

Flexible MBA delivery opens doors

By Dr Vash Mungal, issued by UCT Graduate School of Business

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The MBA, the world's most popular business qualification, is changing in profound ways. Business schools are departing from the one-size-fits-all approach and focusing more on 'how we can meet your needs' - opening up fresh avenues for prospective students to attain the highly valued degree.



Top US publication Business Week recently confirmed this trend when it published its 2006 rankings of the best business schools in August.

It reported that "many (business school deans) are embarking on some of the most curriculum reforms in recent memory" and that "they recognise that a reassessment is long overdue and vital if the MBA is to remain relevant for the next generation of business leaders".

This breath of fresh air in the hallways of top business schools around the globe is playing a major part in the renewed confidence in the MBA.

According to the Graduate Management Admission Council's (GMAC) 2006 Application Trends Survey released this August, for the first time in three years business schools are seeing applications rise significantly.

Part of this new momentum has been attributed to companies feeling more confident with the state of the global economy, with many companies in surveys reporting that the past year has marked their first opportunity to grow since the dot-com bust in 2000.

The efforts by business schools to change to meet market demands, and offer relevant and flexible MBA offerings, however, are also contributing to the rise in applications.

Some of these changes have been at MBA curriculum level with significant moves away from the one-size-fits-all MBA and programmes compartmentalised by discipline.

Stanford University's Graduate School of Business, ranked at number six in the Business Week survey, for example has introduced a new model that emphasises flexibility and customisation, reports the publication.

And it is addressing this need for flexibility, when one looks at the GMAC global application statistics, which appears to be a key factor for many students today.

The 2006 study shows that while full-time programmes are seeing a good upswing with 65% of business schools reporting that full-time applications are up, more flexible programmes are up in a significant amount too, with 62% of schools reporting increased applications.

This is a 35% increase in the number of programmes reporting an increase in part-time applications in 2006 compared with 2005, and a 130% increase compared with 2004. To accommodate the increase in application volume, 55% of part-time programmes planned to increase their class size in the near future.

South African business schools have also felt the effects of this trend and some have responded accordingly with innovation in the MBA curriculum and alternative modes of delivery that meet this new demand for flexibility.

Research conducted by the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB) in 2003 provided foresight into the demand for flexibility with a particular focus on the South African context.

The research highlighted the need for innovative ways of delivering the MBA to meet the needs of students in general, and women and black candidates in particular, in South Africa.

The research found that, for black candidates, top of the list of factors standing in the way of studying a full-time MBA were the total cost (i.e. the cost of tuition and the cost of living while forsaking a salary) and the practicality of doing so.

According to the study, these factors are barriers to black South Africans in particular because these candidates are more likely than their white counterparts to have existing financial obligations in the form of family commitments.

For women, one of the main barriers that the school has identified also revolves around the practicality of doing the degree when family responsibilities exist.

The result of these findings were a concerted effort to develop flexible alternatives across each of the School's core academic programmes - allowing students from anywhere in South Africa to study and work at the same time. One such programme is the modular MBA, launched in 2005, which has seen a 33% rise in applications this year.

In line with the UCT GSB's research in 2003, the modular format has drawn a higher percentage of women (36%) and African applicants (43%) when compared to the full-time programme.

The modular format has also now been extended to executive short courses at the business school. The Programme for Management Development, one of the School's premier short courses, was for example offered on a modular format for the first time in 2006.

In addition to allowing people the ability to get an MBA while working and caring for their families, the modular format is also proving to have an immediate, positive workplace impact.

Student feedback has shown that the modular format allows for immediate application of theoretical principles in the workplace, offering tangible real-world results to students and their organisations.

At a curriculum level it is also proving popular as it offers a balance between distance learning, and classroom contact time, group work and networking opportunities - the latter factors being crucial aspects of the MBA experience.

In the US, the answer to the MBA flexibility question has been dominated by online-based distance learning. This, however, is not the best option available for South Africa's developmental needs.

The biggest shortcoming of Internet delivery is the absence of physical interaction. Students miss out on the intense engagement between classmates and faculty both inside and outside the classroom, and, the exchange of real life experiences.

Whilst the Internet can offer chat rooms and email access to tutors, it is still a poor substitute for the real thing. In the South African context effective group work plays a critical role as a social learning tool - an element not easily reproduced in virtual groups.

The rise of the flexible MBA should therefore be seen as a positive sign that business schools are willing to accept that their traditional offerings in isolation may no longer be the answer to the needs of applicants - and that they are listening and responding to the concerns and needs expressed by the business community.

This is a global quest under way today, but it is especially critical in South Africa where educational institutions and business schools in particular have a very important role and responsibility in economic and social development. Creating access is one way of contributing, particularly in the skills development arena.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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