

## **Project Management at Top Business Schools<sup>1, 2</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

If we summarize what all companies and organizations around the world do, we can state that they perform two types of activities: they execute processes to produce, sell, and distribute products and services, and they implement projects to ensure that the organization survives and keeps growing in the mid and long term. Based on this reasoning, leaders, such as managers and executives, should possess process and Project Management competencies. Many current and future managers and executives go to learn the skills needed to lead a business at Business Schools. In fact, Business Schools are particularly relevant as they are well known for creating the next generation of leaders and for strengthening the competencies of existing leaders. The main question is: are Business Schools teaching Project Management? Since Business Schools all around the world are almost countless, we decided to focus on top Business Schools. From a methodological perspective, we started by defining and identifying “Top” Business Schools. In order to do that we took the leading sources of Business School rankings as inputs. In particular, we considered global rankings, avoiding regional or national rankings. We listed all the Business Schools present in the rankings and removed duplicates. The final list was made up of 197 Business Schools. We then explored their websites in order to identify and analyze:

- Project Management courses in MBA programs,
- Project Management courses in Online MBA programs,
- Project Management courses in Executive MBA programs,
- Project Management courses in Specialized Masters,
- Certificates in Project Management,
- Open Executives Programs in Project Management

Results indicate that Project Management courses are not very frequent among Business Schools and differences can be found depending on the type of training programs.

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## **Introduction**

All the companies and organizations around the world do execute processes to produce, sell, and distribute products and services, and they implement projects to ensure that the organization survives and keeps growing in the mid and long term. While most traditional organizations are process-based, it is hard to find an organization that does not perform projects as well.

Yet, over the past decade, organizations have been relying more and more on projects. The reason is quite simple, in fact, access to broader and cheaper information, fierce competition and customer preferences have:

- Shortened product life-cycles by about 25% (Roland Berger, 2012) and 50 percent of annual company revenues across a range of industries are derived from new products launched within the past three years (Inform, 2012), that is, new products become obsolete much faster and ask for replacements or enhancements more frequently.
- Reduced the possibility to have best seller products. The long-tail effect (i.e. sales less concentrated on a few products) has pushed for an increase in the product variety, which is more than doubled in the past 15 years (Roland Berger, 2012).

As a result, new products or services have to be developed more frequently and processes have to be improved and updated (significant process improvements, such as digitalization, or business model transformation, represent huge transformation projects) more often as well.

The bottom line is that organizations perform more project compared to the past and not having the competencies to successfully manage projects can be detrimental to the current performance and to the ability of the organization to succeed in the long term. As pointed out by many authors (Archibald and Archibald 2015, West 2010, Englund and Bucero 2006, Love and Love 2000, Pinto and Slevin, 1988), project success is not only influenced by Project Managers and Team Members but also from middle and top management roles who can support projects acting as project sponsors or can design an organization that supports the proper management of projects. Based on this reasoning, leaders, such as managers and executives, should possess Project Management competencies. Many current and future managers and executives go to learn the skills needed to lead an organization at Business Schools. In fact, Business Schools are particularly relevant as they are well known for creating the next generation of leaders and for strengthening the competencies of existing leaders. The main question is: are Business Schools teaching Project Management?

## **The research method**

Since the number of Business Schools is too big for a study to consider all of them with the available resources (Wikipedia lists more than 400 Business Schools in the US, more than 250

in Europe, more than 400 in Asia) it has been decided to focus on the most relevant ones. In the Business School sector relevancy is measured by some organizations which compare and rank them. The vast majority operates at the national level while a few provides worldwide analysis. For this research the most famous international rankings have been used to identify what we defined “Top Business Schools”. In particular, the following rankings have been considered: Financial Times Open Enrolment Ranking 2016, Financial Times Global MBA Ranking 2016, Financial Times Executive MBA Ranking 2016, Financial Times Online MBA Ranking 2016, The Economist Executive MBA Ranking 2016, Bloomberg Full Time International MBA Ranking 2016. The analysis frameworks adopted by the different subjects vary depending on the programs to be ranked. However, for similar programs, such as the MBAs, frameworks are not very different since they take into consideration variables internal to the Business Schools (for example percentage of professors with a PhD degree, percentage of international Faculty and students, percentage of woman etc.), the satisfaction of the participants, the satisfaction of the employers and the salary increase.

In this study, Business Schools have been considered “Top” when they were mentioned at least in one of the above mentioned rankings. Of course this criterion is subjective, other criteria may apply (for example being listed in at least two rankings). The rankings we considered evaluate programs and not Business Schools, in case a program is jointly delivered by more than one Business School, all the partner Business Schools have been inserted in the list.

While conceptually easy, creating the list required a good deal of effort since every ranking uses slightly different names for the same Business School.

As a result, the final list was composed of 197 Business Schools. Once the final list had been created, data had been collected by looking at the websites of all the Business Schools in order to find Project Management contents in the following programs:

- MBA,
- Online MBA,
- Executive MBA,
- Specialized Masters,
- Certificates,
- Open Executives Programs.

Data had been collected between November 2016 and February 2017. In the next section of the paper, data related to each program will be provided.

## **Research results and discussion**

### MBA

Out of 197 Business Schools, 180 of them (91%) offer MBA programs. Sometimes Business Schools run more than one MBA program, for example, in some cases MBA are focused on specific topics, such as IT, construction, marketing or they have different formats such as full time or part-time. Based on that, the 180 Business Schools offer a total of 379 MBAs. Out of 180 Business Schools, 45% (81) include Project Management contents in their MBAs while out

of 379 MBAs, 35% (134) of them have Project Management contents. Since some MBAs have more than one course focused on Project Management, if we count the number of Project Management courses delivered in the 379 MBAs, the result is 181.

**Table 1: Project Management contents in MBA programs**

	<b>N</b>
Business Schools	197
Business Schools offering MBA	180
MBA	379
Business Schools with Project Management contents in their MBA	81
MBA with Project Management contents	134
Project Management courses in all MBA	181

Normally MBAs are organized into Core and Elective courses. Elective courses are the ones chosen by a student from a number of optional subjects or courses in a curriculum, as opposed to a required (Core) course, which the student must take. By using this classification, it emerges that 8% (15 out of 181) are Core courses while 80% (145 out of 180) are Elective. Unfortunately, it was not possible to classify 21 courses since there was no explanation whether they were Core or Elective.

**Table 2: Project Management as Core or Elective course**

	<b>N</b>
Core course	15
Elective course	145
NA	21

By considering the type of contents delivered, 53% (96 out of 181) of the courses seem providing general Project Management skills. The verb “seem” has to be used because no detailed syllabus are provided on the websites and for this reason the classification is only based on the course title. It also seems that focusing on specific sectors (IT, construction) or issues (Project Management for Innovation or for R&D) is another frequent option, probably derived from the type of MBA (MBA with focus on IT, Construction etc.) or the dominant job offers resulting from the connections that particular Business School has with the companies.

**Table 3: Type of contents in Project Management courses**

	<b>N</b>
Sector/Issue (IT, Construction, Innovation etc.)	37
Project Management (general)	96
Focus on specific methodologies (quality, risk, schedule, procurement)	23
Strategic Project Management (program, portfolio, executive etc.)	12
Soft Skills	13

If we consider the perspective of the people who think that Project Management should be part of the MBA curriculum, we have mixed results. On one hand, 45% of the MBAs include Project Management contents, and, while there is room for improvement, the percentage cannot be considered low, on the other hand, the vast majority of Project Management courses are offered as Electives, in this way there is no certainty that MBA participants gain Project Management competencies.

### Online MBA

Online MBAs are much more recent compared to MBAs, in fact, only in 2014 Financial Times started to rank them. The shorter history of Online MBAs together with the fact that not all the Business Schools are interested in offering online programs, bring to a pretty limited number, in fact, only 13% of the Business Schools offer Online MBAs. The percentage of Business Schools with Project Management contents in their Online MBAs is very similar to the “traditional” case, in fact, here the percentage is 41% against 45% of the MBAs. Also in this case, some Business Schools run more than one MBA, so that the total number of Online MBAs is 31, among them, 42% (13 out of 31) provide Project Management contents, slightly higher than the MBAs (35%).

**Table 4: Project Management contents in Online MBA programs**

	<b>N</b>
Business Schools	197
Business Schools offering Online MBA	26
Online MBA	31
Business Schools with Project Management contents in their Online MBA	11
Online MBA with Project Management contents	13

Similarly to the MBAs, also in this case the vast majority (92%) of the Project Management courses are delivered as elective.

**Table 5: Project Management as Core or Elective course**

	<b>N</b>
Core course	1
Elective course	12

### Executive MBA

Compared to MBAs and Online MBAs, Executive MBAs (EMBA) are targeted to people that are more senior. The majority of EMBA programs recorded in the QS TopExecutive statistical review report the average age in their classrooms as being 37 while for MBAs is around 28 (Financial Times, 2013). Out of 197 Business Schools, 172 of them (87%) offer EMBA programs, a slightly lower percentage compared to MBAs (91%). As per MBAs, sometimes Business Schools have more than one EMBA program, in fact, the 172 Business Schools offer a total of 248 EMBA programs. Only 14% (24) Business Schools include Project Management contents in their EMBA programs, a percentage much lower compared to MBAs (45%). The percentage slightly decreases when programs, and not Business Schools, are taken into account, in fact, out of 248

EMBA's, 12% (29) of them have Project Management contents, again, much less compared to MBAs (35%). Since some EMBA's have more than one course focused on Project Management, the total count of Project Management courses delivered in the 248 EMBA's is 37.

**Table 6: Project Management contents in EMBA programs**

	<b>N</b>
Business Schools	197
Business Schools offering EMBA	172
EMBA	248
Business Schools with Project Management contents in their EMBA	24
EMBA with Project Management contents	29
Project Management courses in all EMBA	37

Again similarly to MBAs, the majority of Project Management courses (65%) are not mandatory since they are offered as electives.

**Table 7: Project Management as Core or Elective course**

	<b>N</b>
Core course	5
Elective course	24
NA	8

Also in this case, the most frequent title is simply Project Management but since syllabus are not available online, it is not possible to evaluate whether contents targeted to executives (such as strategic Project Management, project portfolio management, being an effective project sponsor) are provided.

**Table 8: Type of contents in Project Management courses**

	<b>N</b>
Project Management	25
Others	12

While for MBAs and Online MBAs the overall situation could be considered promising, the presence of Project Management contents in EMBA programs cannot be regarded as such. As it will be discussed in the conclusions, it seems that Project Management is still struggling to enter the management agenda.

### Specialized Masters

While MBAs and EMBA's are general management programs, specialized masters are focused on specific topics (marketing, finance, strategy, IT, HR management etc.) and normally have a shorter duration. 55% of the Business Schools offer specialized masters and since many Business Schools run more than one master, the total number top 788. When it comes to considering how many Business Schools include Project Management contents in their specialized masters, the percentage (42%) is very similar to the MBAs while if we take into

consideration the number of specialized masters with Project Management contents the percentage drop to 11%. Again, some masters provide more than one Project Management course, for this reason, the total number of Project Management courses increases to 122. The low percentage of masters with Project Management contents is partially explained by the fact that these type of programs try to limit general management skills in order to stay focused on their specific specializations. Among the masters, 6 are focused on Project Management and those 6 are provided by 5 Business Schools, that is, a Business School offers 2 Specialized Masters in Project Management.

**Table 9: Project Management contents in Specialized Masters**

	<b>N</b>
Business Schools	197
Business Schools offering Specialized Masters	108
Specialized Masters	788
Business Schools with Project Management contents in their Specialized Masters	45
Specialized Masters with Project Management contents	87
Project Management courses in all Specialized Masters	122
Business Schools that offers Specialized Masters in Project Management	5
Specialized Masters in Project Management	6

The percentage of mandatory courses (23%) is much higher compared to MBAs and EMBA's, however, it has not been possible to assign one of the two categories (core and elective) to many Project Management courses since the information was not available online. For this reason the percentage is probably underestimated. If we consider the courses for which a classification was possible, the percentage rises to 42%.

**Table 10: Project Management as Core or Elective course**

	<b>N</b>
Core course	28
Elective course	39
NA	55

The explanation can be two-fold: on one hand Project Management could be considered very important and so it should be a core course, on the other hand specialized masters, apart some exceptions, are normally targeted to pretty young students and the strong presence of Project Management among the core courses may reinforce that idea that Project Management is for low level managers and not for executives.

### Certificates

Certificate programs are designed to give students mastery over a narrow subject area or topic. These programs are offered in many trades, professional fields, and academic areas. Certificate programs are generally geared towards adult students and students looking for short-term training leading to immediate employment. These non-degree programs are usually provided at two main levels: undergraduate and graduate.

Among the 197 Business Schools, 24% offer Certificates and since very often Business Schools have more than one certificate, the total number rises to 238 of which 5 focused on Project Management. While we did not expect to find many Business Schools offering Certificates, our expectation was to find more Certificates on Project Management, since:

- The time required to cover the main Project Management topics has a good fit with the duration of a certificate, which is often longer than one month but normally less than a Master.
- Certificates are normally focused on practice e with strong connections with the job market. Being Project Management a typical topic built around practice and in strong demand from the job market, it seemed that Certificates and Project Management was a good pair.
- Many Business Schools offer Project Management in their MBAs and it seemed reasonable that if they have the competencies to run Project Management courses, they could leverage those competencies by building a specific commercial offer around them.

**Table 11: Project Management contents in Certificates**

	N
Business Schools	197
Business Schools offering Certificates	48
Certificates	238
Business Schools with Certificates in Project Management	5
Certificates in Project Management	5
Business Schools with Project Management contents in their Certificates	7

### Open Executives Programs

Open Executive Programs are normally short duration programs (days) focused on a single and very specific topic. 75% of the Business Schools offer Open Executives Programs, among them, 23% have Open Executive Programs on Project Management and since some Business Schools run more than one course on Project Management, the total number of Project Management courses is 81.

**Table 12: Project Management contents in Open Executive Programs**

	N
Business Schools	197
Business Schools with Open Executive Programs	148
Business Schools with Open Executive Programs in Project Management	34
Project Management Open Executive Programs	81

Interesting is to note the distribution of such 81 courses: while 22 Business Schools offer one course, 5 Business Schools offer a total 44 courses, more than a half of the overall offering.

**Table 13: Number of Project Management courses provided**

	<b>N</b>
1 Project Management course	2
2 Project Management courses	5
3 Project Management courses	1
4 Project Management courses	0
5 Project Management courses	1
6 Project Management courses	0
7 Project Management courses	2
8 Project Management courses	1
9 Project Management courses	1
10 Project Management courses	1

The explanation is twofold:

- Some Business Schools have many Open Executive Programs (more than 100) and so there is the opportunity to run very specific courses on different Project Management aspects;
- Some Business Schools have developed a pretty strong Project Management competence center and their commercial offering represents those competencies.

However, similar to Certificates, even though to a lesser extent, we expected more Business Schools offering Open Executives Programs focused on Project Management.

### **Regional analysis**

The analysis at the regional level is influenced by the fact that some Business Schools have subsidiaries in more than one region, however, their number is very limited and, for this reason, the overall results are not affected.

Since MBAs and EMBA's are programs offered by the vast majority of the Business Schools and the programs aim at developing managers and executives, we will focus on them to appreciate if there are differences at the regional level.

**Table 14: Project Management courses in MBAs and EMBA's by Region**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Percentage of BS PM course in their MBAs</b>	<b>Percentage of BS with PM courses in their EMBA's</b>
Africa	60% (3/5)	0% (0/4)
Asia	38% (9/24)	4.5% (1/22)
EU	40% (23/58)	25% (15/60)
Middle East	50% (1/2)	0% (0/2)
North America	48% (39/82)	9% (6/69)
South America	20% (2/10)	18% (2/11)

Given the limited number of Business Schools in Africa, Middle East and South America, percentages are not significant from a statistical perspective and for this reasons they will be not

commented on. Interesting is noticing a certain homogeneity of the diffusion of Project Management among MBA programs, in fact, Asia and Europe show very similar results but also North America is not very different. However, when it comes to EMBA, the presence of Project Management contents greatly varies. As already mentioned when comparing EMBA and MBAs, there is an overall reduction of the presence of Project Management courses but in Europe the reduction is much more limited compared to Asia and North America. In Asia, Project Management courses almost disappear at the EMBA level since just one Business School offers them while in North America there is a drop of 39%. We do not have a compelling explanation for these results but to notice two different models when it comes to Project Management at EMBA: the European model seems considering Project Management suitable for EMBA as well while the Asian and North America model seems neglecting its importance for executive roles.

## **Conclusions**

As mentioned along the paper, given the importance of Project Management to achieve positive business results, the diffusion of Project Management among the top Business Schools does not seem satisfactory.

A first interpretation is related to competition and price. Business Schools with good standing, in fact, when compared to other training providers, are much more expensive and in some cases the difference can be bigger than one order of magnitude. In addition, the offering of Project Management courses, both face-to-face and online, is big. This can decrease the interest of the Business Schools to invest in Project Management since the competition is fierce and it is unclear whether customers are willing to pay a big premium price for course that, at least on paper, have similar contents.

A second interpretation is that participants might already have Project Management skills and competencies. However, based on the authors experience in teaching Project Management to Specialized Master, MBA and EMBA students at some of the top Business Schools, this was the true in roughly 15 to 20% of the cases. The vast majority of the participants we have taught over the past ten years have never learnt the techniques and behaviours to lead projects successfully. Most have been exposed to projects over their careers, and some of them have been intensely exposed to Project Management environments, yet the way the projects were carried out was far from being considered good practice.

A third interpretation is that many participants, at first, do not consider Project Management as a core skill for their career. Based on the qualitative feedback we received from participants, this is quite often the case. In fact, after delivering our Project Management courses, most participants approach us and tell us: “Honestly, before I enrolled for this class I thought Project Management did not fit with what a manager or executive should know, now I understand its relevance”. There are still a few, however, who do not change their minds. What is the source of this misunderstanding? There are probably many reasons, one of which is particularly relevant: too often people think that Project Management is for Project Managers while in reality Project Management is a relevant skill for every person involved in project environments. The origin of

this misunderstanding may also derive from the vast Project Management body of knowledge (books, articles etc.), which is almost exclusively targeted at project managers.

A fourth interpretation is that Business Schools are not fully aware of the role that managers and executives play in supporting project leadership and performance. Discussions we had with some MBA and EMBA Directors suggest that they too have a tendency to relegate Project Management to operative or middle management roles. It is no coincidence that many Project Management Professors work in the Operations Department of Universities and Business Schools. Project Management is still too often considered as an engineering, IT or technical discipline, thus neglecting its managerial components and the strategic role that many projects play in transforming the organizations. This interpretation is partially supported by considering the type of Project Management courses delivered. In fact, the vast majority of the courses are simply named “Project Management” while only a few focus on topics relevant for managers and executives (e.g. Strategic Project Management, Project Portfolio Management, Project Sponsorship).

A fifth interpretation is that Project Management is not very interesting for professors working in Business Schools and for this reason they do not try to push Project Management contents in the various training programs. In fact, while many topics taught at Business Schools also fit with Academic interests (there are many Full Professors of Marketing, Accounting, Finance, HR Management etc.), Project Management is only rarely a career path at many Universities and Business Schools. As evidence, there are only a few Full Professors in Project Management worldwide and many Professors who teach Project Management are also (or mainly) focused on other topics, since those other topics may further their careers. To add on this reasoning, if we look at the job offers targeted at Universities and Business Schools, opened positions in Project Management are more for Lectures, which is a non-academic role, than Researchers or Professors.

We think that the proposed interpretations cannot be considered independently each other. Probably an increase of the diffusion of Project Management has to take into account a multi-facet strategy that comprises the way Project Management is communicated both internally and externally, the way it is taught and also who teach it. This last aspect has not been commented so far. We went through the curriculum of many Project Management Lecturers and we noticed that many of them are Project Managers. At first sight this can be good but, if we consider the perspective of participants who want to become managers or executives, this can be a limitation, in fact, it reinforces the idea that Project Management is mainly for Project Managers and Project Management does not support the development of a robust managerial career.

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