



International Accreditations as Drivers of MBA Education Improvement - A Case of GW MBA

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ABSTRACT

Business schools in China are now under great pressure to implement continuous improvement and quality assurance to remain competitive in a globalized higher education market. Drivers for quality improvement include external pressures such as supranational organizations, national government, marketization, and globalization. As a symbol of excellent quality of management education, MBA international accreditations play an important role in quality improvement of MBA education. A case study based on GW MBA (MBA of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies) is presented to demonstrate this impact. Future challenges include the risk of standardization and institutional isomorphism and the balance between globalization and localization.

Key Words: International accreditations; AMBA; GW MBA

Supported by "Guangdong Education Scientific Planning Fund "

Project Title: Innovative Research on MBA Program : From the Perspective of International and National Accreditations ,Project NO : 2011TJK135.

INTRODUCTION

As an unchangeable trend in the contemporary world, globalization has given impetus to internationalization of higher education, especially the internationalization of MBA education, which put business schools around the world, especially those of developed countries and low income countries, under great pressure to commit themselves to continuous improvement and quality assurance to remain competitive in a globalized higher education market.

Since its inception in 1991, the MBA education in China has gained rapid development along with domestic economic take-off and cultivated a great number of high-level managerial talents for China's economic reform and socialist modernization. In the past 25 years of development, the number of universities offering MBA education increased from 9 in 1991 to 236 in 2011, with enrollment jumping from 84 to 35777 (Xi, 2013) . Despite this, the MBA education in China is still far behind that of developed countries. Key problems for attention include shortage of faculty resources, out-dated teaching method (Ma, 2009) , lag of curriculum arrangement(Liu&Hou , 2005, poor teaching quality, and weak global competitiveness (Gao, 2012.

MBA education plays a crucial role in preparing professionals to be able to make contributions to business activities in a globalized environment. During the past decade, various external forces have impacted business schools in China, compelling them to focus on continuous

improvement processes to meet the requirements of national economic and social development.

External Pressures on Business Schools in China

Supranational Organizations

Since the Second World War, some supranational organizations have been actively engaged in promoting the overall development of higher education on a global scale. Quality improvement has been a main objective driving the activities of organizations such as the OECD (Organization for Economic Development and Co-operation), the WTO (World Trade Organization), the EU (European Union), the World Bank (Bryant, 2013), and the IAU (International Association of Universities). In contrast to the organizations cited above, the IAU, which is an official partner of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), is a non-governmental educational organization founded in 1950 to promote cooperation at the international level among the universities of all countries as well as among other bodies concerned with higher education and research. And it defines the internationalization of higher education as the process of combining transnational and cross-cultural ideas and atmosphere with the main functions of universities, including teaching, research and public services (Huang, 2011).

National Governments

The traditional role of Chinese government as the quality controller in the educational sector has changed since the release of *Decision on the Reform of the Educational Systems* in May 1985, which marks the beginning of the marketization of higher education in China. This reform transforms the management system of excessive government control over the institutions of higher education, expand operational autonomy of institutions under the guidance of the state's unified educational policies and plans, and encourages higher education institutions to take the initiative to meet the needs of economic and social development. (Yin Qiping, 1994).

As the business management talent pool for China's reform and socialist modernization, MBA education gains extensive attention of Chinese government. In 22th March 2016, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, being aware of the current problems of MBA education, issued a document entitled "Points Regarding How to Further Standardize Professional Degree Education of Master of Business Administration". This document made it clear that business schools need to make further commitments to more effective management, quality improvement and reputation enhancement. Business schools are now compelled to make strategic decisions, with a considerable emphasis on quality improvement.

Marketization

Business schools, by their nature, are more market-oriented than other areas of the university. In past decades, this marketization has intensified as competition has become globalized. As both the main consumers and commodities in higher education, students can now search the internet to find the ideal educational service which meets their needs. According to the student surveys, academic reputation and teaching quality are the most important determinants of university preference (Geoffrey & Julia, 2002). Liang-Hsuan Chen (2006) also pointed out that academic pulling factors (university reputation/quality/ranking) have the strongest influence on international students when they choose to study abroad.

In recent years, business schools in China have continually taken various actions to attract international students, including financial aid and exchange programmes. However, faced with fierce competition from well-established business schools in western countries, addressing

issues of quality assurance and reputation improvement becomes the top priority of business schools in China.

Globalization

In the past 20 years, globalization has changed the worldwide higher education landscape dramatically, especially for business schools. It witnesses the growth of cross-border trade in the field of education, and drives countries in the world to make aggressive efforts in international higher education industry.

In addition, with the establishment of branches in China by more and more multinational corporations and the implementation of “Going out” strategy of Chinese enterprises, business schools assume great responsibilities to cultivate versatile business professionals who can be engaged in transnational management, familiar with business practices of foreign countries, and deal with complex international environment.

International Accreditations for Business Schools

Various external factors, therefore, have driven the quest for improved education quality in China, particularly in business schools. Given such circumstances, many business schools and MBA programs in China have attempted to pass examinations of international accreditation standards for business schools as a way to increase brand value and improve teaching quality and reputation. As a symbol of excellent management education quality, MBA international accreditations demonstrate a business school’s status in the international stage and become a key to attract prospective MBA students. Up till now, almost all top business schools in the world have acquired AACSB, EQUIS, or AMBA accreditations (黄磊, 2011) .

The top three most influential international accreditations for business schools across the world are: AACSB, AMBA, and EQUIS.

AACSB

Founded in 1916, AACSB (The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) provides internationally recognized, specialized accreditation for business and accounting programmes at the bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral level. Up to now, only ten business schools are AACSB accredited.

AMBA

Established in 1967, AMBA (The Association of MBAs) is the impartial authority on postgraduate management education and is committed to raising its profile and quality standards internationally for the benefit of business schools, students and alumni and employers. As of 30th September 2016, 31 business schools and MBA programs in China have been AMBA- accredited.

(<https://www.mbaworld.com/business-schools/business-school-search>)

EQUIS

EQUIS (European Quality Improvement System) was set up by EFMD (European Foundation for Management Development) in 1997 with the fundamental objective to raise the standard of management education worldwide. EQUIS assesses institutions as a whole and stresses the balance between high academic quality and the professional relevance provided by close interaction with the corporate world. Up till now, 20 business schools in China have been accredited by EQUIS.

(<http://www.efmd.org/accreditation-main/equis/accredited-schools>)

Table 1: The Number of Business Schools Accredited by Top Three International Accreditations for Management Education

| | Total Number | Number of Business Schools in China |
|-------|--------------|-------------------------------------|
| AACSB | 800 | 10 |
| AMBA | 241 | 31 |
| EQUIS | 173 | 20 |

Source: AACSB (www.aacsb.edu), EQUIS (www.efmd.org), AMBA (www.mbaworld.com), www.mbachina.com

AMBA Accreditation Criteria and Procedure

Since its inception, AMBA's mission has been to promote and protect postgraduate management education internationally, with the MBA as the flagship programme. AMBA's accreditation scheme is designed to provide a quality assurance and quality enhancement mechanism for business schools and MBA programme worldwide, in order to ensure the value of this qualification for potential students, graduates, employers and society.

The AMBA accreditation criteria mainly covers six aspects, that is, the institution, faculty, students, purpose and outcomes, curriculum, and mode and duration.

The accreditation process for business schools without prior AMBA accreditation includes four stages: initial stage, pre-assessment stage, assessment stage, and post-assessment stage.

GDUFS AND ITS MBA PROGRAMME

About GW MBA

The School of Business of GDUFS was established in 1982, as an outgrowth of the Department of Business Management of the former Guangzhou Institute of Foreign Trade. In May 2001, School of Management (SOM) was established. In 2007, MBA Education Center was established and later renamed as Graduate School of Business(GSB) in 2012. In order to further integrate business disciplines and facilitate their sustainable development, SOM and GSB were merged to form the School of Business in July 2014.

In 2015, GW MBA received AMBA accreditation, which made School of Business of GDUFS the 26th AMBA accredited school in China, and the 225th in the world. In the same year, the School launched EPAS accreditation, and received EFMD membership. In 2017, the School launched the AACSB accreditation process and received the membership (<http://bsen.gdufs.edu.cn/info/1020/1262.htm>).

The MBA program includes full-time MBA(autumn), part-time MBA(spring), and part-time MBA(autumn).

Full-time MBA(autumn)

In full-time MBA programme, students study full-time on campus for 2 years. After passing the national examination and the re-examination, students start their study in autumn. Students have to complete the required credits and write their dissertations. After passing the oral defense, they can obtain both MBA diploma and degree.

Part-time MBA(spring)

In part-time MBA(spring) programme, students study part-time on campus usually for three years. After passing the national examination for on-the-job applicants and the self-determined enrolment scores of the University, students start their study in spring. During their studies,

they have to complete the required credits and write their dissertation. After passing the oral defense, they can obtain an MBA degree.

Part-time MBA (autumn)

In part-time MBA(autumn) programme , students study part-time on campus for three years. After passing the national examination and the re-examination, students start their study in autumn. During their studies, they have to complete the required credits and write their dissertations. After passing the oral defense, they can obtain both MBA diploma and degree.

Table 2: GW MBA Programme

| Programme | Intake | Mode of Delivery | Duration | Exam | Degree and Diploma |
|-----------|--------|---------------------|----------|---|--------------------|
| Full-time | Autumn | Monday- Friday | 2 years | National exam and Interview | Degree and Diploma |
| Part-time | Spring | Saturday and Sunday | 3 years | National exam for on-the-job applicants and Interview | Degree |
| | Autumn | Saturday and Sunday | 3 years | National exam and Interview | Degree and Diploma |

Impact of AMBA Accreditation Criteria on the SOB of GDUFS

It is generally agreed that international accreditation has impacted positively on business school management ideas and internal quality guarantee system (Wang, 2011) , has encouraged a search for excellence (Cornuel,2007), and has improved the education of business ethics (Zhang, 2014) .The positive impacts of AMBA accreditation have been summarized in the Table 3.

Table 3: Impact of AMBA Accreditation Criteria on the School of Business of GDUFS

| Accreditation Criteria Driving Quality Improvement | Improvement Outcomes |
|--|--|
| The institution | Clearly articulated mission |
| Faculty | High levels of quality, diversified profiles |
| Students | Student diversity |
| Curriculum | Curriculum breath and depth, student participation |

The Institution

The first and foremost criteria of AMBA accreditation is that the institution have “ an appropriate mission, explicitly expressed and regularly reviewed, which reflects its key strengths and underpins the design of the MBA portfolio” (www.mbaworld.com).

From the very beginning, the School of Business of GDUFS establishes its own mission, vision, and values in line with its resources and capabilities. The mission of the School is “ To turn out high-end international business professionals” and the vision is “To grow into a high-level internationalized business school with distinctive features”. The values of the School is

“SMILE”, in which “S” stands for social responsibility, “M” for mutual respect, “I” for integrity, “L” for learning by doing and “E” for entrepreneurship.

As we can see from the descriptions of the mission, vision and values of the School, the School highly reflects the feature of internationalization, which is the core competence of both the school and the university.

Faculty

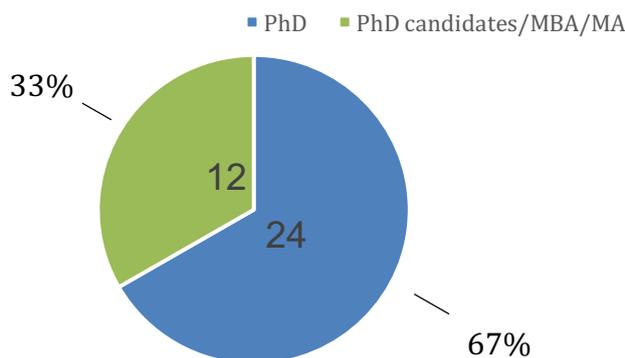
Under the AMBA criteria, faculty teaching at MBA level must be appropriately qualified and the school should have a through and inclusive faculty development and recruitment policy.

Academic Background of Core Teaching Staff

According to the Self-Audit Documentation for AMBA Accreditation, as of January 2015, the School of Business of GDUF has a faculty team with 71 full-time teaching staff, 36 of whom are core MBA teaching staff. As a supplement, it has also employed 55 part-time professors from the academia and the corporate world, laying a solid faculty resource foundation for a first-class business school.

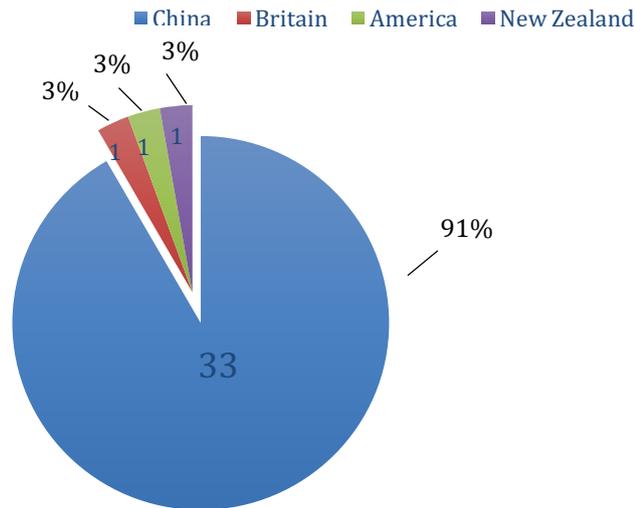
Among the 36 full-time teaching staff, 67% have PhD degree, 33% are PhD candidates or hold MBA or MA degrees (see Chart 1).

Chart 1: Degree Structure of Core MBA Full-time Teaching Staff



Source: Self-Audit Documentation for AMBA Accreditation

As for the nationality of the 36 full-time teaching staff, 3 are foreigners, accounting for 9%, coming from the Britain, America and New Zealand (see Chart 2).

Chart 2: Nationality Structure of Core MBA Full-time Teaching Staff

Source: Self-Audit Documentation for AMBA Accreditation

Faculty Recruitment

In the faculty recruitment process, the School has strict regulations concerning the criteria and procedure of faculty selection and employment, requiring the faculty members meet certain standards in education, academic achievements and consultancy experience. Then, it has adopted various measures to inspect their ability to combine academic research with MBA teaching. Candidates selected after the above procedure still need to go through the trial teaching of MBA Education Center, which specifically inspects faculty members' English proficiency, clarity of lectures, teaching methods, control of the classroom and knowledge of the discipline. Only those qualified can formally become MBA faculty members.

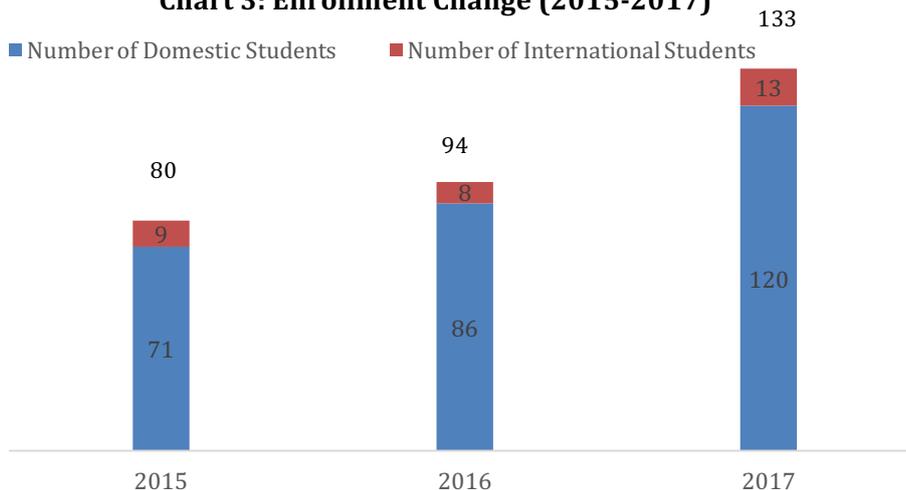
Faculty Development

What's more, in order to forge a high-level teaching team, the School tries its best in faculty development and actively expands development channels. For example, the School offers faculty members opportunities to study abroad and actively supports faculty members in attending academic conferences of related disciplines at home and abroad as well as faculty trainings hosted by the National MBA Education Supervisory Committee. Furthermore, the University and the School invite or employ domestic peers to have exchanges with the faculty members in teaching and research. By holding faculty symposiums or classroom observations, it enables the faculty members to share their experiences in teaching, overseas study and research at home, thus the whole teaching teams can improve and develop together. For those new faculty members, the University offers a series of pre-service training activities such as teaching method lectures and seminars, teaching observation, teaching video and analysis, expert consultancy and modern education technology training.

Students

AMBA lays considerable emphasis on student diversity for the enrichment of the learning process. Since the School received AMBA accreditation, the enrollment increased steadily from 80 in 2015 to 133 in 2017(see Chart 3).

Chart 3: Enrollment Change (2015-2017)



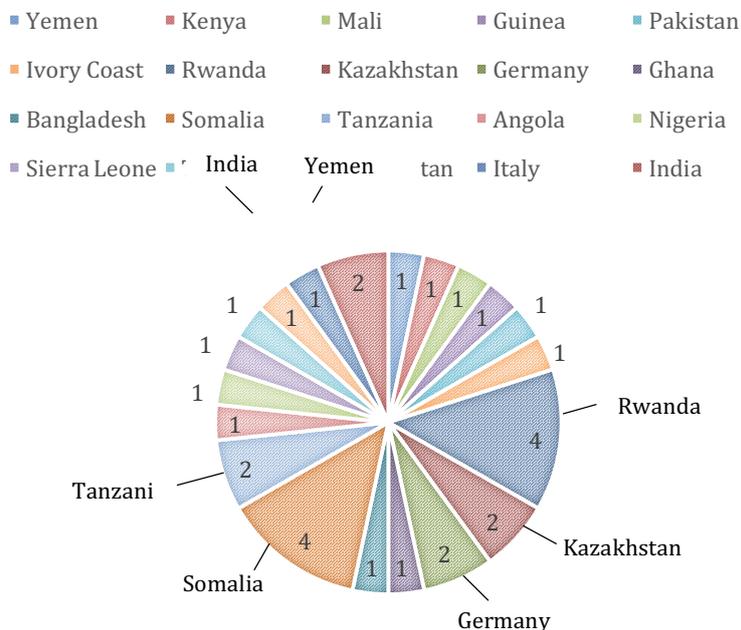
Source: MBA Education Center of GDUFS

The diversity of the students of the School is demonstrated in the nationality and professional background of the students.

Nationality of International Students

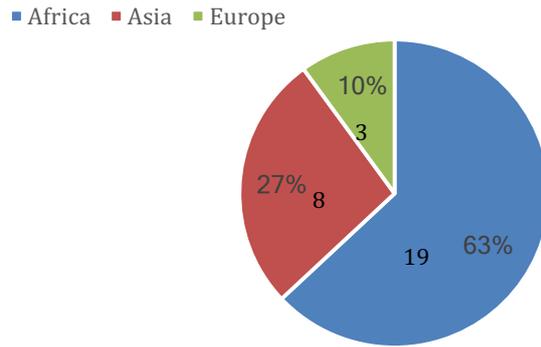
In the year 2015-2017, the School recruited 30 international students from 20 countries from Africa, Asia, and Europe (see Chart 4). Of all these international students, most of them (63%) come from Africa, followed by Asia (27%) and Europe (10%) (see Chart 5). With the growing quality and reputation of the Portfolio, the School will attract more international students.

Chart 4: Nationality Structure of International Students (2015-2017)



Source: MBA Education Center of GDUFS

Chart 5: Continent Distribution of International Students (2015-2017)



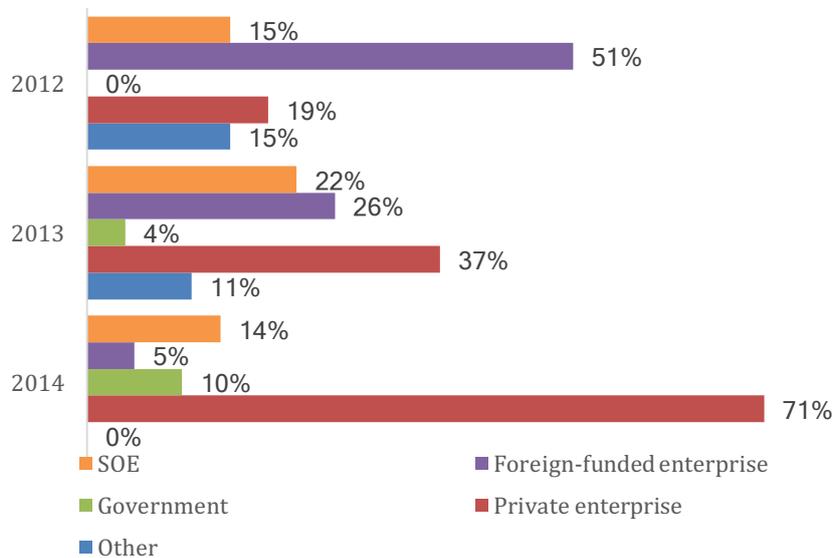
Source: MBA Education Center of GDUFS

Professional Background of Students

To ensure student diversity, students of each class have come from different types of enterprises and industries. Therefore, they can provide different perspectives in problem analysis and solution during deep communication in course learning or case discussion.

Generally speaking, in the year 2012-2014, MBA students of the School mainly from three types of enterprises, namely, state-owned enterprises(SOE), foreign-funded enterprises, and private-owned enterprises, although enterprise type distribution of students of three sub-programs are different.

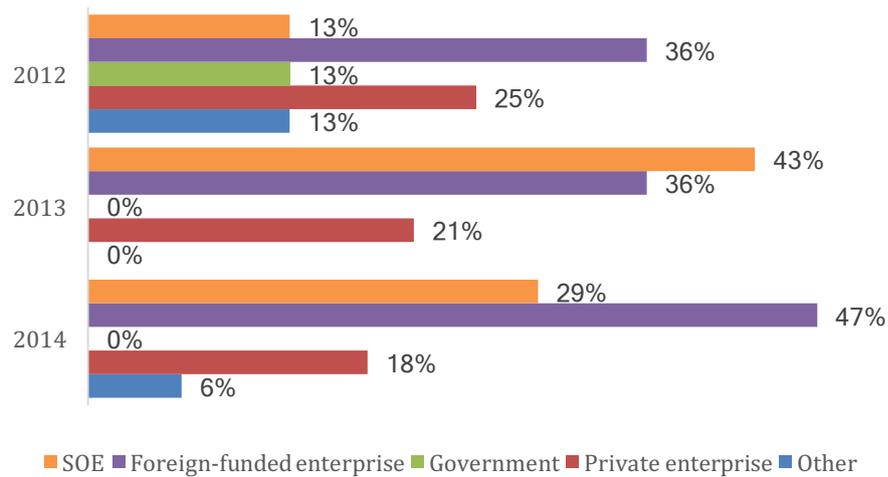
Chart 6: Enterprise Type Distribution of MBA Students (Full Time Autumn)



Source: Self-Audit Documentation for AMBA Accreditation

As we can see from Chart 6, MBA students (full time autumn) mainly come from private enterprises and foreign-funded enterprises, with a small proportion of SOE. What’s more, the students from private enterprises was steadily increasing.

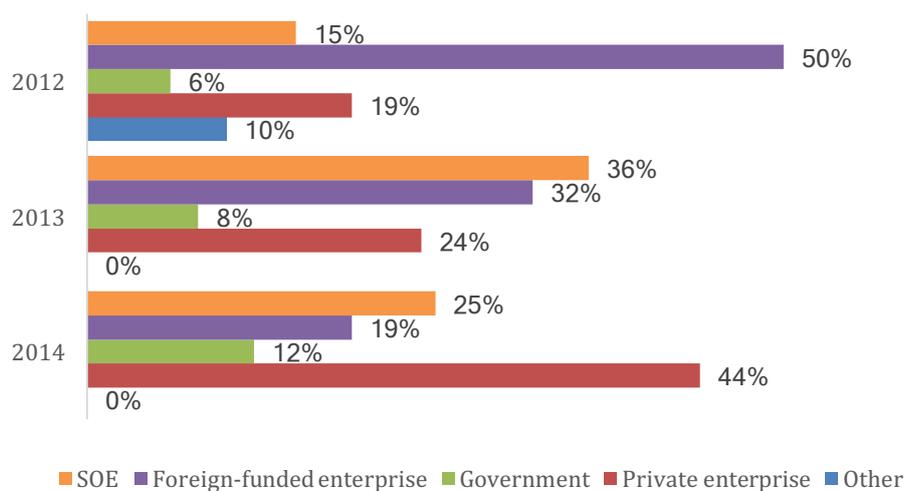
Chart 7: Enterprise Type Distribution of MBA Students (Part Time Spring)



Source: Self-Audit Documentation for AMBA Accreditation

From Chart 7, we can learn that there is the majority of MBA students (part time spring) are employed by foreign-funded enterprises and SOE. Students from government are relatively fewer.

Chart 8: Enterprise Type Distribution of MBA Students (Part Time Autumn)

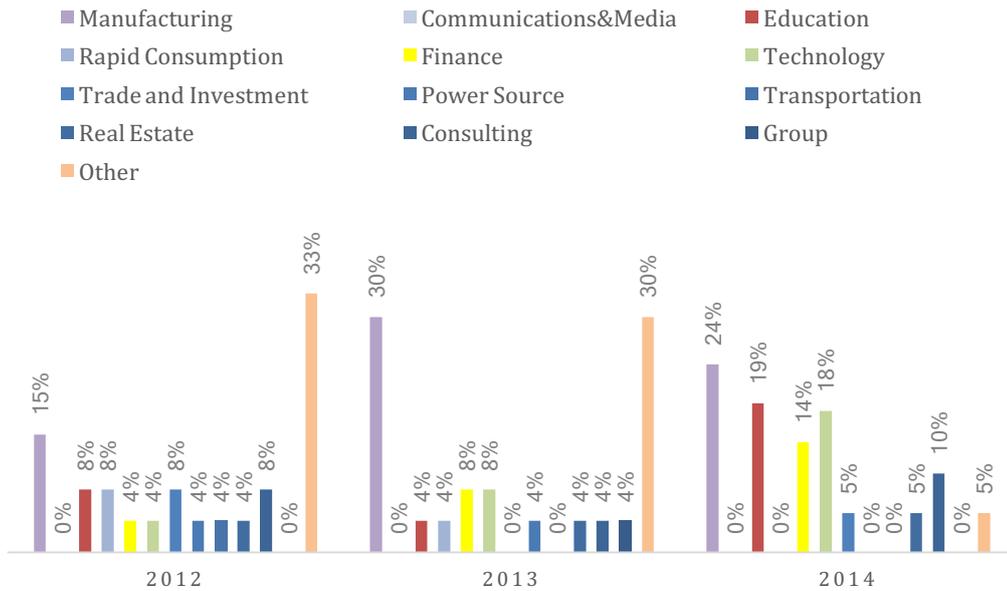


Source: Self-Audit Documentation for AMBA Accreditation

It can be shown in Chart 8 that compared with MBA students (full time autumn) and MBA students (part time spring), more MBA students (part time autumn) are employees from government. In addition, while the number of students from foreign-funded enterprises dropped, the number of students from private enterprises rose.

Students' industrial background in the School is also diversified. As is shown in Chart 9-11, MBA students of each cohort work in different industries although the diversity varies from year to year.

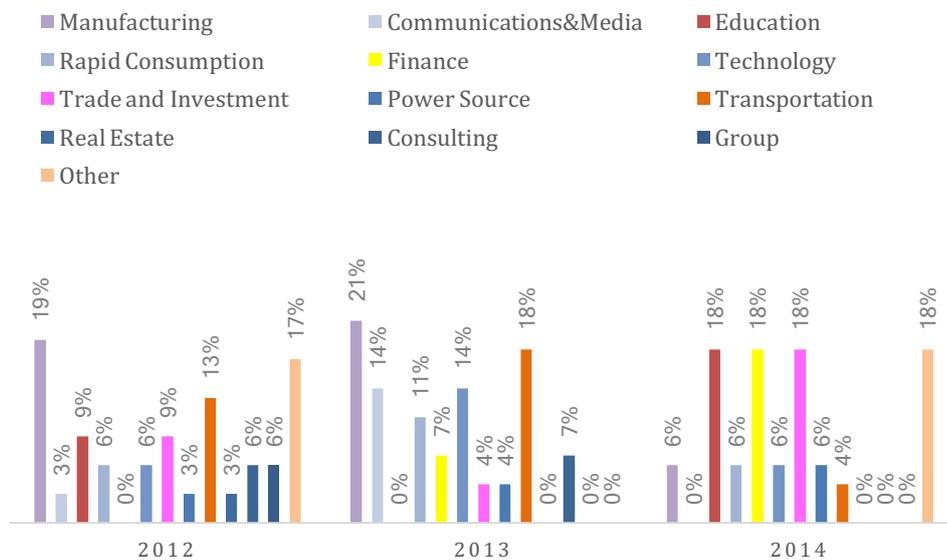
Chart 9: Industrial Background of MBA Students (Full Time Autumn)



Source: Self-Audit Documentation for AMBA Accreditation

As we can see from Chart 9, the industrial background of MBA students (full time autumn) became less diversified, despite the increase in the number of students from education, finance, and technology industries.

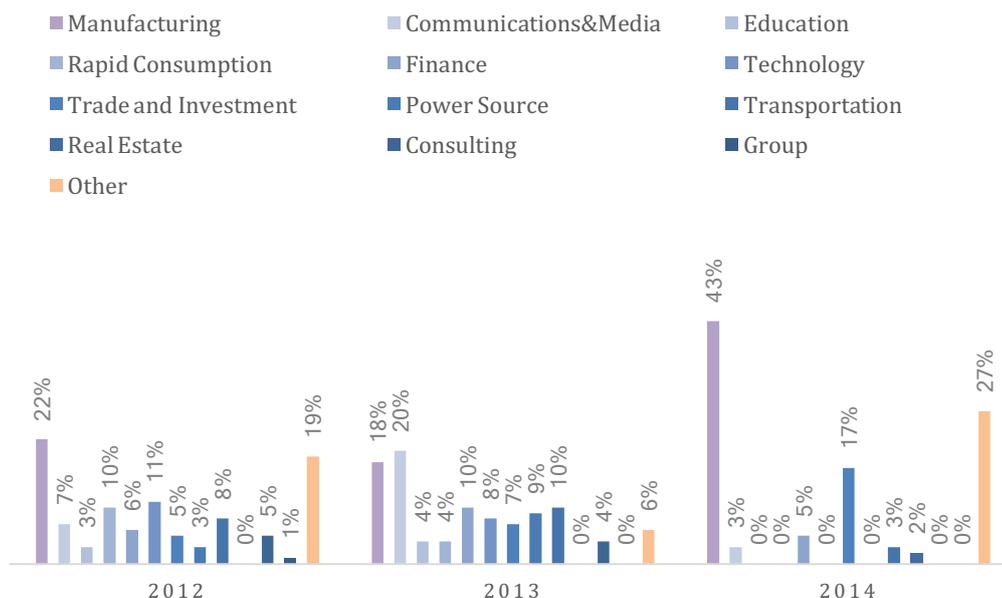
Chart 10: Industrial Background of MBA Students (Part Time Spring)



Source: Self-Audit Documentation for AMBA Accreditation

From Chart 10, we can learn that during 2012-2014, students from industries of education, finance, trade and investment increased year by year, while students from industries of real estate, consulting and group plummeted.

Chart 11: Industrial Background of MBA Students (Part Time Autumn)



Source: Self-Audit Documentation for AMBA Accreditation

A conclusion can be drawn from Chart 11 that the industrial background of MBA students (part time autumn) is less diversified than that of MBA students (full time autumn and part time spring), with manufacturing occupying a dominating place.

Curriculum

Through its criteria for curriculum, AMBA has contributed to the breadth and depth of MBA curriculum by insisting on its comprehension and integrity. In order to meet this requirement, the School attaches great importance to both the balance between theory and practice and the balance between functionality and integration.

In course arrangement, faculty members usually require students to read textbooks and supplementary materials before class and basically master the relevant theories and concepts. The class time is mainly for theory application in the way of case study, role play, and simulation.

During teaching, faculty members guide students, in the management decision-making process, to integrate relevant knowledge from different courses instead of just focusing on certain function, so that they can think from a holistic perspective. What's more, for the purpose of enriching learning experience and developing transferrable skills, faculty members are required to pay more attention to interactions and diversified teaching methods such as group assignments, discussions, corporate visits, student lecturing and invitation of distinguished guests.

In curriculum design, the School not only offers functional courses, such as Management Economics and HR Management, but also offers integrated courses such as Strategic Management and MBA Forums.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

With the growing influence of MBA international accreditations, more and more business school will apply for them for quality improvement. However, business schools will face accompanying challenges linked to these accreditation processes. The first challenge, as

Kappler (2012) pointed out, is uniformity. Schools will need to ensure that “standards” do not lead to “standardization”. Scoot (2006) also pointed out that to the extent that the environments of business schools are becoming more turbulent and hypercompetitive, the current accreditation standards increase the likelihood of poor strategic decisions making.

Another challenge is the long-argued topic of the balance between globalization and localization. Nowadays, it is widely condemned by the field of business and education the blind pursuit of internationalization of MBA education in China at the cost of localization(Cui, 2012) . Given the uniqueness of Chinese economic and political environment, it is necessary for business schools in China to innovate MBA education, devoting to the localization of MBA education on the basis of internationalization.

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