development of rankings in the field of European management education.

THE FIELD OF EUROPEAN MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

The development of rankings has both driven and been driven by competition in the media field, and rankings have developed in relation to an increasing interest in management education topics in the media. This increase in the management education discourse in public media is a reflection of competition between newspapers and magazines. The *Financial Times* competes with several other magazines and newspapers both nationally and internationally, all increasing their coverage of management education issues during the mid- and late 1990s.

But this media competition is also related to the development of the MBA label in Europe, and to the very large increase in these programmes during that time, perhaps primarily in the UK (Mazza et al., 1998). The business press noted that with an expanding business education market, particularly for the MBA, a substantial group of business-school trained individuals was quickly taking up important management positions in industry. Thus, with a business-education section in the paper, newspapers wanted to target people in their mid-twenties, fresh out of business schools and MBA programmes, to read the paper and to subscribe (business education correspondent FT, 2001-03-29; Selections interview 3, Business Week). Business- and management-education topics were thus seen as an important step in building a long-term customer base among business people.

The interest of media is thus an important part of understanding the recent proliferation of business school rankings. When asked why he set up a ranking in the first place, the founder of the *Business Week* ranking stated,

The schools didn't seem to care very much about the attitudes or the perceptions of their customers: the people who actually buy their product. [...] I felt there was no marketplace, really, to make the schools even pay attention to demand. [...] So what I thought was this, one thing that a ranking would actually do is to create a market where none had existed. Create a market where schools could be rewarded and punished for failing to be responsive to their two prime constituents: the students and the corporations. (Selections Interview 3, Business Week, p. 1-2)

This quote points to one of the most common arguments for rankings, namely, that they contribute to forming markets and to market demands that in turn influence the development of management education. As market mechanisms, rankings are assumed to diffuse information and to help students make informed choices about where to study.

Demands for market mechanisms are not unproblematic, however. Miller (1996) calls attention to a number of problems with performance indicators such as rankings lists as means to ensure accountability and to create markets. Who are the customers? And what exactly does it mean to be a customer in, for instance, education? Answers to these questions are unclear (Miller, 1996, p. 57-60). Thus, that markets exist is not self-evident, nor that rankings and league tables are panaceas for creating them. Market explanations and the drivers identified in relation to media are thus not enough to understand why rankings have developed. Investigations of what happens when rankings are introduced in specific contexts is necessary, such as in education, where conceptions of markets and customers can not be taken for granted.

Conceptualising rankings as part of the field of management education provides a different perspective on what rankings mean, and on what they are—a perspective different

from that of earlier studies of business school rankings. A field approach provides the opportunity to understand and conceptualise not just the reactions and responses of individual organisations to changes in the environment, but also the interrelated efforts of organisations to respond and contribute to such developments. Identity-forming processes of organisations are not secluded from each other or from the actions and interpretations of other constituents and groups of actors. A field perspective gives the opportunity to understand the interrelatedness of reactions, responses, and identity-forming processes among actors, and to understand the influence that the rankings may have on the field of management education.

The concept of organisational fields is used in institutional theory to depict an area of social life or a group of organisations that compete for the same resources and legitimacy, as well as live by the same institutional frameworks in terms of laws, regulations, normative rules, and cognitive belief systems (cf. DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1981). Organisational fields influence how organisations within them are structured and carry out work, and what is considered legitimate activities. The definition of “field” is inspired by Bourdieu, who claims that fields are made up of organisations struggling for something that they have in common, as for instance, the definition of good art in the field of arts (Bourdieu, 1993). Through processes of field structuration, fields are constantly constructed and defined, (Giddens, 1984; Greenwood et al., 2002), and also through institutionalisation of norms and practices. Institutionalisation describes how values, beliefs, and practices become taken for granted and legitimate within fields.

Rather than taking markets as given, theories of fields and institutions suggest that markets are logics, or social constructions that are the result of institutionalisation processes (cf. Fligstein, 1996; cf. Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). Institutional logics change over time and undergo field-specific developments, and cannot therefore be uniformly taken for granted (Friedland & Alford, 1991). Thornton & Ocasio (1999), for instance, show how the higher education publishing industry changed from an “editorial” logic to a “market” logic, as conceptualisations of publishing changed from that of a profession to that of a business. Understood this way, conceptions of customers and markets are shaped in the field, and in processes of institutionalisation of fields.

Institutional theory and the concept of fields thus suggest that business school rankings have developed in relation to specific practices, norms, and regulative systems within the field of management education. Those theories and concepts also suggest that the environment and the larger context of the field in which organisations work influence the way these organisations understand and react to changes, such as the introduction of a rankings system,

which implies that the reactions to the rankings may be conditioned also to other developments in the field. To understand the development of rankings, some of the recent developments within the European field of higher business education also need to be addressed. The following sections describe first the development of rankings in relation to an expansion of media interest, and second, show that the development of rankings is closely tied to, and part of, field-specific developments such as the expansion of the MBA label in Europe, increasing competition in and internationalisation, and the development of different forms of regulations and standards within the field. As such, the rankings are also part of a societal trend to audit and scrutinize cultural and social performances of various kinds. Thus, rankings can be considered part of the forming and reforming of a field for management education.

International business school rankings in the media

Despite intuitive perceptions that the ranking phenomenon is new and different, at least from a European perspective, MBA and business-school rankings are far from a new invention. Business school rankings appeared as early as in the 1970s in the United States, and grew steadily throughout that decade. Daniel (1998) report several attempts by university researchers and professors to compile rankings that were intended to assess the relative standings of business schools in the United States. In 1973, a group of researchers at Columbia University undertook a survey about the reputation of schools, asking business school deans to list other professional schools in their fields. The schools most often mentioned were ranked the best. At about the same time, two professors at Georgia State University came up with a rating system that was based on the number of articles published in major journals by the faculty members of each school. This ranking resulted in a list of the “Twenty Leading American Schools of Business and Commerce” (Daniel, 1998, p. 215). Students also engaged in rankings. Students at Columbia University compiled a ranking based on assessments of the employment value of graduates; they simply asked recruiters to name the business schools they considered best. The schools most mentioned made up the “top 12” list. In 1974 a ranking was performed by the MBA magazine, which combined criteria for academic quality with that of employment value in surveys of both deans and students/graduates (Daniel, 1998, p. 215).

Efforts to rank business schools and other educational establishments continued in the United States in the 1980s, although the introduction of new business school rankings introduced a significant change in the rankings trend. Business school and MBA rankings

now began to spread outside of a strict academic setting and move into general magazines and business magazines. The *US News & World Report* started producing rankings of business education organisations in 1987, and since 1990, have ranked not only business schools but a wide set of college and university disciplines; and *Business Week* started their biennial ranking of MBA programmes in 1988. Both these rankings have gained attention outside strict academic settings, and have spread to a wide audience of prospective students, parents, employers, and so forth (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996).

The development of rankings is thus related to an increasing interest in management education issues generally, inside and outside of the strictly academic settings. The introduction of management education topics in business magazines, such as *Business Week* in the late 1980s, signalled the increasing interest and attention that was being paid to professional management education, the MBA, and other forms of management training. But not until the early 1990s, however, did management education make a significant breakthrough in popular as well as academic discourse. Moon (2002) notes a very dramatic increase in both the number of management periodicals and the number of articles featuring management education topics in both academic and popular publications in the early 1990s, particularly in 1991 (Moon, 2002, p. 66-67). The number of management periodicals covering management education topics, specifically represented by the MBA, increased from around 5 each year in the 1980s to approximately 15 each year in the 1990s (Moon, 2002, p. 67). By that time, almost one out of ten issues from leading periodicals covered one or more management education topics (Moon, 2002, p. 68). Thus, the discourse on management education became prominent publicly in the early 1990s.

One example of an international newspaper that has dramatically increased the coverage of management education topics in recent years is the *Financial Times* (FT), which started a standing section on business education on October 2, 1995. The aim was to create a consumer guide to the many options of management education programmes and organisations:

The page will provide a practical guide to the many sources of management education, analyze recent trends in areas such as curriculum and teaching styles, and offer advice to help readers decide which of the many programmes on offer best meets their needs [...]

The FT page will help companies and managers at all levels to take decisions on this widening range of options, and provide a foretaste of what life will be like on campus. We are sure it will prove a useful additional service for readers. (Financial Times, 1995-09-25, p. 13)

From writing about management education issues generally under the management page of the paper, from this year, business education got not only a standing section under the heading “Inside track” in the Monday paper, but also an appointed editor (business education

correspondent). The section contains a column, “News from campus”, featuring brief notices about business schools and programmes, as well as one or more feature articles every week. The section is also accompanied by advertisements for MBA programmes and schools. The coverage of business education in the *Financial Times* has, since the dedicated section was first started, more than four-folded: from producing 800 words a week it now produces about 3-4000 words a week and the number of dedicated surveys, or special issues, has increased from two to six per year (business education correspondent FT, 2001-03-29).

One specific development in this increasing coverage of business schools and management education was taken when, at the end of the 1990s, the *Financial Times* introduced rankings of business schools and management education programmes. The rankings became part of an effort to launch a credible business education section for the *Financial Times*, and to compete with other newspapers and magazines:

Because we are the FT we have to produce something that is hard, and that is factual, and something that is going to have an authority. And I felt very strongly that we could only do that if we had rankings. (Business education correspondent FT, 2001-03-29)

The wording in this quote, interestingly, stresses that the ranking and the business education section need to have “authority” in the management education field, and that this is largely what the newspapers and the different rankers compete for. A newspaper with “authority” sells not only newsstand copies of the ranking edition of the paper, but attracts interest, resources, and influence beyond the individual rankings.

The 1999 *Financial Times* ranking list featured business schools from both the United States and Europe in a ranking of 50 full-time MBA programmes. The expressed intent of the *Financial Times* first international ranking list was to make explicit the differences between the two continents, or the “Atlantic divide”:

By combining European and North American schools in a single ranking, the Financial Times survey of full-time programmes highlights where North American business schools shine and where their European counterparts prove attractive. (Financial Times 1999-01-25, p. II)

This effort to construct a ranking that compared schools across continents was a reaction to the American business magazines *Business Week* and the *US News & World Report*, who had produced rankings of U.S. business schools for a long time. While these rankings gained increasing attention in the United States, there were still very few rankings that featured European business schools and MBA programmes until this point, and even fewer, if any, that compared business schools from different continents. The rapid expansion of international rankings in the late 1990s and the early 2000s thus introduced yet another change in the

attention of the business school rankings game. Business school and MBA rankings, which have moved even farther from specialised magazines and the academic corridors, have also left a strictly American setting. Competition between the rankers has also driven an increase in the number of lists, and there are currently ranking lists of executive MBA programmes and executive education courses alongside the full-time MBA rankings. Rankings have become the business of the large media companies, which continue to spread management education topics to an even wider general public.

Diffusion of the MBA and expansion of management education in Europe

Coupled to this increasing media interest from management education issues is the growing market for higher education in business and management in Europe, and internationally. The field of management education, which is diverse and competitive, has expanded dramatically in recent years (cf. Locke, 1989). There are many types of programmes for graduate management training, geared to students with or without work experience as practicing managers. Today, the MBA programme has become one of the most visible business education programmes in many parts of the world. Moon (2002) shows that, in the beginning of the 1990s, the MBA is in focus in the management education discourse within management periodicals. The MBA is originally an American graduate degree in business, which has spread to Europe and other parts of the world in recent years. The first MBA programme in Europe was set up in the late 1950s (Sahlin-Andersson & Hedmo, 2000), and several new programmes were started during the following decades. The expansion of the MBA increased dramatically in Europe during the 1980s and 1990s (Mazza et al., 1998). With 400 new business schools established in Europe during the late 1980s, together with many of the traditional universities starting MBA programmes, the competition in the MBA market today has become fierce (Daniel, 1998, p. 266). Over 700 MBA programmes are offered in Europe today (MBA Info, 2003-10-13).

Together with the expansion of the MBA, internationalisation of business schools has also notably occurred, and particularly for MBA programmes. An increasingly global market for education seems to have arisen, within which schools are starting to internationalise their entire operations and offer “global” educational programmes, as for example, Duke university’s campus in Frankfurt and INSEAD’s Asian campus in Singapore (Financial Times, 1999-05-24). This internationalisation, together with the establishment of new schools locally, has radically increased the competition among business schools and universities.

Management education programmes thus compete for financial resources and for students, faculty, and support from businesses.

The developments within the field are not restricted, however, to business schools and universities. Increased competition since the 1980s is partly due to several attempts by the corporate world to develop their own learning programmes for their executives and trainees, challenging traditional universities and business schools. Companies with specialised management education/training divisions, often called corporate universities, increased from 400 to more than 1600 in the United States between 1990 and 1999 (Academy of Management News, Oct. 2000). This development is also likely to be under way in Europe. In addition, professional business advisory firms have been tending to move into education, with a subsequent “colonization” of knowledge that changes the relationship between the business community and academia (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001).

With an increasing number of corporate universities and attempts to colonize knowledge production processes, the need and desire to create systems that evaluate, assess, and define good and proper management education has been accentuated. The expansion of business education as well as an increasing globalisation has not just increased competition, but has also enhanced the need and desire to regulate and set standards for business education institutions that provide guidance as to which schools and types of organisations are considered part of the field.

Regulating pressures

The MBA degree, in the process of expanding in Europe, has become an institutionalised part of the higher education systems in most countries (cf. Moon, 2002), despite the fact that it does not easily fit into most national educational systems. Together with a deregulation of educational systems and the increased globalisation of higher education, the role of the nation state in higher education thus seems to have diminished, whereas demands for new forms of regulations and standards have been evoked (Hedmo et al, 2001). This development has increased the attention given to new forms for control and regulation of educational programmes in Europe (Sahlin-Andersson & Hedmo, 2000). With a large and seemingly quite diverse market for MBA programmes and other business education programmes, the need for transparency, comparability, and also standardisation has been evoked. The diffusion of the MBA label has also created possibilities for comparing programmes from different countries and regions, or for comparing different organisations, largely by creating expectations of similarity. Moon (2002) notes the perceived necessity of a transferable degree, such as the

MBA, when management education institutions want to be part of globalisation and of “the global society”. This argument is prominent in both written and verbal discourse within the MBA market (Moon, 2002, p. 89). The diffusion of the MBA title has thus provided conditions as well as incentives for international comparisons and new forms of regulations. This has caused a number of organisations, such as accreditation organisations and the media, to engage in standardising and regulatory activities (Hedmo et al., 2001).

Efforts to assess, evaluate, and scrutinize performances of all kinds are increasingly popular in many areas of social and cultural life (Miller, 1996; Power, 1997), not just in management education. The trend to evaluate and audit is particularly emphasised by Power (1997), who claims that we have entered an “audit society” where performances of all kinds are, by external pressures, subject to being audited, and claims that activities to an increasing extent are organised in order to be auditable (Power, 1997, p. 87). Audit activity carries a technological element, which includes the particular tasks and routines performed by practitioners, as well as a programmatic content, referring to the norms, ideas, and concepts that follow the pragmatics and that attach the practice to broader policy objectives (Power, 1997). The normative element can also be described as the discursive representations and the vocabulary that forms the meaning of the practice (Miller, 1994, p. 3).

It is the distinction between the technicalities and the norms and ideas following such practices that help us understand the increase in regulations, assessments, and evaluations of various kinds, because the programmatic content of audits and accounting has been transferred and embodied in other forms of assessments and evaluations. The norms and vocabulary that follow from such activities are, for example, accountability to external constituents, quality and quality control, and efficiency and control (cf. Miller 1994; Power 1997). The development of regulations and audits are often explained as following from demands for these things—demands for accountability, transparency, control over processes, and for quality control and quality improvements.

Shore & Wright (2000) show that as the concept of audit entered British higher education in the 1980s, the term was separated from its largely financial meaning and became associated with a cohort of other terms, such as performance, quality assurance, quality control, accreditation, accountability, value for money, efficiency, benchmarking, and stakeholders (Shore & Wright, 2000, p. 60). In the field of higher education, the diffusion of these terms has led to an expressed tendency for the production of more external quality assessments and evaluations (Engwall, 1998; Trow 1998), such as accreditation and rankings. These evaluation and assessment techniques have developed in close relation with the development of the field

at large (Hedmo et al., 2001). These assessments seem to have arisen from a quest for universities, and for colleges, to be accountable to their external supporters and to society at large, for pursuing their missions faithfully and for meeting legitimate expectations. Trow (1998, p. 20) argues that this accountability is both financial and academic, the latter referring to evaluations of the outcomes of, for instance, teaching and research.

Blurred boundaries of management education

The developments within the field described above suggest that there is a blurring of the boundaries of business education, such that a clear distinction between “traditional” business education and other forms of management training is increasingly difficult to make. A multitude of diverse actors, each claiming to produce knowledge and to educate and train managers and students of business, makes it unclear as to who is inside and who is outside the field of management education. It was also argued that the expansion of the MBA and the blurring of boundaries have created a desire among business schools and regulators to bring order and discipline to the market. This uncertainty and the desire for order have led to subsequent development of new regulations and rankings that aim to distinguish the serious from the less serious management education providers, and the “good” schools from the “bad” ones.

Research on the development of management education as an academic discipline and a distinct intellectual field show that insecurity about work procedures and tasks is high in management studies compared to other university disciplines (Engwall, 1992; Engwall, 1995; Whitley, 1984). External validations and evaluations are therefore assumed to be particularly important and powerful within management education. Whitley (1984) characterises management education as a “fragmented adhocracy”, claiming the discipline has a low degree of reputational autonomy over both performance and significance standards in research, and a high degree of dependence on other scientific fields as well as on various audiences for the research and teaching outputs (Whitley, 1984, p. 338-340). Management education is, and has always been, open to many audiences for legitimacy and reputation, and to standards set by non-intellectuals and a “management elite”, as for instance, a commitment to vocational training of managers (Whitley, 1984, 338-340). This leads to a discipline where “knowledge production and validation [...] is rather fragmented and disjointed” (Whitley, 1984, p. 341), implying that insecurity about the performance standards and evaluative procedures is high, and that intellectual standards and procedures for gaining legitimacy are divergent. This implication means, in turn, that there is high insecurity about who are considered good and

bad in management education, and about which standards should be allowed to judge the performance of individuals as well as organisations within the field. The boundaries and the definition of the field are hence unclear.

IDENTITY FORMATION, FIELD STRUCTURATION, AND THE ROLE OF CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS

Although perhaps particularly salient in contemporary management education, the questions and concerns raised here are not restricted to the field of management education. Those questions and concerns have broader theoretical implications that involve the ongoing construction of organisational fields and field boundaries. The struggle to construct and constitute an organisational field, such as the field of business and management education, is an ongoing process involving many diverse actors. Fields are a place of struggle over symbolic capital, where each field has its own specific logic that determines which characteristics can be used as capital, and which types of capital are required for participation (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 269). Because of this struggle, the boundaries of the field are flexible and constantly changing, requiring actors to engage in boundary-work to construct and determine the boundaries of the field (Gieryn, 1999). This boundary-work can be expressed as a struggle to determine insiders and outsiders, to determine the criteria that define actors in the field, and to determine who has the authority to judge and set field boundaries.

With this context, the development of a field for management education can be framed in more theoretical terms, addressing questions of how fields are defined and determined. Who, or what, counts within the field, and who are considered as legitimate players and part of the field? On the other hand, considering the many actors and principles to judge and evaluate management education that has developed in recent years, the question arise as to who, or what procedures, has the legitimacy to determine who counts and who does not count? What are the procedures for deciding what is legitimate, and deciding who is to be considered good or bad? What do rankings represent in this respect? In broader terms, this is about the construction of an organisational field, and about the mechanisms that determine field structures and sets boundaries of a field. The theoretical problem to be addressed in this thesis thus concerns the construction of fields, field boundaries, and the role of rankings in such processes. The main theoretical question is,

- What is the role of rankings as classification systems in the continuous structuring of fields and field boundaries?

Rankings in identities and fields

Returning to the arguments made at the very beginning of this chapter, that rankings may create uncertainty and anxiety among business schools and contribute to identity-forming processes, we must not forget the reactions and actions of business schools to the development of rankings. How can this be related to field processes? Despite representing two quite distinct research traditions within organisation theory, theories of identity and institutional theories of fields, they have more in common than a first glance would indicate. This study makes use of both, to understand the contemporary development of rankings in European management education. To link the two concepts of identities and fields is not new, however. In the Scandinavian research tradition in neo-institutional theory, the concept of identity and identity-formation has been perhaps particularly elaborated (Czarniawska, 1997; Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson & Sevón, 2003; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Sevón, 1996). Here, identity has been treated as an important part of field processes: for instance, as grounds for imitation processes and isomorphic pressures (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). Other researchers have also made the connection between institutions and identities, regarding identity processes as an important component in field formation and institutional change (Oakes et al, 1998).

I will build on these studies to further develop the connection between identities and fields, and to more explicitly take the view that the forming of individual organisation identities is a vital part of the forming and reforming of organisational fields. The process of identity formation is seen as part of the creation and recreation of fields and of boundaries of fields. This will help me to describe and understand field construction in more detail, as well as to see wider consequences and effects of individual identity processes. Hence, regarding both field formation and identity formation as interrelated two-way processes becomes necessary: identities are influenced by, and contribute to, the forming and reforming of fields and the structuring of fields.

Empirically, this means treating rankings as classification mechanisms. The role of classification mechanisms such as rankings provides an important link between identity processes and fields. Classifications and categorisations are used in processes of identity-formation and identification (for instance Bowker & Star, 1999; Sahlin-Andersson & Sevón, 2003; Sevón, 1996), and are central aspects of the forming and reforming of organisational and cultural fields (for instance Bourdieu, 1996a; DiMaggio, 1987; Oakes et al, 1998). In order to understand the functioning of fields, the principles of classification that exist in

fields, which help to construct and diffuse norms and practices, must be understood. Business school rankings are here understood as one such principle of classification, among many others. The rankings, in being such measuring or classification mechanisms, are thus perceived to contribute to field processes by setting and diffusing norms and standards for what business schools should do and how they should do it, and by playing a role in the identity formation of business schools. A focus on rankings as a classification mechanisms means a focus on what they measure, and how, but also on how and why they have developed and been received in the business school community.

Outline of the thesis

The following study is thus aimed at understanding the expansion of business school rankings, and at investigating the role of rankings in the forming of organisational fields. Chapter 2 is theoretical and develops the issues of field and field formation, and of the identity-formation of individuals and organisations within fields. The role of classification mechanisms in these processes is also specified. The chapter ends with the presentation of the analytical framework that will be used for the subsequent study of business school rankings. Chapter 3 extends the discussion of the analytical themes and explains how the empirical studies fit into that overall frame of reference. Furthermore, this chapter deals with the methodological considerations made in relation to the empirical studies as well as the chosen analytical and theoretical frame of reference.

Thereafter follows four chapters that deal with the empirical findings and problems concerning business school rankings in Europe. These chapters, which treat the rankings in relation to the identity-formation of schools as well as the forming of a European field of management education, look closer at the rankings as part of the everyday lives of European business schools. Because the presentation of the empirical findings in these chapters are based on the theoretical frame of reference, pertinent aspects of the specific structure of the empirical chapters are discussed and described in chapter 3. It suffices here to say that chapter 4 is a background chapter, whereas chapters 5, 6, and 7 focus on each of three aspects of the rankings: the rankings as measurement techniques, the rankings as a list and an ordering of schools, and the rankings as a field mechanism. Chapters 8 and 9 analyse and conclude the findings of this study.