

PREPARING POST-GRADUATE STUDENTS FOR BUSINESS LIFE: THE CONTRIBUTION OF STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT AND ICT

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Abstract

This paper critically assesses the relevance of and extent to which Strategic Management offered by the Graduate School of Business Leadership (GSBL), University of South Africa (UNISA) contributes to preparing post-graduate students for business life in a rapidly advancing information and communications technology (ICT) environment. The findings largely confirm the relevance of the Masters in Business Leadership (MBL) degree and the positive contribution of Strategic Management in preparing students for business life.

Introduction

Despite the increasing importance of Strategic Management as an MBA capstone course at business schools worldwide, it has recently come under scrutiny for reasons which include relevance and modes of delivery. This paper explores the extent to which Strategic Management offered by the Graduate School of Business Leadership (GSBL) adequately prepares its students for business life in an increasingly important information and communications technology (ICT) environment. The GSBL offers a predominantly online Masters of Business Leadership (MBL) degree. A literature review on the status and relevance of the MBA and Strategic Management including the role of ICT is followed by the methodology, research findings, conclusions and recommendations.

The Business School MBA Programme

The forerunner of the modern business school, the Harvard Business School (HBS), was founded in 1908, and courses in Business Policy, the antecedent of modern-day Strategic Management commenced in 1912 (Bower, 2008). While the MBA is mostly a success story in academic terms (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002), there are serious concerns with regard to its relevance (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). In 2011, participants in the "Redesigning the MBA: A Curriculum Development Symposium" concurred that business schools had fallen behind industry in key areas and needed to quickly develop and deploy newly designed management programs that meet the evolving knowledge and skills

needs of business (Bisoux, 2011). The main concerns regarding current approaches to the MBA, and Strategic Management within the MBA, including the role of ICT are explored below.

Generalisation Versus Specialisation - What Business Schools Offer and Employers Expect

Despite the success of MBA programs over many decades (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Schoemaker, 2008), a perennial dilemma involves what business schools offer – a *general* MBA or an MBA degree with *specialisation* – as opposed to what employers require and students expect. Although research in the United States (U.S.) found that an MBA education has a positive impact on the employment, income, and promotion of graduates in the short and the long term (Zhao, Truell, Alexander, & Hill, 2006), scholars increasingly criticise the value of current MBA programs (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Elliott, Goodwin, & Goodwin, 1994).

According to Gupta, Saunders and Smith (2007), “Graduate programs in business education are presently at cross-roads as the students and faculty are torn between selecting or offering a general MBA program and an MBA with specialisation” (p. 2). A general MBA provides knowledge to students in basic business areas and selected functional areas to understand every aspect of the business. MBA programs with specialisations focus almost exclusively on one or more functional areas with limited exposure to basic business courses, if at all. Gupta, Saunders, and Smith (2007) analysed the content of 758 advertisements in which US employers indicated MBA as one of the qualifications for the advertised position. Of these advertisements, 95 % specified that the MBA was preferred. Of the total number of positions for which an MBA was preferred or required by employers, 96 % required a general MBA, indicating a serious disconnection between what MBA programs offer and what employers need. They concluded that the vast majority of employers do not care about MBA specialisations, while business schools keep offering more and more specialised and industry-specific niche programs.

Concerns Regarding the Relevance of the MBA

Notwithstanding the success of MBA programs, academics, students and other stakeholders increasingly state that the MBA is wholly out of touch with the “real world” and is largely irrelevant to the needs of managers (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009; Hopkins & Swift, 2008). Research by Rubin and Dierdorff (2009) showed that behavioural competencies indicated by managers to be most critical are the very competencies least represented in contemporary MBA curricula. Dierdorff and Rubin (2006) identified six distinct behavioural competencies that best describe the essential behaviour requirements for managers across industries and managerial positions. Their research in 2009 revealed *relevance* as the single most pressing issue facing contemporary post-graduate management education and confirmed a serious miss-match between business school offerings and managerial expectations (Table 1).

Table 1

Percentages of Competency Category Coverage Across Schools

Competency category	Average of Curriculum Coverage %	Management Expectations %
Managing decision-making processes	9.6	19.7
Managing human capital	13.0	19.0
Managing strategy and innovation	8.8	17.1
Managing the task environment	21.1	17.0
Managing administration and control	27.0	16.6
Managing logistics and technology	15.4	10.6

Source: Adapted from Dierdorff and Rubin (2006); Rubin and Dierdorff (2009). (Research based on 373 US business schools and 8,633 incumbent managers across 52 managerial occupations.)

With regard to relevance, these authors recommend greater emphasis on managerial decision-making processes and skills, human capital and people-oriented courses, strategy and innovation in MBA curricula as a priority.

Strategic Management – Debate Regarding Relevance and Integration

From 1912, Strategic Management evolved to where we are today - strategy theory to business inertia, strategic resilience, organisational transformation and finally to business sustainability (Bower, 2008; Ronda-Pupo & Guerras-Martin, 2012). There are, however, concerns whether business schools offer what employers want and students expect.

Relevance.

Despite the importance of Strategic Management, its legitimacy and relevance as an academic discipline have been questioned by scholars. Reasons include failing to have a concise, formal definition, lacking its own unique theories, and being a sub-field of other disciplines. However, Cox, Daspit, McLaughlin, and Jones (2010) concluded that Strategic Management does meet the criteria of an academic discipline as identified by Biglan (1973). Furthermore, in the

disconnection between the typical MBA and the requirements of managers identified by Rubin and Dierdorff (2009), the second most serious miss-match related to *Strategy and Innovation*. But Storey, Salaman and Holti (2008) seriously question whether managers always know what they need. In their view, “What executives actually know – about their industry sector, their particular business function, their organisation or even themselves – remains one of the unspoken mysteries of modern business” (p.14). Senior managers are generally unsure about strategy – its meaning or the organisation’s strategy. As such, it would be difficult if not impossible for managers to know what they want from business school education.

Integration.

A main objective of the traditional MBA Strategic Management capstone course is to develop integrated strategic decision-making skills in students (Kachra & Schnietz, 2008). Crittenden (2005) states that while the need for integration required by managers is escalating, the format of most strategy courses as well as strategy pedagogy has largely remained unchanged in recent decades. By asking the question “What should MBA integration consist of?” Kachra and Schnietz (2008) contend that business school faculty generally do not adequately recognise that three kinds of integration exist: theoretical, applied and practical, all of which require different levels of intellectual, analytical, behavioural and experiential skills. Faculty teaching Strategic Management should understand the various kinds of integration and create opportunities for students to practise all these integration skills. They recommend that Strategic Management should focus on the multiple levels and styles of managerial decision-making (Kachra & Schnietz 2008; Balch & Borah 2010).

The Role of ICT in MBA Programme Delivery and Delivery of Strategic Management

Proliferation of Web 2.0 applications *inter alia* through technologies such as blogs, wikis, social networking sites and the use of the Internet as an online course delivery mechanism to supplement and even displace face-to face instruction have flourished over the last two decades (Eastman & Swift, 2001; Alexander, 2006, 2007; Guri-Rosenblit, 2009; Moser & Sweeney, 2010; Oncu & Cakir, 2011). This research accordingly investigates the practices that online users (students at a South African business school) currently employ when using Web 2.0 sites. Web 2.0 technologies allow customisation, personalisation, and rich opportunities for networking and collaboration, all of which offer considerable potential for addressing the educational needs of today’s diverse student body (Bryant, 2006; Balch & Borah, 2010; Salazar & Wang, 2009). Franklin and Van Harmelen (2007) state that Web 2.0 is a relatively young technology. Universities therefore still face many unresolved problems that include appropriate pedagogies for use with Web 2.0 (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008). Institutional issues related to Web 2.0 technologies lie outside the scope of the current study.

The GSBL has made exceptional progress in offering academic programs online by way of distance learning in a blended approach, based on ODL principles (Unisa, 2008), including the use of online study manuals and continuous two-way online interaction between students and academic staff. Learning experience requires students to submit assignments and reports online as part of formative assessment. A compulsory 'block system' requires students to attend a one-week study school once every semester for all modules in a specific study year.

Research Strategy

Questionnaire Design, Administration and Data Collection

An online, web-based exploratory survey was conducted among second-year post-graduate Strategic Management students at the GSBL in December 2012 to empirically identify and assess their experience with regard to their studies in Strategic Management within the MBL and the practices they employ when using Web 2.0 applications. The web-based questionnaire consisted of two parts, each part containing questions to: (a) identify users' experiences related to their study of Strategic Management within the GSBL MBL degree and (b) identify respondents' current Web 2.0 usage patterns and the impact of Web 2.0 technologies on their studies. Completion of the questionnaire was voluntary. Anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed and ethical clearance for the research obtained. The questionnaire was previewed by subject experts and responses were analysed for inconsistencies, inaccuracies and incomplete answers.

Target Population and Response Rates

The total population of 345 GSBL second-year students were invited to participate in the study of which 108 completed and submitted their response online – all of which were usable. The following limitations of the research could affect generalisability of the research findings: (a) a single business school offering online, distance education using a blended approach; (b) research focused on the value of Strategic Management in preparing students for business life, while the remaining 10 modules offered during the first two years of the degree program may also have contributed in this regard; and (c) a student body comprising 95 % of the students working full time and studying part-time that will exhibit unique characteristics compared to face-to-face education.

Discussion of Findings

The online distance education effectively combined with limited face-to-face intervention in a blended approach to course delivery for the three-year MBL degree at the GSBL provided the context for this research.

Profile, Gender, Age and Ethnic Race of Respondents

Of the 108 respondents, representing a 31.3% response rate, 95% studied part-time while working full time. Of the remaining students, 3% studied full time, and 2% studied part-time while working part-time. This target response group comprised of 39% male and 61% female students. However, the learning patterns of students and

implications of gender differences were not investigated further. The average age of the respondents was 37 years. The racial diversity of the respondents was as follows: Black African, 76%; Whites 9%; Indian 7%; Mixed Race (Coloured) 4%, while 4% preferred not to respond.

Learning Experiences Related to the MBL and Strategic Management

Relevance of the MBL.

Students' value derived from Strategic Management within the MBL degree program was assessed using a five-point Likert scale, where 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 denote strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree respectively. The categories strongly agree and agree were combined and expressed as a percentage of the overall response to a question on a specific issue. The preamble to the questionnaire stated that students should indicate the extent to which the components of the MBL and Strategic Management prepared them for business life. The six categories of management competencies identified by Dierdorff and Rubin (2006) were deemed appropriate for this study. The responses to individual questions were, where necessary, combined to provide an aggregate number for the comparison of findings with those of Dierdorff and Rubin (Table 2).

Table 2

Respondents' Views With Regard to the Perceived Relevance of the MBL Degree as Related to Their Own Work Situation

Competency Category	Ranking of Areas of Competency Covered by U.S. Business Schools*	Ranking of Managers' Requirements*	Students' Value of GSBL Competency Areas** (Ranking and %)
Decision-making processes	5	1	1 (85%)
Human capital	4	2	5 (65%)
Strategy and innovation	6	3	2 (82%)
Task environment	2	4	3 (79%)
Administration and control	1	5	4 (70%)
Logistics and technology	3	6	- (***)

Source: Adapted from Rubin & Dierdorff (2009)* and researchers' survey data** (percentages have been rounded)(*** no specific survey questions were related to 'Logistics and technology').

Ranking in the first two columns of Table 2 is based on Rubin and Dierdorff (2009). Relevant responses to the survey questions relating to the relevance of the MBL degree offered by the GSBL were grouped into the first five categories of Rubin and Dierdorff. The data for ranking the value to students of the MBL offerings was derived by combining the 'strongly agree' and 'agree' responses for each question, expressing this combined answer as a percentage of the total responses to a question, and taking the average of all the responses to questions within each 'competency category' to arrive at the ranking of as well as the percentages for competencies in the last column of Table 2. (Questions on 'Logistics and technology' were not included in the survey.) The data in Table 2 indicate that the students' perceptions of the value, and by implication the relevance, of the MBL degree in preparing them for business life closely resemble the ranking of managers' requirements in Table 2, with one exception – the ranking of 'Managing human capital' (ranked 5 as opposed to 2). For 'Human capital' however, the ranking coincides with that of Rubin and Dierdorff for U.S. business schools, which means that Human Resource Management and related courses in the MBL do not adequately meet students' workplace aspirations.

Apart from the six competencies in Table 2, and because of their increasing importance for business, questions on Corporate Governance and on Ethics were included. The percentages reflecting the value for students related to these competencies were 68% and 59 %, respectively, indicating a real need for improvement in these areas. In conclusion, while the MBL degree appears to be largely relevant in terms of students' workplace needs, areas for improvement need to be addressed along the guidelines provided by the current research - despite its qualitative nature. The GSBL MBL degree has an optimal balance between a general masters degree and a masters degree with specialisations (See www.unisa.ac.za/default.asp?Cmd=ViewContent&ContentID=282811 for the composition of the MBL degree, also indicating the electives available in the third year). From the findings, and given the structure of the MBL degree, the issue of integration does not appear to be serious, probably due to a rather optimal combination of basic courses and specialisations.

Relevance of Strategic Management

Aligned to the main aim of this study, the questionnaire addressed key aspects related to Strategic Management to determine the value of the GSBL Strategic Management in preparing students for business life, accepting that other academic attributes may well contribute in this regard. The survey questions for this part were specifically aligned to the managerial competency 'Strategy and innovation' identified by Rubin and Dierdorff (2009). A five-point Likert scale was used again, and the same procedure as described for the MBL degree was employed, combining the 'strongly agree' and 'agree' categories, and expressing them as a percentage of the total responses for a specific item as presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Respondents' Views With Regard to the Perceived Relevance and Value of Strategic Management Related to Their Own Work Situation

Components of the GSBL Strategic Management that Constitute the 'Strategy and Innovation' Competency on Which Students Were Surveyed	Ranking of the Relevance and Students' Value Of Strategic Management Components for Business Life Preparation (Ranking as %)
Strategic planning and alignment	90
Mission and vision	87
Organisational structure, organisational culture and core competencies	85
Environmental scanning and analysis	81
Value chain, benchmarking and strategy tools	81
Strategy implementation	81
Creative thinking, analytical thinking and synthesis	80
Leadership and teamwork	79
Staff engagement and communication	78

Source: Researchers' compilation of survey research data.

The average of the percentages of the nine components is 82% (ranging from 78-90%, based on components of 'Strategy and innovation' in Table 3). Strategic Management thus appears to largely meet the requirements of the respondents as far as relevance, value in the workplace and preparing them for business life are concerned, noting that the other 10 courses may contribute in this regard.

The Role of Web 2.0 Technologies and Applications for GSBL Students

All respondents (100%) had Internet access and indicated that they created online profiles on Web 2.0 sites such as social networking and sharing sites. The main means of Internet access by respondents were as follows: from work (68%), from home ADSL Broadband (19%), from home modem dialup (11%), and other means (2%). None of the respondents accessed the Internet from the

university/business school or from Internet Cafés. This breakdown makes sense, given that 95% of respondents enjoy full time employment. Frequency of accessing Web 2.0 sites by the respondent group was as follows: several times a day (56%), once a day (20%), a few times a week (16%), once a week (6%), less frequently than once a month (1%), and those who did not know (1%). Since the MBL degree is mainly based on group work, Internet use will of necessity be high, especially where group members are geographically dispersed. Time spent using Web 2.0 sites per week appeared as follows: more than 5 hours (31%), more than 4 hours (12%), more than 3 hours (19%), more than 2 hours (13%), more than 1 hour (8%), less than 10 minutes (2%), and those who do not know (3%). Again, that 62% of students spent more than 3 hours per week using the Internet could be expected in distance education. The sites that respondents most often accessed that were of value in their online studies include: online communication sites and technology (e.g., mail and webmail); online information sources (e.g., Encyclopedia, Wikipedia); social networks (e.g., LinkedIn, MySpace, Facebook); and web-based instant messaging (MSN Web Messenger), which could be expected in online distance education. Franklin and Van Harmelen (2007) state that in Web 2.0, everyday users use the web as a platform to generate, re-purpose as well as consume shared content, data sharing, and rendering the web as platform for social software, enabling groups to socialise, collaborate, and work with each other, which would apply to GSBL students.

Positive Influence of Web 2.0 on Studies

More than 80% of the part-time GSBL students (82%) experienced a positive influence of Web 2.0 on their studies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The majority of the respondents were positive regarding the relevance as well as the extent of integration of the GSBL MBL degree, with the exception, to an extent, of the competency 'Managing Human Capital'. However, on average, more than 80% of the respondents derived value from their study of Strategic Management and believed that it adequately prepared them for business life. All students had access to the Internet, and the majority fully engaged Web 2.0 sites and applications in their studies. This research has revealed new and challenging insights with regard to the online use of Web 2.0 and related technologies in the rapidly changing business education and technological environments.

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