

MARG CONFERENCE REPORT

On Thursday 30th March the London School of Economics hosted the 38th Annual Management Accounting Research Group Conference. Recent meetings of the group have addressed business models and cultures, strategic partnerships and management accounting, as well as the state and the future of management accounting (MA). This year the theme was 'New Times, New Practices' with a focus on the rapidly changing business environment and how MA practice might respond with speed, especially in relation to smaller organisations. 140 delegates from practice and research attended the event held in the Hong Kong Theatre of LSE's Clement House.

After a welcome from Professor Alnoor Bhimani, Professor Juhani Vaivio from the Aalto University School of Business presented a fascinating study of "Organizational Change, Measurement and Occupational Identity". Although primarily a research paper, what was particularly interesting about Juhani's presentation was his focus on how accounting has been implicated in cultural changes within organisations and how this is manifest at the individual task level. What might at first seem mundane, how the working practices of vehicle inspectors in Finland have changed over the last sixty years, is anything but. By extrapolating this study to changes in everyday working life over the same period and by considering the role of accounting measurement in this change, accounting practice is revealed as far from the neutral technical practice that many assume. A more profound question then arises: Will the emerging 'standardized self' enable or stifle creativity?

After this reflective start, Professor Michael Bromwich cheered us all up with his portrayal of the 'doom and gloom' of the current management accounting predicament. Michael emphasized the challenges presented by the decline in MA in business schools and the robotisation of much of the more routine MA activity. Fortunately Michael then presented, in a series of forecasts, a number of future opportunities for the management accountant. There was an interesting juxtaposition between the first two presentations that I ruminated on over an enjoyable lunch: perhaps there is a call for a more reflexive management accountant, one that acknowledges the important role that MA plays within organizational change and that focuses on the social complexity involved in these changes, rather than purely technical matters that tend to leave the human factors out. This theme was picked up in the afternoon section, starting with a presentation from Kiran Ali and Hanif Jiwa from Trigo Consulting that took us 'Out of the (Excel) Frying Pan into the Fire'. This explored how other business intelligence technologies might be able to tackle the problem of wasted time. Whilst Kiran and Hanif touched on the human and social factors, these were really brought home in the break-out sessions.

The attendees were divided into six groups and asked to discuss 'The future of MA'. The attendees were provoked by a series of questions that they might wish to consider. In the break-out session that I attended, I found the contrasting perspectives of practitioners and researchers to be most enlightening. Our group looked at how MA training might help to prepare management accountants to respond to the rapidly changing technical environment. Perhaps predictably, the practitioners tended to focus on training that focused on the technologies and in particular those involved in Big Data. In contrast, the researchers challenged the premise of the question that assumed MA as only the object, rather than also as an agent, of change and the narrow focus on the technical that such a presumption entailed. The various groups presented back their discussions in a lively postprandial session. A particular highlight was the gentleman from practice who listed out, with more than a hint of irony, the training courses on offer to him that all seemed to

include the word Excel in the title!

The formal part of the day concluded with the distinguished practitioner lecture from Tristan Price, Chief Executive of M. P. Evans Group PLC. Tristan described the advantages and disadvantages of being a small organisation, drawing on his personal experiences managing palm oil plantations in Indonesia. He contrasted the benefits of being close to the operations where the 'debate leads the numbers' to the Hogarthian travails of a 'descent into madness' when a small company like M. P. Evans tried to contend with the mighty Big 4 when lobbying for changes to accounting standards. The 'Short Chains, Long Reach' of his title were perhaps most vivid in his descriptions of the short communication chains of a head-office of 6.4 FTE in Kent and the influence they have over the palm oil plantations some 7,300 miles away in Indonesia.

The day ended very pleasantly with an evening reception and a chance to meet people in a more relaxed setting. I reflected on an interesting day as I wended my way home. After many years in practice, I was left with the impression that there is an unquenched appetite from both practitioners and researchers for a more critical perspective of the role of accounting within culture, one that attends to the behavioural and social implications arising from accounting practice as well as to the technical areas that are already well catered for. What made the Conference different than the many practice-based conferences that I have attended over the years was the way that it balanced both practice and research. I like to be left with interesting questions from these types of events and the 38th MARG conference certainly did that. Many thanks to all the attendees and to CIMA, the ICAEW's Charitable Trusts and the London School of Economics Department of Accounting for generously sponsoring this well-organised and engaging conference.

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