

**The Use of the Case Method in Large and Diverse
Undergraduate Business Programmes:
Problems and Issues**

*A Report to The European Case Clearing House
and
The Foundation for Management Education*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The case method in business and management education is generally considered to have been developed as an executive education technology in the United States in the early years of the twentieth century. Much of the literature on the case method reflects these origins and is therefore often assumed to be culturally and institutionally specific. However, cases are used today in a wide variety of contexts, including undergraduate business education. Over the last two decades the number of undergraduate students entering higher education in Britain has increased dramatically, creating a significant change in the university institutional environment. The increase has been particularly pronounced in the field of business education. The aim of the research reported in this document is to explore the use of case-based teaching methods on undergraduate business programmes in the context of significantly increasing student numbers; in other words to explore how the process of teaching and learning via the case method is affected by its context. In this report we discuss key themes in the current context of UK higher education, explore the use of cases in large and diverse undergraduate business education programmes, and examine how the changing institutional context of these programmes has affected the use of the business case as a pedagogical technology.

The report is organised in five parts. After an introduction where we reprise and discuss the details of the research proposal, we explore the concept of ‘massification’ in higher education. We argue that massification encompasses not only an increase in student numbers but also a broad set of interconnected changes that have taken place in UK higher education since 1980. Next we explore the evolution of the nature and purpose of the case method in business education. We then use data gathered from a series of semi-structured interviews with staff and students involved with business modules at a number of universities to explore the perceived impact of massification on case study teaching and learning. We find that massification is significantly affecting both teaching practice and pedagogical intent; and that it also helps to explain and illuminate shifts in student expectations, behaviour and experiences. We conclude with a discussion of the key themes that have surfaced and suggest some future avenues for research.

The main conclusions from both the literature we surveyed and from our primary research is that massification is a pervasive phenomenon which is having a far-reaching impact on teaching and learning at both old and new universities. Our data suggest a set of strong tensions in the use of case studies in a mass higher education context. Pressure to reduce costs, tighter enforcement of copyright laws, increased internal and external monitoring, coupled with increasing complexity in the management and delivery of large course and changes in student and expectations have led staff to abandon, curtail, modify or develop their use of cases. The first and second strategies, that of shifting wholly or partially from traditional uses of cases to mini-cases, “vignettes” and other short classroom exercises, can be seen as a falling back strategy in the face of the pressures of massification. However a number of academics in our sample, whilst recognising the reality of a resource-constrained environment, retained a strong commitment to case pedagogy. The move to less ambiguous, more structured (and some would argue less challenging) learning technologies is being resisted for a variety of different motives and in a variety of different ways.

Case studies by their very nature accommodate different interpretations, different ways of framing of problems and the application of different theoretical lenses; so although they offer a highly valuable learning opportunity, they also create complexity and diversity which is potentially costly and difficult to manage. Cases are rich sources of detailed data that represent organisational complexity but also bound it. One of the results of massification has been a more diverse student body, composed of individuals whose life experiences and cultural values differ significantly from each other. Case studies lend themselves to multiple readings, with different readers adopting a different perspective and gaining different insights. The case medium, according to this reading, is perceived as having a good fit with the new audience and as being in accord with the private inclinations of some academics who value the notion of a ‘liberal education’ over vocational training. Conversely, it also remains attractive to academics who remain committed to strong vocational values in business education, and who see cases as providing a uniform benchmark learning experience for diverse groups of students.

In summary, therefore, we find that the changing context of higher education is having a profound effect on the use of the case method of teaching and learning in undergraduate

business education but that the effects are by no means linear or uni-directional. Although it is inappropriate to generalise from a small number of research sites our data suggests that massification may influence not only the extent and form of case teaching but also its perceived pedagogical purpose. We find that the case method in practice has evolved in ways that, paradoxically, both resist and accommodate the “McDonaldization” of higher education, that both standardise and customise student experience and that both diminish and bolster professional autonomy.

Almost all of the existing research into case study teaching focuses on postgraduate students and we suggest that the use of cases as a vehicle for undergraduate learning is likely to be a fruitful area for future research. We close by suggesting a number of ways in which the project might be extended so as to broaden and deepen our understanding of case-based teaching and learning at the undergraduate level.