

Chapter 5

Management Improvement

INTRODUCTION

The Literature Review in Chapter 2 has revealed that during the last decade there has been a great deal of discussion about the adequacy of management education and its provision. In Australia, debates of this nature have been accompanied by a large increase in the provision of MBA programmes in most institutions of higher education and, at least during the years of prosperity in the late 1980s, increased interest among employers in sponsoring these programmes (The Australian Financial Review:1993). The university business schools appear to have played a major role in this change - by increasing the number of student places and the variety of courses at post-graduate and post-experience levels in business and management studies. For example, some of the university management education and development programmes are conducted in conjunction with employers in the workplace, using in-company schemes, or with commercial training organisations which traditionally are not associated with institutions of higher education.

However, despite these developments and reported changes for improvement on the part of the universities and business schools, literature to date still reports dissatisfaction with graduate management education. It is therefore important to investigate this dissatisfaction, through exploring the respondents' perceptions of the critical areas needed for managerial improvement, their preferred methods of improvement, and their ways of assessing the value and effectiveness of the methods at the operational level of managers and organisations. Perceptions of this nature should reveal parts of respondents' needs and expectations relative to the management education enterprise.

Within the chapter, the following main sections form the framework of presentation:

- 1 Critical Areas for Managerial Improvement;*
- 2 Methods of Managerial Improvement; and*
- 3. Value of Managerial Improvement to Management Performance.*

CRITICAL AREAS FOR MANAGERIAL IMPROVEMENT

The Most Critical Areas

Respondents were asked about their perceptions of the most critical areas where typical Australian middle and senior managers need to improve significantly. Table 5.1 records their response.

Over recent years, a new set of catch phrases has entered the corporate language and been adopted by the management literature. 'Downsizing', 'rightsizing', 'restructuring', 'entrepreneur', 're-engineering', 'Pacific Rim' and others, all reflect the realities of daily life for organisations attempting to cope with competition, economic unpredictability, deregulation, demographic realignment, and technological change. It is not surprising that all three groups of respondents commonly regard the areas of strategic management/planning and leadership as critical areas for managerial improvement. Also ranking high is the concern with international issues and competition at global level, although this is apparently not recognised by the student/graduate group who, together with the employer group, regard entrepreneurship as of highly critical importance.

From the data, it is clear that the background, experience and preferences of the respondents affect their perceptions. An educator's research or teaching interest, an employer of chief executive status whose organisation is short of certain management expertise, or a student who, working as a mid-level manager in the civil service, seeks career planning, are examples of factors which influence their perceptions. When asked to explain the apparently high interest in the area of managerial use of computers, the majority of the educators in one business school highlighted their school's recent, and costly, twinning arrangement with a computer company to introduce computer simulations in its middle management and executive programmes.

Interesting too are the underlying assumptions of the respondents which influence their perceptions of the critical areas. The area of leadership skill, for example, has been given prominence by all three groups of respondents. Views of the respondents suggest that this is perhaps due to the area's *difficulty* of transfer to students (as acknowledged by nearly all of the educators), of teaching well (as

Table 5.1 Perceived Critical Areas For Managerial Improvement

<u>Critical Areas</u>	<u>Educators</u>		<u>Employers</u>		<u>Students/ Graduates</u>	
	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank
Strategic management/planning	92	1	96	1	91	1
Leadership	72	4	88	2	79	2
Corporate culture/values/ethics	24	7	80	3	33	8
Entrepreneurs/business management	-	-	80	3	70	4
International/global economy & strategies	84	3	76	4	-	-
Human resource planning	88	2	65	5	-	-
Coaching and counselling	-	-	50	6	33	8
Finance/accounting/financial planning	88	2	50	6	45	6
Negotiation	52	5	50	6	-	-
Managing change/organisation development	84	3	50	6	66	5
Managerial uses of the personal computer	84	3	42	7	33	8
Performance management	72	4	42	7	41	7
Management of quality	40	6	42	7	41	7
Innovation	-	-	42	7	75	3
Developing/identifying managerial talent	-	-	19	8	-	-
Team building	52	5	19	8	33	8
Managing People	52	5	88	2	75	3
Managing for productivity	-	-	76	4	70	4
Marketing/cross-organisational effectiveness	84	3	-	-	66	5
Skilful use of influence	-	-	-	-	41	7
Labour relations	84	3	-	-	41	7
Career planning and management	-	-	-	-	41	7

assumed by the majority of employers that 'management educators are incapable of teaching management skills well') and of uncertainty in scope and nature (as claimed by a large number of students/graduates that neither educators nor employers have clarified the aspects of leadership expected of them). In addition, the perceived *importance* of an area – such as the frequency of tasks, skills or knowledge used on the job, whether the area is essential to all levels and functions of managers, easy to make errors on the job without it, the consequence of the errors, how critical it is to effective performance, or whether it is already part of the management education curriculum or not (for example, the areas in 'innovation' and 'management of quality' are indicated as areas often neglected in MBA programmes) – determines it as critical for managerial improvement.

Nevertheless, regardless of individual values and convictions or needs and aspirations, the views of respondents suggest that the areas presented are among the most in need of managerial attention and development today, and will possibly remain so for the next generation of corporate leaders. Respondents' perceptions in this regard can be well represented by the following observation of one of the senior educator respondents when commenting on the varied nature of the list of critical areas for managerial improvement:

Management education is not merely about developing managers. Nor is it purely about strengthening organisations. Its real purpose is its impact on the clients those organisations serve. So, ultimately, our society must be better off.

(Ed:15)

This statement suggests an expanded, even futuristic, view as to how management practices should be regarded. What educators, employers, students/graduates of this research regard as critical for managerial improvement, imply that they are seeking alternate ways of managing organisations. From leadership with a global sensitivity, to understanding of the dynamics of the businesses, entrepreneurial spirit focused on wealth creation, teamwork, strong interpersonal and people skills, the ability to solve conflicts before they occur, the capability to motivate people to do things they do not want to do, ethical values to 'do the right thing', a client focus, orientation towards profits sufficient to reward shareholders, growing the business adaptability based on sound judgement, courage for risk-taking, foundation in basic disciplines such as financial analysis, curiosity being stimulated to look for new solutions to problems, and even a passion for what one is doing, are all points that come out. Any of these characteristics is important, not

only for the organisation but also to the nation. Indeed, all these facets of management practices were repeatedly stressed, yet mostly found lacking, by the respondents as they perceive today's managers attempting to cope with rapidly changing work environments.

Emphasis On Managerial Behaviour

Furthermore, the data reflect that the employer and student/graduate groups tend to emphasise managerial behaviour in effective management – 'knowing all the management theory in the world does not ensure that we will be better (improved) managers'. A smaller number of educator respondents than that of these two groups agree that management involves both cognitive and behavioural skills. Literature has revealed that traditional management education has stressed for too long the cognitive academic elements far above the need for behavioural skills. In a sophisticated occupation like management, it is difficult to imagine that the preparation for it does not involve both academic and practical elements.

Perhaps what the data also reflect is that the challenge in managerial improvement hinges on confronting and addressing *reality*. There appears to be an underlying assumption among employers and students/graduate respondents that they are more in tune with management reality than the educators. However, their individual motives – such as students seeking marketable qualifications like the MBA in order to negotiate higher salaries and the frequent urgent demands of business, which render employers' need for 'quick-fix' solutions – may well distort reality. In addition, more than 50% of Australia's managers have no formal educational qualifications beyond secondary school (The Australian Mission on Management Skills, 1991:1). This apparent lack of management-related education or training make comments of the educator respondents such as 'employers do not know how to utilise MBA talents', 'ask what the employers want may get something totally incoherent none of the organisations knows anything about good management', difficult to ignore. As argued by one of the educator respondents who believes that employers are not always correct about management reality:

In Australia we have a very badly educated workforce. In some way we [business schools] should be looking at raising the level of education out there. The Australian businesses perform very badly. Do they have the right to tell us or our best students what the right kind of education that students should have, when they have not been very successful in their own games? Particularly the manufacturing industry which has been in downward shift since the 1950s.

(Ed:01)

What are the implications to managerial improvement of this conflict among respondents? Whose reality is appropriate as a basis for improvement? The majority of educator respondents also appear to claim that they are more capable than employers to assess the strengths and weaknesses of managers before designing learning opportunities to develop the appropriate managerial behaviours. This suggests a specific planning of managerial improvement. What approaches and methods do they use, and what is the compatibility of these to the needs of employers and students/graduates?

METHODS OF MANAGERIAL IMPROVEMENT

Respondent perceptions about methods of managerial improvement appear to revolve around the approaches of management education, development and training, together with modes of on- or off-the-job learning. The emphasis, particularly of the employer respondents, is that any of these approaches or modes 'must relate to what participants are doing in their work and not to some kind of academic fairy land'.

Nevertheless, as respondents identified the methods of improvement, the boundaries between management education, development and training became blurred. The general understanding of these approaches among the respondents appears to be that: *management education* is formal, award-based, systematic, conducted at academic institutions, of longer duration; *Management development* is non-formal, of shorter duration, topical, conducted by academic or non-academic institutions on- or off-the-job; and *management training* is skill-base, formal or non-formal, mainly short programmes conducted at technical training level on-the job. Furthermore, all three approaches can be interlinked with experience gathering. However, few respondents attempted to classify the methods of improvement. For example, a large number of the respondents are of the opinion that the development of managerial skills should be part of the management education curriculum. Table 5.2 shows the categories of method of managerial improvement as identified by the MBA-related educators, employers and students/graduates, the percentages of mention and the rank order of the mentions.

Table 5.2 Perceived Methods Of Managerial Improvement

<u>Methods</u>	<u>Educators</u>		<u>Employers</u>		<u>Students/ Graduates</u>	
	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank
Self-directed reading	24	5	50	3	54	4
Correspondence courses	84	1	34	5	54	4
University or institution programmes	84	1	40	4	62	2
On-the-job experience	60	2	65	1	70	1
On-the-job training	52	4	53	2	58	3
Workshops/conferences	56	3	-	-	70	1

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Relevance To The Workplace

Respondents in general indicated that the perceived relevance to the workplace determines their preference for a particular method. The employer and student/graduate groups, for example, rank on-the-job experience and on-the-job training activities higher than more formal academic courses in universities and other institutions. This preference for improvement methods also suggests that what managers need to learn to improve themselves and the workplace is very different from what is conventionally taught in universities. There appears to be a 'practical viewpoint' (as emphasised by all employers) and an 'academic viewpoint' (as maintained by all educators) within the data, resulting in different, if not opposite, emphases of the two groups as they regard the same topic areas.

Data presented earlier in Chapter 4 reveal that employers, in particular, perceive job skills and experience as extremely important to managers. Thus the methods of improvement will respond to the needs of the specific jobs. To them, interpersonal skills include the abilities to be social, develop others and relate interpersonally, and problem-solving is defined by skills such as strategic, conceptual and critical thinking; and only a few skill areas – such as financial analysis or technical report-writing – can be associated with those offered in specialised degree programmes like the MBA. Whereas to the educators, management improvement programmes should emphasise the interpersonal roles of being a figurehead/leader, or the liaison and informational roles of being a monitor, disseminator, and spokesman; and decisions-making roles should include being an

entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator, and negotiator (adopted from Mintzberg, 1973, 1989). In short, where employers consider that experience and training-on-the-job should focus on 'personal values', educators consider that educational or developmental programmes offered by the business schools should focus on 'scientific values'.

Employer respondents in particular, while recognising that a strong and generalist foundation within management education programmes broadens the experience of a management career, emphasise that these programmes have not responded to their concerns for management improvement. Here, the employers reiterate the absence of managerial *job skills* in business school programmes, particularly those of the 'personal values' – from leadership skills, interpersonal and organisational communications to showing initiatives, developing optimistic outlooks about people and organisation, entrepreneurial and international skills, and others. As respondents attempted to define leadership skills as follows, there seemed to be a consensus among the employers that current management education programmes of more 'scientific values' have failed to address this aspect of job skills of the managers:

Leadership skills:

*Negotiation skills

- "developing impartiality and gaining acceptance as a mediator."
- "creating an atmosphere for negotiation."
- "cutting through to the nitty-gritty and to deal with the real issues."
- "negotiating a best solution for the organisation and the employees."

*Establishing a purpose direction

- "creating and communicating a vision of the future."
- "establishing progressive goals consistent with organisational goals."
- "planning the steps required to achieve the goals."

*Coaching

- "guiding and motivating staff to perform well and achieve goals."
- "providing feedback on performance."
- "developing skills of staff"

Intellectual Emphasis Vs Market Demand

Educator respondent views on this matter are quite diverse and not as unanimous as those of the employer respondents. More than half of the educators interviewed stress the *intellectual emphasis* of university management education

which teaches students 'rationality based on analytical criteria, judgement based on evidence; even intuition, it is based on reasoning'. They regard management development or training as only meeting the short-term needs of managers and their organisations, thereby neglecting the long-term educational purpose.

These educators also maintain that to educate the next generation of business leaders, it is essential to teach business understanding and management skills as a complex whole instead of a set of disparate functions or skills. Recognising the rapid changes of the organisational environments and in an attempt to make education more practical and less theoretical, they stress that they have re-designed the curriculum by including, for example, team-work and leadership, placing greater emphasis on globalisation and quality and adding real-world consulting projects and field assignments as experiential learning methods. In addition, they view university management education as playing the role of developing learning organisations for the managers through identifying new goals, monitoring progress and generally upgrading the quality of managerial improvement.

A smaller number of the educators interviewed, on the other hand, acknowledge the importance of meeting market demands. They advocate that management improvement be customised for individuals or organisations not only in content, but also in structure and modes of learning. In their exploration of the needs and expectations of the employers and students/graduates for management improvement, thereby making it possible for educators to address the specific problems business and organisations are facing, one of the three business schools actively engages its educators in executive development programmes. The educators of the school emphasise that, apart from economic considerations, these programmes are the chief source of strength for their MBA programme. They claim that the school is closely involved in tailored executive programmes and has 'become one of the largest academic institutions offering executive education in Australia'.

In addition, the school's management development centre has had some 6,000 people from over 500 companies attend the programmes, as well as people from all branches of government. They also emphasise that the base of knowledge acquired through this teaching industry has enabled the school and its faculty to identify and develop the core concepts and key learning factors underpinning an appropriate management education for today's and tomorrow's managers. Furthermore, joint research ventures of the school with companies – another process of generating the

most up-to-date teaching materials and units in the MBA course options – and a range of consultancy services enable them to practise what they preach.

Different Types Of Improvement Serve Different Purposes

The data suggests that one approach or method of managerial improvement is not necessarily better than another. It appears that different types of improvement serve different purposes. Among the organisations in which the employer and student/graduate respondents work, examples of integrating university and institution programmes with on- or off-the-job development or training, and guided mentoring, are not uncommon. Within the employer group, training officers of the larger, national organisations report that increasingly they are combining internal and external programmes – for example, 'bringing in external professors to teach certain modules, but there is that direct link to the existing corporate culture that we want to develop'.

In these organisations there is much more detailed analysis of what the needs and objectives of the organisation are and who can meet those needs before exploring external management education or development programmes. Another employer respondent indicates that his organisation, in contrast to the previous practice of solely relying on business school programmes, has now adopted a culture of 'growing its own' top managers where junior managers of the best intellectual capacity, strategic, innovative and entrepreneurial potential, are selected for a series of internally designed experiences and programmes stretched over a period of 10 years and that at the end of this period managers will be eligible for senior executive positions.

Organisations are cost-conscious, and rightly so. The apparently increased emphasis on maintaining corporate identity, culture or objectives in managerial improvement programmes may well be a way of meeting organisational needs and addressing the specific problems relative to the organisation, thus generating real benefits of the programmes to the organisation. But does this approach really enhance managerial and organisational effectiveness?

VALUE OF MANAGEMENT IMPROVEMENT TO MANAGERIAL PERFORMANCE

Rank orders displayed in Table 5.2 suggest that conflict exists between educators, employers and students/graduates about the perceived value of the various

methods of managerial improvement listed. Earlier observations in this Chapter (pages 145 and 146) explain the high value given to on-the-job experience and on-the-job training by the employer group. Student/graduate respondents also value on-the-job experience highly. The following comment of a graduate reflects the perceptions of this group:

I might have gained some tools and some confidence from the MBA programme. But the degree itself has not qualified me as a manager. I become qualified only through performance in the workplace when my colleagues, and subordinates, think of me as a manager.

(S/G:03)

However, the majority of educator respondents expressed concern about the needs-focused or organisation-designed and -controlled management improvement approaches increasingly favoured by employers. All three schools indicate that they have been approached by some employers for accreditation of similar type of programmes. There is an example of a bank which attempted to negotiate a Master of Management Degree which would be of 2 years duration, with 40% of the curriculum in-house based, and would cover 'a wide range of management skills more appropriate for general managers than the MBA provides'.

In fact, the literature reveals that the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers (Australia), originally a professional body, operates its own M.B.A. (Technology Management) in conjunction with Deakin University. The Association is now one of the largest private providers of MBA degrees in the country (Karpin, 1995:302). The Australian Management College at Mt Eliza too, renowned originally for its short-term executive development programmes, has achieved accreditation from Monash University for its graduate Corporate-MBA programme.

There appears to be an emerging trend that employers and non-academic institutions are either seeking or have begun to operate MBA status education outside the business school environment. However, comments from respondents also reveal that the costs to organisations to 'tailor-make' courses are high and may require tens of participating students to make them cost-effective. For this reason, only the very large organisations, or groups of organisations are able to consider this approach.

Quality And Status

Concerns of the educator respondents regarding corporate-operated management education appear to revolve around the issues of quality and status. They

stress that this type of management education emphasises corporate lives and values, thus destroying the main learning experiences. Participants may learn to be better specialists of functions relative to the organisation but they lose the cross-fertilisation of ideas with a wider spectrum of managerial talents. In contrast, university-operated management education provides the link to these talents and develop experienced functional specialists into generalist managers. The narrowly-focused corporate context does not serve this purpose.

Furthermore, the possibility that any organisation may be able to create a degree for itself, without an identifiable core common to the standard and rigour of the national or international management education, to as high as graduate education level, and ultimately free of independent and diligent academic checks and evaluations, is a major concern of these educators. This possibility undermines a well established and distinctive approach to management education. The following comment of an educator reflects this anxiety:

Unless universities impose their standards and continuously question and criticise things, which is the nature of the university, degrees of this nature have no effect. Employers approach universities to seek respectability because people there understand well why things are the way they are. So unless you teach the why as well as the how of standards, you are really prostituting your own institutions.

(Eq:16)

Among the educators, there also appears to be a significant sense of powerlessness. They acknowledge, on one hand, the dilemma of having to eventually meet the employers' demand for an alternative management education if this is what the market wants – the same way as they have been making changes in order to maintain market shares. On the other hand, the likely event of proliferation of corporate-based graduate management qualifications and the lack of consumer protection agencies in Australia is extremely disturbing. A small number of employer and student/graduate respondents also share their concern.

Methods Of Evaluation

When asked about the methods of *evaluation* of the managerial improvement programmes and ways of yielding benefits of the programmes to the organisation, respondents surprisingly provided very little data. Only 15% of the organisations represented by the employer and student/graduate respondents of the research conduct some kind of cost/benefit analysis of their managerial improvement efforts.

These organisations practise limited and unstructured evaluation methods, by relying essentially on factors such as improved sales results, change in behaviour, beliefs, expectations or performance, and sometimes by simple 'reaction' questionnaires. The others do not evaluate any programmes at all, often due to its low priority or that it is not a requirement.

The educator respondents stress that employers' 'intuitive', 'common sense' or 'uncontrolled' approaches to evaluation render the validity, reliability and accuracy of measurement methods questionable. It appears that although evaluation is, seemingly, an important concern to the three groups of stakeholders of this research – in terms of the time, effort and costs expended by each group – it is the least explored by them. In fact, the literature also gives little coverage of measurements or cost/benefit analysis of managerial improvement methods. The absence of reported extensive investigations on evaluation issues may have contributed to the respondents' apparent lack of information and ability in making evaluations or, in turn, fuller utilisation of management improvement.

Nevertheless, there appears to be a consensus among respondents that many factors and variables distort evaluation. Apart from a great range of values and needs in a diversity of environments of the different stakeholders, there is also a great range of roles and activities expected of managers. History on management has also shown that many successful leaders and managers have emerged from places other than business schools or any development or training programmes. It is therefore difficult to claim that there is one best method of managerial improvement, or to assume that the search for alternatives should only revolve around graduate management education.

The educator respondents tend to believe that the current management education or development programmes which they are operating empower the participants and develop them as leaders for competitive and creative organisations. There is a high level of satisfaction in view of the perceived success of the MBA education (as reported in the literature regarding the large number of students applying for admission and the good salaries paid to graduates). Hence, they are satisfied with the quality of the job they are doing in educating students for productive careers in the business world and advancing the knowledge and practice of business and management.

This degree of pride may have generated a level of complacency which precludes the need for measurements of their actions which they claim as responsive to the demands of the markets. They also stress that instead of evaluating the institutional machinery in detail, scarce time and financial resources should be invested in studying various processes of management education inside and outside business schools and its impact on the Australian community.

The employer respondents, amid these optimistic perceptions of the educators, increasingly seek alternative and more suitable means of improving management performance, claiming current management education impractical, too theoretical and lacking skill-focus to cope with the needs of business and organisations. None of them, however, has indicated a plan or policy of assessment. On the other hand, there is a tendency to believe that any attempt at improvement 'benefits in some way' and is 'an appropriate thing to do'.

Among a small number of employer respondents, there is a belief that managerial improvement is meant for the select few who have the best potential and that, in reality, the majority of managers are not employed for executive development purposes. Therefore, little or no emphasis is placed on concerted efforts to transfer learning, or utilise it to maximise managerial or organisation effectiveness.

The student/graduate respondents tend to agree with the employer respondents that management improvement 'benefits (them) in some way'. Their assessment of the value of a method is based on the suitability to their tasks, of what they have learned and their enhanced, or otherwise, ability to perform the tasks after learning. Naturally, they appear to be chiefly concerned with benefits to themselves in terms of credentials, capabilities, marketability. Any method enhancing these qualities is therefore effective. In addition, similar to the educator respondents, this group of respondents is MBA-related and appears to share the educators' pride in business school education. As one graduate pointed out:

What contributes to this pride? It is part of building up a mystique of how difficult the course is, how challenging it is. There is nothing like previous graduates who keep reinforcing that mystique. I am too honest, sometimes I tend to underplay perhaps how difficult parts of it were.

(S/G:23)

So it appears that even the MBA experience alone, in overcoming the pressures of competing within an impressive crowd of students, sharing and gaining

knowledge, which serves to complement a sophisticated education experience aimed at elevating participants to view points and responsibilities of leaders at more senior management, already assures a sense of value and effectiveness in the minds of these respondents.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has revealed that conflict abounds among educators, employers and students/graduates regarding the critical areas of management currently in need of improvement, the various methods of improvement, and the ways improvement programmes are utilised and evaluated for maximising managerial and organisation effectiveness. Differences in priority determine needs and expectations. While educators favour the objectives of broadening the manager's frame of reference, understanding and perspective, employers and students/graduates call for less analysis of prescription, more soft material and insights into how the world of organisations really work, as opposed to how it *should* work – a more practical process said to be best learned in real managerial environment and usually found in non-formal and non-qualification programmes conducted inside organisations.

The essential argument is that there is no 'one best model' of management improvement, and therefore 'no one best way' of educating, developing or training managers. At best, there appears to be a range of broad models which illustrate particular aspects of managerial reality. The contrasting needs and expectations of the three groups raises several questions impacting on the future provision of education for managers: What facts, techniques or attitudes have participants gained from the current provision of management education? How satisfied with the education are the participants? Does the gain lead to effective managerial performance? What is the effect of this gain on the employing organisations?

Chapter 6

The Current M.B.A. Programmes

INTRODUCTION

How well do the MBA programmes offered by Australian universities satisfy the needs and expectations of the three major groups of stakeholders in the management education enterprise? The previous two chapters have analysed some of the stakeholder needs and expectations and the values influencing the satisfaction of these needs. This chapter focuses on how each group perceives the current MBA programmes operated by the Australian universities.

Issues such as curriculum, structure, students and faculty, teaching and learning – all of which reflect the purposes, role and practices of a business school – are being explored in this chapter. The aim is to seek further evidence on whether and/or to what extent overall operations of the MBA programmes may or may not be meeting the needs and expectations of the respondents, so that in later chapters implications for the future of MBA education and recommendations for appropriate management education can also be drawn from this analysis.

Within the chapter, the following main sections form the framework of presentation:

- 1. How Suitable Is the Curriculum Content of the MBA Programme?;*
- 2. How Appropriate Is the Structure of the MBA Programme?;*
- 3. Are the Correct People Attending the MBA Programme?; and*
- 4. How Effectively Taught is the MBA Programme?*

HOW SUITABLE IS THE CURRICULUM CONTENT OF THE MBA PROGRAMME?

The literature review in Chapter 2 reveals that in all the debates about developing managers, there is very little about the specific curriculum content suitable for this purpose. Unless the 'syllabuses' – which have been widely criticised – are known and understood, discussions will continue to be full of misunderstanding. At the apex is the MEA, currently offered in one form or another

by over 38 institutions in Australia (The Australian Financial Review, 1996) and countless others elsewhere, especially in the United States.

The relevant literature claims that the MBA has been hailed as the common currency for *top* level management in much of the world. In many countries it is one of the key routes to career advancement. In fact, all the educator respondents of this research stress that their MBA programmes cater for the aspiring *senior* manager.

Range Of Curriculum Content

A survey of the curriculum of MBA programmes offered in the three nominated business schools of this research reveals an extensive range of content and specialisations. Some of the specialisations are as follows:

- General Management
- Finance and Accounting
- Marketing
- Organisation Studies
- Operations
- Information and Decision Analysis
- Law and Management
- Strategy
- Public Sector
- Research

Under these specialisations, core and elective units are designed. Figure 6.1 shows the range of subjects offered by the three business schools. The subjects are classified under context, strategy and skills. Each of the three Deans claims to have developed one or more distinctive characteristics from these subjects into sources of competitive advantage. In two of the schools, finance and accounting are specialities, while in the other school it is the operations and logistics of manufacturing management. All three schools emphasise international perspectives in their MBA programmes.

According to the educator respondents, the specialisation in Organisational Study covers topics such as leadership, group behaviour, motivation, ethics and the like which have been generated by social scientists observing managers managing. The remaining specialisations are about the environment of the manager, which fills the larger part of the MBA syllabus. This covers topics such as the economic forces which affect the organisation in which the manager works, both the effects of national and international macro-economic policy; the demands of the financial

Figure 6.1 MBA Curriculum Content Range

<u>Context</u>	<u>Strategy</u>
Management Politics	Management Foundations
Ethics in Management	Financial Management
Management Environment	Marketing Management
Human Resource Management	Strategic Management
Public Sector Management	Investment Management
Management Economics	Global Strategies
Organisational Behaviour	Enterprise Management
	Management Consulting
<u>Skills</u>	
Management Accounting	
Technology Management	
Information & Decision Analysis	
Operations & Logistics Management	
Management Communications	
Corporate Acquisitions	
Marketing Research	

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institutions – banks and stockmarkets, the tools of information and control such as accounting, information systems and quantitative analysis; and structure of the organisation – its legal framework, the role of unions, the nature of production, marketing and distribution.

It is unanimously claimed by the educator respondents that 'anybody engaged in the world of business definitely profits from this type of curriculum', and that the work of the business school should not be dismissed as irrelevant to the activity of management. Rather, what has been taught in the MBA programme is necessary for the well-educated manager.

Emphasis Of The Curriculum Content

In reference to the suitability of MBA curriculum content, respondents identified the emphasis they saw as being given to these content areas. Table 6.1 shows the categories of these emphases, the percentage of mentions and the rank order of mentions. It is interesting to note that some of the categories such as Initiative, Oral Communication, Risk Taking and Written Communication are not listed within the curriculum of any of the three schools, yet time and again they are raised by the respondents as essential emphases of the MBA. These, along with Leadership/Interpersonal Skills, are commonly known as 'soft' content. Data suggest

that respondents are generally of the opinion that these aspects are given low emphasis in the MBA programmes.

Earlier analysis on managerial skills (Chapter 4; page 128) and on the critical areas needed for managerial improvement (Chapter 5; page 140) reveals that today's business is urgently in need of the 'soft' skills. Data in Table 6.1 appear to support this analysis as a large percentage of the employer and student/graduate respondents do not perceive emphasis having been given to the Leadership/People

Table 6.1 Perceived Emphasis Which Is Currently Given To The Development Of Various Management Expertise In An MBA Curriculum

<u>Emphasis</u>	<u>Educators</u>		<u>Employers</u>		<u>Students/Graduates</u>	
	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank
ANALYSIS	40	1	61	2	41	4
COMPUTER	16	4	42	6	54	2
DECISION-MAKING	32	2	65	1	50	3
INITIATIVE	8	6	-	-	8	9
LEADERSHIP/PEOPLE ISSUES	12	5	34	7	20	8
ORAL COMMUNICATION	12	5	30	8	25	7
PLANNING/ORGANISING	20	3	53	4	58	1
RISK TAKING	4	7	46	5	29	6
WRITTEN COMMUNICATION	16	4	57	3	37	5

Issues content, declaring the MBA programmes as 'mainly business study courses and not addressing the issue of management skills'. While the data of the educators indicate some concern about the 'soft' content, emphasis is placed more on issues of Analysis, Computer, Decision-making and Planning – the 'hard' skills usually based on quantitative or statistical techniques or models.

Respondents appear to define the differences between 'People' and 'Analysis' content as follows:

People issues: motivation, organisational culture, human dynamics; people and technological change, particularly in relation to work practices, work organisation, personal skills, and job design methodologies that have become counter-productive; alternative work patterns; continually re-skilling the workforce; encouraging people to be innovative; appropriate reward systems; personal development strategies to match corporate strategic planning.

Analysis issues: finance and accounting for strategic planning and management, including strategic planning and management of technology; finance and

accounting for non-cost bases for competition and market success; the limitations – particularly for strategic purposes – of conventional analysis and money management techniques; technology analysis and forecasting; competitor analysis.

Educator respondents' argument for the analytical issues is that these are skills which improve a manager's problem understanding, reduce subjective judgement, allow deeper analysis of a problem, enable justification of a decision and more confidence in the final decision. To them, these techniques are invaluable to senior managers as management is about making choices in terms of costs and benefits. They stress that the major drawback against the use of these skills is the employers' and their organisations' general lack of knowledge about the skills, hence the more reason they should teach managers these skills.

Associated with the quantitative issues are the views of employer and student/graduate respondents that these content emphasise 'theories', rather than 'real-life' and 'practical' use to a manager's work. To this, a large number of the educator respondents argue that theories underpin practice. MBA students who have had some years of work practice require theories which enable them to understand how and why a management practice may be effective or otherwise. This understanding is essential if MBA graduates are expected to adapt and handle change in their work environment. These educators maintain that the key issue is to ensure that the theories are relevant to managerial practices and demonstrate how the theories underpin practice.

However, views of the educator respondents reveal other underlying assumptions. The majority of educator respondents acknowledge that 'soft' skills (perceived as important to managers) are areas which have not been well developed, hence educators have difficulty of 'doing it right' – a major reason which explains the perceived inadequacy of MBA content. However, the greater underlying assumption appears to be that the MBA educators do not regard the 'soft' content required by the managers suitable to the MBA curriculum. As pointed out by two of the educator respondents:

There are always tensions whenever we talk about adding more skill emphasis such as leadership or people management in the MBA curriculum. There seems to be no strong reasons other than conservatism perhaps.

(Ed: C2)

The major reasons we don't teach these critical issues well is because if it is seen that we teach these often untaught things well, it will be more difficult to teach and justify what we already teach.

(Ed: 06)

It appears that traditional business school values are very much adhered to by the educators.

It is of significance to note that while some of the educator respondents claim that 'dramatic' changes have been made in the MBA curriculum to suit current managerial needs, they tend to choose what they wish to teach rather than what business organisations really need. Some of them believe that skills or competencies, including for example cross-cultural skills which hinge on values and attitudes, cannot be conveyed in a course or at graduate level but should be embedded in work experience or work training. Furthermore, as it takes a significant amount of time for managers to acquire the skills through the workplace – skills which are subject to change and specific to situations – the MBA programme should not aim at serving this purpose.

There appears to be a significant gap between what the educator respondents consider as suitable content for a senior managerial education and what employer and student/graduate respondents regard as the work and involvement of a manager. Within this gap, while the understanding of a 'manager' is uncertain, the understanding of a 'senior manager' is even more unclear. It is also interesting to note from one of the Dean's view that he is not in a 'production line' business of 'turning out' managers, and that he attempts to provide an education which gives students a 'different approach' to management – a willingness to analyse assumptions and an ability to think and act creatively.

Design Of The Curriculum Content

Perhaps closely related to the emphasis of content in MBA programmes is the issue of how the curriculum content is designed, which judging from the overall views of the respondents also explains why employer and student/graduate respondents at large regard some content as irrelevant and not addressing the needs of the managers. There appears to be little practice among the educator respondents of designing the content for more qualitative or 'thick' descriptions – that is, 'paying homage to the overt and covert, the emotional and rational, the flux of changing patterns, the layers, depths and contradictions' (Quillien, 1993:20). One of the

educator respondents, a professor in Accounting, who stresses the importance of qualitative treatment of the MBA content, explains that:

A conventional feature of a unit like Accounting is that it is accurate, it balances. It is a great quantitative discipline. It is all about judgement. Lying behind those numbers are whole strings of value judgements. There is also a whole lot of arbitrary assumptions. And we should get into those parts much more. This is how I think that good managers will have to understand the future.

(Ed:11)

About a third of the educator respondents appear to share this view. This is reflected in Table 6.2. These data appear to support those of Table 6.1, viz that employers, together with similar concerns indicated by the student/graduate group, regard the current MBA content as more quantitative than qualitative.

Table 6.2 Perceived Amount Of Quantitative And Qualitative Emphases In MBA Content

	<u>Educators</u> Quan./Qual.		<u>Employers</u> Quan./Qual.		<u>Students/ Graduates</u> Quan./Qual.	
	%	%	%	%	%	%
TOO MUCH	12	16	65.3	11.5	45.8	8.3
ABOUT RIGHT	60	64	26.9	23	41.6	50
TOO LITTLE	25	20	7.6	65.3	12.5	41.6

One of the chief concerns of the employer and student/graduate respondents is that MBA subjects appear like a series of 'seminars on basic business functions such as marketing, finance and operations'. The content does not cover cross-disciplinary issues such as quality management, customer service, change management, entrepreneurship or international business – areas which demand the *integration* of the knowledge acquired from the various MBA subjects and areas which may well provide opportunities to make education less theoretical and more pragmatic. There appears to be a consensus among these respondents that educators over-emphasise function-specific knowledge with little regard for developing the cross-functional aspects of management, thereby discouraging development of the broad insights necessary for management.

This results in the MBA curriculum focusing on developing analytical skills while sacrificing the equally important and often cross-functional interpersonal, leadership, social responsibility, global or other 'soft' skills. These respondents also perceive that there is an 'MBA philosophy' which demands building the course around traditional subjects, and educators deal with subject problems only, thus failing to develop students to think across disciplinary boundaries and address complex organisational problems. The following comments of a graduate, now a senior executive, reflects the concern of he and his counterparts that their expectations of the MBA were higher than what the programme was able to offer them:

I have had near 20 years of managerial experience. I was seeking the ability to frame problems adequately and make discerning judgements about what really is a critical factor and what is less so in this messy world of globalisation, political fragmentation, foreign assignments, unpredictable markets and so on. In short, I need an appreciation of the complexity of organisational life, not just specific knowledge, models, rationality or managerial control.

(S/G.21)

This suggests that cross-disciplinary thinking is essential for the type of qualitative or 'thick' emphasis of content required by MBA graduates. It also appears that qualitative answers within an MBA programme will dominate, well above the need for statistical analysis.

Academic Values Prevailing Upon Curriculum Content/Design

Linked to this inadequacy is also the employer and student/graduate respondents' perception that most of the educators are locked into a set of *academic values*. To them, educators appear to define their career in terms of research, advancing their own discipline and addressing the requirements of the academic community rather than that of the business community. As a result, their problem-solving approach is likely to be different and inadequate in addressing the problems and concerns of business. Furthermore, academics seem to be accustomed to operating as individuals, designing syllabuses and teaching in styles deemed appropriate by themselves. In so doing they ensure the replication of the traditional institutional value of structuring a business school where 'people of economics department and accounting department never talk to each other'. Hence, as the school develops, the same disciplinary problem arises.

The employer and student/graduate respondents pointed out that these educator and business school values – which impact directly on their actions, the MBA programmes they provide and, ultimately, the satisfaction or otherwise of their clientele – are not usually examined. They also stressed that their declared need for 'softer' and relevant managerial skills in the MBA curriculum should signal a change in the cultural values of the educators. However, more often than not, these values constitute substantial barriers to change.

Only a small number of educator respondents appear to share these views, pointing out that there is an extremely small literature available dealing with the advantages of the qualitative approach and it is difficult to build courses around such an approach unless the traditional academic way of structuring and learning also changes. Nevertheless, change is taking place as faculties attempt to meet on a regular basis to ensure that what is taught in one discipline is quickly linked to another. Team teaching, computer simulations, multidisciplinary case studies and field projects are also added to the core subjects, but 'so much more work has been heaped on the students that staff have since had to scale back additions in course requirements, examinations and leadership exercises'. One of the educators indicated that:

This is a slow, evolutionary process. I am not proud of the fact that we have not taken the leadership in curriculum change and moved significantly. I think it sets a tone for the entire business school.

(Ed:20)

Once again, whose values and whose needs are more important, what to include and what to remove from the curriculum, are issues yet to be resolved. The observations in this and earlier analysis chapters suggest that proponents of the 'hard' and 'soft', 'skilled' and 'non-skilled', 'quantitative' or 'qualitative' approaches, are continuously locked in a 'dialogue of the deaf', where personal needs and expectations will not be surrendered. A respondent even suggests that the title 'Master of Business Administration' is at fault, creating uncertainties where the educators emphasise content for Business understanding and the employers and the industry at large emphasise content for Administration understanding. It appears likely that it will be some time before suitable MBA content are widespread within the business and school communities.

HOW APPROPRIATE IS THE STRUCTURE OF THE MBA PROGRAMME?

Just as there is no single definition of management, no single structure of the MBA programme can be right for every student. Students' ability to perform effectively in MBA studies hinges on their learning experience and the structure of the programme influences this experience. The three business schools vary in the structural design of their MBA programmes - number of years in duration, full- or part-time and number of semesters per year. The literature also reports of distance-learning, company-focused and consortium MBA structures in other institutions.

Figure 6.2 shows the structures of MBA programmes found within the three business schools. In its early days, graduate management education was geared primarily towards full-time students. Today, however, many business schools offer, and sometimes concentrate on, programmes designed for students in employment and with less time to study. One of the schools of this research offers the traditional 2-year full-time structure, while the other two schools offer the intensive 12 months or 18 months full-time structures, which can also be studied part-time. The intensive MBA programmes, having fewer contact hours than the traditional structure and covering the basic curriculum, cater for executives with advanced business backgrounds.

Figure 6.2 Structures Of MBA Programmes

	<u>Business School</u> <u>1</u>	<u>Business School</u> <u>2</u>	<u>Business School</u> <u>3</u>
Duration/ part-/full-time	24 mths f-t	12 mths f-t 24-36 mths p-t	18-24 mths f-t 30-36 mths p-t
No. of Semester	4	3	3
on-/off-campus	on-campus	on-campus	on-campus
	(also in plan 'open-learning' mode)		
		

Criteria For Selecting An MBA Programme

Respondents cited the following criteria for selecting an MBA programme:

- reputation of the business school (published ranking; whether the school is a 'good' school);
- size of the business school (number of staff; 'respectable' premises and settings catering for mature students, such as the availability of syndicate rooms and a refreshment area);
- content of the MBA programme (subjects of interest to student; specialisations in areas important to student's job needs, such as in organisation behaviour, internationalism, entrepreneurialship or finance);
- teaching staff (reputation; type of instruction and its effectiveness);
- *structure of programme* (duration; full- or part-time; timetable and hours of attendance per week);
- facilities (library; placement service; support systems such as in computing and photocopying);
- location (proximity to work or home);
- culture (research or teaching culture and effect of it on students);
- graduate comments (atmosphere of learning; degree of difficulty of programme; overall effectiveness of programme); and
- fees (up-front and hidden).

Of these factors, the selection of an MBA programme, in the majority of cases among the student/graduate respondents, is determined by how the *structure* of the programme compares with their personal needs – career plan, work or education background, interests, capabilities, family commitments, and others. While there is a selection of study modes to complete the degree, economic necessity and time constraints appear to be the most critical factors determining their plan of study. These factors are more associated with the structure rather than with the fees of the programme. To some of these respondents, the need to be in employment, or not choosing to give up two years of experience, salary and promotion or other advancement possibilities, have prohibited them from attending the two-year or full-time programmes, in which case the one year intensive or part-time programmes are suitable to them. Those who selected the two-year or full-time programmes were mostly self-supporters with only 3 of them sponsored by employers.

Impact Of Structure On Student Performance

So how does an MBA structure – full-time, part-time, 2-year or 1-year – impact on student performance in the MEA? First, respondents were asked to

indicate the advantages of each of these structures of the MBA programmes. Figure 6.3 shows the advantages identified by them. The advantages of the full-time structure also reflects the disadvantages of the part-time structure, and vice versa. Likewise, the 2-year and 1-year comparison indicates advantages and disadvantages. It appears that each structure has its distinctive merits and shortcomings which can not be dismissed, and the selection of one is very much a personal need. In addition, these perceptions suggest the significant influence a structure may have on the student's ability to perform effectively in a programme. For example, the full-time student's regular interaction with the faculty and the part-time student's opportunities to apply learning immediately in the workplace, each of which enriches learning experience in different ways.

One of the Deans stressed that popular management literature often implies that business schools provide a variety of offerings chiefly for the economic purpose of increasing student numbers. What is often neglected is educators' attempts to meet these realistic concerns of the students as shown in Figure 6.3. As can be seen, not a single structure can address all or most of the concerns. Variations of structure in the MBA programme are designed to suit students' personal situations and goals and to minimise the inadequacies of a particular structure they may have selected. For

Figure 6.3 Perceived Advantages Of MBA Structures

<u>Full-time</u>	<u>Part-time</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *total immersion in studies *more time for study and peer discussions *shortened time period before graduation *more well-rounded school life *increased opportunities to network/make friendships *closer faculty relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *broadening career options without interrupting earnings *day-to-day application of learning *benefits job performance *more realistic and meaningful learning experience *employer evaluation enhanced *costs stretched over longer time *employer more willing to fund study
<u>2-year</u>	<u>1-year</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *broad spectrum of management subjects *less intensive and pressure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *less foregone earnings *shorter time heightens motivation to complete

example, utilising school facilities through summer and holiday periods and on weekends year-round, allows students to enter an MBA programme at any semester,

thus allowing greater flexibility, lessening study pressures and work strains, and even reducing the time required to complete a programme.

One of the three schools which is renowned for maintaining the traditional values of the 2-year full-time programme is in the process of designing a sandwiched 'open-learning' MBA programme to address the needs of sponsoring employers. Within this education process – another structure different from those discussed above – sponsored practising managers, instead of undergoing full-time study at one stretch of time, exit at appropriate stages of the programme, having acquired what is felt is necessary by the sponsoring organisation. Data from the employer respondents suggest their reluctance to sponsor MBA students. This type of structure, which appears to incorporate the merits of both full-time and part-time structures as shown in Figure 6.3, may well help increase employer sponsorships

There is, however, controversy among respondents about the calendar length of MBA programmes, although it does not appear to be a key criterion affecting the design or selection of an MBA structure. As traditionally the MBA has been a two-year full-time on-campus degree, there is inevitably conflict between the proponents of one versus two years, full-time versus part-time and on-campus versus off-campus. The argument is centred on quality. Believers of the traditional model claim that it is impossible to achieve adequate depth or quality in lesser time and in a less concentrated mode. The opposite view is that if the course is intensive and well planned, then an adequate level can be achieved, particularly given the maturity of those attending the programmes. A real issue, of course, is about costs in terms of time, fees and foregone earnings. There is no evidence in the data which indicates low quality of the MBA due to calendar length. On the contrary, data reflect a positive perception of the characteristics about the non-traditional models.

ARE THE CORRECT PEOPLE ATTENDING THE MBA PROGRAMME?

Mintzberg (1989) argues that it is wrong, socially as well as economically, to educate relatively inexperienced people in management and that management education should be directed at those who have substantial organisation experience coupled with proven leadership potential as well as the requisite intelligence.

Entrance Requirements

The entrance requirements to the MBA programme of all three business schools appear to have observed this argument. The schools require MBA students to have obtained a first degree and at least two years of work experience. Two of the schools require the achievement of a mid-point score or higher (scale of 200-800) of the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) – a standardised measurement for general verbal and mathematical abilities. The other school, mainly catering for its Executive MBA programme, does not require this criterion but has raised the minimum work experience to 5 to 8 years which must be certified by referee reports.

It seems that a certain degree of flexibility exists with respect to the entrance requirements. Data reveal that applicants can also be admitted into a programme without first degrees or GMAT scores if they have proven senior managerial experience and potential. While there does not appear to be a conflict among respondents regarding entrance requirements, it is of some significance to note that the GMAT is regarded more as a selection/rejection device to cope with over demand for limited places, rather than a short-listing mechanism. There is also a widespread uncertainty among the respondents about the use of the Test in assessing the quality of students. One of the senior educators commented as follows:

People who get in [the MBA programme] are not necessarily better than the ones who get excluded. But the GMAT helps us to ascertain that on strictly intellectual grounds those selected are capable of continuing the programme.

(Ed.22)

It appears that the various mechanisms of selecting quality students for the MBA programme have yet to ensure the provision of those personal qualities needed in effective managers. In other words, students may succeed in the MBA programme, but might never succeed as managers.

Motivation In Studying The MBA Programme

While the business schools select suitable students, student motivation in studying for the MBA and their choice of a programme also play an important part in the overall quality of MBA participants. Demographic details of student/graduate respondents (Figure 4.3 of Chapter 4) show that at the time of studying the MBA, 21% of these respondents were without first degrees while 17% of them had higher

degrees, but their work experience was spread between 3 to 23 years. All of them were full-fee paying students. They can expect to pay up to A\$25,000 for an MBA programme or A\$45,000 for an Executive MBA programme – 'postgraduate courses in administration, business and management attract the most number of students and are the most expensive programmes for which fees are charged' (Higher Education Council, 1996:6-7). Only one in three of them was fully or partly sponsored by an employing organisation, with a very large 77% self-funding their own MBA studies. In addition, at least 45% of them had forfeited employment for full-time study in the MBA programme. The background of these respondents is such that they wanted to be absolutely certain of what they could gain from a carefully-selected MBA course and they demanded value for money from the business schools.

Respondents were asked to give their three most important reasons for students wishing to pursue the MBA. Their replies were coded into categories of motivations. Table 6.3 shows these categories, the percentages of mention by the respondents and the rank order of the mentions. The most popular reasons are career progression or advancement and improving or updating managerial performance. These two categories – 'improvers' and 'careerists' – are easily the top two reasons in all three groups of respondents and the category on academic challenge appears to occupy less importance. The 'improvers', such as those who have been mid-level managers, wish to upgrade managerial performance;

Table 6.3 Perceived Motivations For Studying An MBA

<u>Motivations</u>	<u>Educators</u>		<u>Employers</u>		<u>Students/ Graduates</u>	
	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank
Career progression, advancement	56	1	50	2	66	1
Improving/updating managerial performance	48	2	53	1	62	2
Personal development	24	3	15	5	37	3
Money (to get a higher salary)	8	6	3	7	25	4
Broadening skills from present technical/specialised areas	4	7	3	7	20	5
Marketability (able to move and change jobs)	16	4	26	3	16	6
Getting the formal qualifications	24	3	19	4	8	7
Academic challenge	12	5	15	5	4	8
Job-specific reasons (new duties, starting own business)	4	7	7	6	4	8

.....

the 'careerists', such as those who have been engineers and systems programmers, wish to achieve director level in their workplace; and the 'academics', such as those who want to learn new ways of doing business, new hiring expectations, analytical and strategic skills, wish also to acquire a second degree at Master's level.

It is interesting to note that student/graduate respondents rank marketability quite low and employers rank this category relatively high – which reflects the reputed concern of employers over losing sponsored MBA graduates. This is perhaps a reason why such a small percentage (23%) of the MBA student/graduate of this research have been sponsored by employers.

The majority of the student/graduate respondents are over 35 years of age and tend to indicate reasons other than career advancement. Part-time students tend to differ from conventional full-time students in their motivation for study. They tend to produce a greater range of reasons – such as job-specific reasons – than the full-timers as most of them were in employment. For example, an older student approaching 50 years of age, who is also an experienced manager, expanded on his reasons for joining the MBA programme as follows:

Not promotion, I run a division now. Where next? Out to grass I suppose! Very few opportunities above me. I tried to explain on the application form and make a case for a geriatric. Business is changing so rapidly, it is necessary for all managers to cope with change, not just cope but be ahead of it. One should continually try to learn new things, keep the brain active.

(S/G:08)

Similar to the graduates, the part-time student respondents acknowledged that their motivations changed during the MBA programme.

High Expectations Of The MBA Programme

Nevertheless, data do not reflect significant variance in the perceptions of the respondents with respect to individual motivation. However, motivation also signals very high expectations – such as career shifts, or earning high salary after gaining the MBA – of the MBA programmes by all three groups of respondents. Educators have similar perceptions to that of the students and in view of what they generally believe the possession of an MBA can achieve, appear to equate motivation with high expectations, thereby suggesting an assumption that current MBA programmes have met these expectations. By contrast, employers, having similar perceptions to that of the students, appear to suggest that educators have not met the high expectations,

particularly in view of their widely reported dissatisfaction in the literature of current MBA programmes. Could it be that the 'wrong' students (having potentially unrealistic motivation) are attending the MBA programme if, in fact, the educators are not likely to meet the high expectations? Can the educators realistically meet the high expectations?

Only a small number of the employer and educator respondents answered these questions with some insight. According to these respondents, the reasons such as 're-tooling' oneself or acquiring new skills in order to pursue a new career are poor reasons for studying the MBA, as an MBA cannot easily do this and employers almost always prefer experience. A one-year or two-year programme does not make a desirable senior manager out of a civil engineer or any other professional. The MBA can only add to an individual. It cannot really change the graduate. It reinforces strengths and experiences rather than replaces them. Employers' well-reported long-standing skepticism and suspicion of the past decades of MBA programmes appears to strongly endorse this view.

To most of the employer respondents, the MBA means nothing by itself – 'it assumes relevance only when looked at in the context of an individual's past experience and future potential'. This also explains why employers generally do not provide MBA graduates with special career paths (Chapter 5; page 152) and do not pay them more than non-MBA employees in similar jobs, even though MBA graduates, and their educators, tend to believe that they deserve higher salaries, citing broadened experience and newly acquired generalist management know-how as the primary reasons.

Mismatch Of Expectations

So, herein lies a significant mismatch of expectations among the three respondent groups – a mismatch of educators' assumption that they *have* met the expectations of the MBA programme, with the students' assumption that educators *can* meet their expectations and, finally, with the employers' assumption that educators *have not* and most probably *cannot* meet the expectations. It appears that what an MBA programme *can* ultimately (or, at most, is to enhance the performance of graduates to *do* a better job. To some of the employer respondents, this seemingly 'leavening' effect to the organisation appears to be *satisficing* as they admit that 'an MBA can never be all things to all people' and that 'even a born manager will be that much better with a proper education when a skilled workforce is a major strategic

weapon of the organisation'. As to the student/graduate respondents, when asked whether it is still worth it if an MBA is not likely to come with the kind of guarantee perceived by them, the following comments of a graduate reflects their response:

The MBA may well look worse off if it can't guarantee me a high-paying job, but I am still better off. In an increasingly competitive job market, everything counts. The person with the MBA has a perceived status, and value to a company, whether the employers like to think so or not. The person is still likely to have an advantage over the person who lacks one, even if the degree isn't the first-class ticket it once seemed to be.

(S/G:10)

Would this motivation alone ensure the 'correct' students (of potentially realistic expectations) attending the MBA?

HOW EFFECTIVELY TAUGHT IS THE MBA PROGRAMME?

The Academics In Business Schools

In Australia, Karpin's (1995) wide-ranging study on leadership and management skills reports that academics in business schools are allowed to teach without formally developing skills in the area and there is little evidence of systematic performance assessment of academics in these schools. Some schools attempt to develop limited systems, usually based on student feedback. The study also reports that the development of academics is generally focused on doctoral studies, attendance at conferences and sometimes research and publication. There is little evidence of private and public sector placement of academics as part of professional development and continuing education. With this general background and the reported dissatisfaction with the MBA programmes in the literature, it is important that this research explores the effectiveness, or otherwise, of the teaching of the MBA educators before assessing its impact on the effectiveness of the programmes.

All three Deans of the schools emphasised that faculty members have been selected for the MBA programmes because of excellence in teaching and research, each member having academic qualifications, professional experience and research interests. Demographic details of the educator respondents (Figure 4.1 of Chapter 4) show that 80% of them hold doctoral degrees and 56% of them are senior academics holding professorial status. Each educator interviewed emphasised active involvement in research and publication in the areas related to the teaching of the

MBA. Their research interests are wide-ranging. Very little data have been collected of the managerial experience of these educators, as the majority of them appear to emphasise the importance of their consultancy experience which provides them with interaction with senior management in the business, public or military communities. In these experiences, they usually perform as change agents, or they design and conduct management and professional development programmes to client organisations. The 20% of educators without the doctoral degree indicate their current pursuit of the degree as professional development and enhancement of teaching quality. These demographic details suggest that the educators aspire to generate and disseminate innovative ideas for the practising manager.

What Qualifies An MBA Educator?

When indicating their perceptions about what qualifies an educator to teach the MBA, respondents covered the following dimensions of teaching quality. They stressed that MBA educators should

- have managerial experience;
- have worked with, or taught, managers in countries of their interest,
- have worked in a number of Asian countries;
- have conducted original research in the subjects they teach; and
- be used to teaching senior managers.

Respondents also rated the quality of teaching in the MBA programmes on the scale of 1 to 10. Table 6.4 shows their perceived ratings. These ratings reflect evidence of low-medium standards of teaching being tolerated in the business schools, and employers in particular are of this opinion.

Table 6.4 Perceived Ratings Of MBA Teaching

Rating Scale: 1 to 10 (low to high)

EDUCATORS	6.2
EMPLOYERS	5.4
STUDENTS/GRADUATES	7.3

.....

A wide range of reasons was given by the respondents for their ratings on the educators' teaching – from the inability to explain concepts clearly, to lack of preparation for sessions, teaching in the abstract, uninteresting subject matter, rigid approaches used in teaching and analysis, inability to demonstrate relevance of the subject to the real world or provide feedback on assignments or other prescribed

work, being unavailable for consultation, and narrowly trained educators who are specialists rather than experienced managers or leaders. In addition, student/graduate respondents often expressed difficulties and pressures about studying the MBA programme. Whether these difficulties are partly due to the inadequacies in teaching is not clear from the data. However, a student pointed out that:

They [educators] deliberately test us at times by making sure that if we are doing three subjects in one semester, that we would have major presentations in all three subjects in the same week just to see whether we could get our reports and presentations all done. Sometimes these are on the same night, just to see that we could manage our time, so we finish all the reports on time and at the right time, knowing that they are overlapping.

(S/G:12)

Experiences Expected Of MBA Students

Respondents expect students to gain a series of experiences from an MBA programme, as summarised in Figure 6.4. The respondents suggested that these experiences are common to all the subject areas of the MBA.

Figure 6.4 Perceived Student Experiences Expected In An MBA Programme

- *Increase capability in the theoretical and practical side of business
- *Learn a creative approach to solutions of business and managerial problems
- *Develop ability to work with a team or in a group
- *Gain an understanding of generalist management
- *Develop ability to research complex organisation problems
- *Learn a flexible approach to management
- *Improve ability to think critically
- *Learn an in-depth approach to business
- *Improve analytical skills for solving management problems
- *Learn how to obtain relevant information from business literature and various sources
- *Improve grounding in workplace interpersonal skills
- *Improve skills in written communication
- *Gain some idea of the business context of managerial work
- *Improve skills in oral communication
- *Improve ability to think in abstract terms
- *Improve ability to learn independently
- *Improve ability to solve new problems in my work by using basic managerial principles and concepts

.....

The experiences reflect the employers' and students/graduates' needs and expectations of MBA teaching and the educators' objectives of their own teaching in the programme. Data reveal that the more common *teaching objectives of the educators* appear to be:

- developing an awareness of the theories of business and management
- developing an understanding of the techniques and principles associated with senior management;
- developing a broad view of the role a generalist manager may have in industry and society; or
- improving understanding of the phases of managerial work.

On the other hand, the more common *needs and expectations of the employers and students/graduates* appear to be:

- increased awareness of the skills necessary for managers;
- better understanding of the variety of approaches to management;
- improved ability to successfully interact with people, individuals and in groups; or
- increased awareness of the social basis of management.

These objectives and needs appear to be mismatched, some of the employers stressing that this might well be the result of business schools having employed educators incapable of teaching the 'true' managerial skills. It also appears that the teaching objectives of the educator respondents are broadly based, which is in contrast to the more focused and 'deep' learning (Ramsden:1992) expected by employer and student/graduate respondents. In some cases, these expectations also include the development of intuition about organisation realities or the learning of better written communication skills

Valued Educator Practices

Respondents also indicated the teaching attributes and practices of educators they would value in an MBA programme. Among these are:

- educator's knowledge of the subject;
- preparation and organisation in teaching;
- use of practical examples and relevance;
- both small and large group teaching;
- lectures presented at a pace such that the students have time to comfortably take notes and listen;
- useful handouts; or

- attempts by the educator to reduce the time spent transmitting content to increase the time available for student activities.

Here, the respondents appear to be in consensus, including those educator respondents who may not have adopted one or more of these practices.

The above observations about MBA teaching suggests that many of the MBA educators have failed to adopt the 'deep' teaching/learning approaches and the quality of their teaching has thus been greatly reduced as a consequence of their seemingly 'surface' approach. However, there was a smaller number of conscientious educators among the respondents whose views reflected their constant efforts in enhancing teaching quality. Those educators are conscious of 'teaching an MBA class' which demands a much greater ability to absorb and respond to student feedback – a reason why many of the MBA classes are conducted in discussion format. This way of constantly receiving feedback enables staff to more effectively impart the knowledge, enthuse the students and ensure their understanding of key concepts.

Some of them, in their efforts to blend theory with real-life examples, teach the MBA subjects in 'acting' terms and 'perform' to the students – 'picking up the lines all the time', 'being provocative, challenging, witty', 'preparing lectures with jokes, anecdotes and highly personal, sometimes embarrassing, stories about yourself'. They use different teaching methods – from syndicate work, case studies, games, videos, special speakers, exercises, verbal arguments, computer simulations, readings/texts/handouts, plant trips, assessment instruments, individual and group assignments/evaluations, to speech coaches, writing coaches, assigned mentoring system, and consulting projects which aim at integrating students' learning experience and enabling them to assume the role of advisers to top management of client companies. Usually their assessment of an MBA programme is based on an evaluation of classroom contributions, written assignments, verbal presentations, informal tests and examinations.

These dedicated educators also encourage student syndicates to decide on their own learning focus, such as in the approach adopted by the following educator:

Groups decide what they want to do and I would go away and prepare a book of reading, so that every student will have something to read for each week, and they are expected to interrogate the group which does the presentation. The idea is to bring students together to learn from each other rather than relying on the teacher all the time. Starting from the first year with lots of input from me, my input becomes less and less. I actually become more of a facilitator towards the end of the programme.

(Ed:18)

They regard this interactive and facilitating approach as suitable for graduate level learning, allowing students 'much more buoyancy and much more thinking through the issues'. They stress, however, that maintaining similar types of approaches throughout semesters, pacing themselves, maintaining students' interest and 'constantly bringing students along towards a conclusion' is extremely difficult. Those who have succeeded regard themselves as 'very special people'.

This small group of educator respondents found the employers' perception of MBA teaching as 'surface' or 'superficial' offensive. They believe that the development of analytical skills and judgement should be the aim of graduate business education, as this type of teaching enables students to reach decisions for themselves. It appears that written assignments play a crucial role in developing analytical skills. For example, students analyse and evaluate selected business and management articles, with logical processes of argument and insight and their reports are rigorously marked by the educator. This type of full or short report is a regular class exercise, after which syndicates are formed to analyse, then encapsulate the key ideas and produce executive reports which provide their consensus views. Students select their own articles, nominate their syndicates and assign a spokesperson to give verbal report of their views which are thrown open to questions from the floor. Evaluation is also based on the peer assessment of the answers to the questions. An educator emphasises the merits of this teaching process as follows:

At the end of the day it has to be what they believe. I certainly don't impose my views on them. I either attempt to summarise what I see as the issues or I tell them my view because, I tell them, I am entitled to my view just as they are entitled to theirs.

(Ed: 05)

This apparently rigorous training helps explain the pressure experienced by the MBA students, indicated earlier in this Chapter (page 173). It perhaps also partly explains the graduates' sense of pride about their MBA experience of having survived such pressures. Most important, through this analytical process, students gain different views and the ability to make sound decisions for themselves. The following statement comes from a graduate who was particularly appreciative of the process:

It gives you the opportunity to improve your skills rather than teaching you any so-called knowledge. It makes you think, not so narrow minded, lateral, and encourages us to think for ourselves.

You think outside your circle, just like reading the newspaper – don't believe everything you read. I have learned to look at things more broadly.

(S/G:01)

Other student respondents emphasised that this process also develops their learning skills and interpersonal skills as they rotate among syndicates. It helps them to see that the quality of verbal and written communication is important, promotes teamwork and cultivates in them a sense of responsibility and self-confidence.

Perhaps what really sets these educators apart from their counterparts is their enthusiasm for teaching and their genuine interest in their students. These educators also claim that they spend a great amount of time preparing for the MBA classes and they expect their students to do the same. One of the three Deans of the schools indicated that his school has been engaging in active efforts to nurture and reward good teaching. Examples of these efforts are teaching workshops, mid-course evaluations, merit-pay awards, student quality circles which offer weekly feedback to lecturers and being active and responsive to student requests. Also planned are the industry/managerial experience programmes for educators, launching of systematic evaluations, detailing teaching requirements for recruitment and tenure decisions, de-emphasising individual competition and cultivating a more co-operative and integrative learning environment, and faculty mentoring system where new academics are assigned senior faculty mentors and co-teach their first courses.

It appears that the practices and intentions of this school may well be the beginning of a re-examination of the institutional cultures of the business schools and their educators and, as a consequence, graduate management education

Research Vs Teaching

Employer respondents in particular are of the opinion that, when compared with research, teaching has not been given priority by the MBA educators. They quoted a variety of examples of business schools putting far greater value on scholarly research than teaching ability, of mediocre teachers gaining promotions and tenure only because they are prolific researchers, of educators known for research on highly general and abstract knowledge or analytical modelling which are impractical to teaching or business, of the need to achieve fame and make money through publications, competitive research and consultancies, of promoting research as the right side of the binary line between teaching and research, and of a lack of interest or ability by staff to provide MBA students with the quality teaching they

need. None of the educator respondents attempted to refute these criticisms. Their responses focussed on the need for rigorous research which is the raw material of superior teaching, and that their research examines the associated issues of teaching, business or management – a chief way to also reach out to the needs of employers and students.

Once again, the data indicate that the views of these three groups of stakeholders, more often than not, form a circle of anxiety-producing arguments as each attempts to redefine the changes needed for the MBA education. Furthermore, the pursuit of change appears to isolate them from one another as they define the advocates and the deviants. The change being sought is one that must meet students' needs and expectations and also satisfy both the academic and the business communities – a challenge that seems as problematic as it was several decades ago.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has analysed the perceptions of the respondents regarding the content, structures, students and teachers of the current MBA programmes offered in Australian universities. In the process, the practices of the business schools and the assumptions of the educators, employers and students/graduates about these practices and their intentions, have been explored. These assumptions also reflect the values, needs and expectations of the three constituent groups of MBA education.

There appears to be more conflict than consensus, if not ambiguities between the respondents about the educational issues of current MBA programmes. There are different expectations about the most appropriate content of an MBA curriculum. Design of structures is perceived as meeting the student's need rather than the employer's need. Student motivation for the MBA qualification is regarded as unrealistic by the employers. Students and employers call for better quality of teaching.