

## **GRADUATES' VIEWS ON THE OUTCOME AND QUALITY OF MBA PROGRAMMES**

### **ABSTRACT**

The primary purpose of this paper is to report on the opinions and perceptions of 633 MBA graduates of the quality and standing of South African MBA programmes. The findings presented in this paper form part of a more comprehensive study on the status and nature of the MBA programme in South Africa. This paper reports on the following research objectives:

- To assess specific outcomes of the MBA programmes offered by South African business schools.
- To gauge the quality of the MBA programmes of South African business schools, based on graduates' perceptions.
- To extract factors relating to the MBA programme outcomes; and MBA programme quality.
- To elicit the opinions of graduates on the future development of the MBA programme in South Africa.

To give effect to the research objectives, programs 1D, 2D, and 4F of the BMDP statistical package were used to calculate descriptive statistics, while the BMDP statistical package 4M was used for a factor analysis and for verifying the inter-item reliability of the research instrument. The main findings pertain to the MBA graduates' perceptions of the outcome and quality of the MBA programme as well as the most prominent findings in respect of the open question on the future development of South African MBA programmes, from the perspective of graduates.

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## **1 INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM DEFINITION**

The shortage of know-how and skills of high level human resources in South Africa is well documented (Human, 1989; Hofmeyr, 1990; NMC, 1992:28; Mbeki, 1996; NPI, 1997; Beeld, 1998; Yadavalli, 1998: 8). It is a well-known fact that South Africa's economic growth rate, productivity and prosperity are being jeopardised by the shortage of properly qualified high level human resources.

Business schools play a vital role in supplying high level human resources, particularly through the flag-ship MBA programmes (Fischgrund, 1983; Anderson & Chan, 1992: 25; Neelankavil, 1994:41; Bickerstaffe, 1996:70).

A recent worldwide development has been the proliferation in MBA programme content, which is sometimes perceived as having had a negative effect on the appropriateness, and overall quality of the programme. Given the changes in the fast-paced business environment, the question arises whether MBA programmes still meet the needs of business practice (Mittner, 1998: 12; Tucker, 1995a: 36).

Against the background of the continued proliferation of MBA courses and the increasing criticism of the relevance of these programmes (Pesulima, 1990: 13-22; Neelankavil, 1994: 39; Tucker, 1995b: 12; Byrne, 1997: 6; Beezhold, 1998: 21; Business Day, 1998; Hugo, 1998: 16; Oosthuizen, Köster & De la Rey, 1998: 6-10; Yucelt, 1998: 27), extensive research was done on the status and nature of South African MBA programmes (Louw, 1999). This paper will, however, only report on some of the facets of the comprehensive project, more specifically on the opinions and perceptions of MBA graduate respondents of the quality and standing of South African MBA programmes.

## **2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH: A SUCCINCT OVERVIEW**

International and national data searches of existing MBA programmes have revealed that previous research focused primarily on aspects such as:

- Psychological factors: the influence of the MBA degree on the graduate and his/her immediate family and gender issues, etc. (De la Rey, 1977; Louis, 1978; Geromel, 1993).
- Management education and assessment of training needs (Beyers, 1977; Van Schalkwyk, 1982; Slabbert, 1987; Pesulima, 1990; Alberts, 1994).
- Business schools' strategic management of change, and strategic marketing (Lazarow, 1979; Williams, 1993; Malan, 1994).
- Best business school ranking and ratings (Bickerstaffe, 1996; Byrne, 1997; PMR, 1997).

Although previous research on aspects such as the ranking of business schools could be identified, no trace of research on the relative importance of core courses and management skills and traits, and quality aspects pertaining to the MBA degree in South Africa could be found.

## **3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

As stated, this paper focuses on a specific section of the overall research objectives of a more comprehensive research project. With reference to the focus of this paper, the following objectives are paramount:

- To assess specific outcomes of the MBA programmes offered by South African business schools.
- To gauge the quality of the MBA programmes of South African business schools, based on graduates' perceptions.
- To extract factors relating to the:
  - MBA programme outcomes; and
  - MBA programme quality.
- To elicit the opinions of MBA graduates (in an open question) on the future development of the MBA programme in South Africa.

With the problem definition and research objectives as background, a brief overview of the research design and methodology is presented, followed by a discussion of the empirical findings.

## **4 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1 SAMPLE SIZE AND EXTENT OF RESPONSE**

In canvassing the perceptions and opinions of graduates of MBA programme quality, use was made of the Human Sciences Research Council's (Pretoria, South Africa) register of MBA graduates to draw up a list of students who graduated from business schools at South African universities in the period 1985 to 1995. Questionnaires were subsequently mailed to the total population of 3 430 MBA graduates on the address list who were still resident in South Africa. A total of 633 usable questionnaires were received and used in the analysis. Eliminating the unusable questionnaires (that were marked "address unknown" or were incomplete), a response rate of 19.3 per cent was achieved. No follow-up exercise was necessary, as the number of responses (N = 633) was considered satisfactory for statistical analysis and representative of the population strata. In addition to the information supplied in the questionnaires,

numerous opinions, personal experiences, views and recommendations with regard to the future development of MBA programmes in South Africa were also received from these respondents.

#### **4.2 STRUCTURE OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE, DATA ANALYSIS AND TESTS OF INTERNAL RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY**

A postal questionnaire consisting of five sections was used as a research instrument. Section A gauged the relative importance graduates allocated to subject disciplines (core courses) and their perception of the quality of tuition received. Section B assessed the relative importance of skills and traits essential to successful job performance, as well as the extent to which tuition actually developed these abilities. Section C canvassed the opinions of respondents on the various outcomes of the MBA programme, while Section D dealt with the quality of the MBA programme, including an open question on the future development of the MBA programme in South Africa. Section E covered respondents' biographical information. As stated in the Introduction, the focus of this paper will be on Sections C, D and E of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire contained carefully phrased statements and/or questions to which the respondents had to respond by means of a continuous Likert five-point scale. The research instrument was subjected to testing in a pilot study consisting of 30 MBA graduate respondents. In addition to the pilot study, sections of both the research instruments had been tested in previous research (Pesulima, 1990; Bosch, Radder, Tait & Venter, 1994; Byrne, 1997).

To give effect to the research objectives, programs 1D, 2D and 4F of the BMDP statistical package (Frane, Jennrich & Sampson, 1990) were used to calculate descriptive statistics such as mean values, standard deviations

and frequency distributions, as shown in Tables 1 and 3. Rankings were determined by means of summary statistics.

All the items in the research instrument were subjected to a factor analysis procedure to assess the discriminant validity of the research instrument. Factor analyses were performed on the data with the objective of identifying communalities with regard to MBA programme outcomes and MBA programme quality aspects.

To verify the consistency of the inter-item reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients were calculated by using the statistical package BMDP 4M (Frane *et al.*, 1990). The following Cronbach alpha coefficients were found: outcomes of the MBA programme: 0.8011; and the quality of the MBA programme: 0.9035. The reliability of the research instrument can therefore be regarded as high, because the coefficients are larger than 0.80 (Sekaran, 1992: 174, 284, 287).

## **5 MAIN FINDINGS**

### **5.1 BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION OF RESPONDENTS**

For the sake of brevity, biographical information on the respondents will not be presented in table form. The most pertinent findings can be summarised as follows:

- Most of the respondents (67 per cent or N = 419) graduated in the period 1990 to 1995, representing contemporary opinions and viewpoints.
- Half of the respondents (50,2 per cent or N = 317) possessed a science or medical qualification prior to enrolling for their MBA degree, while

those from a commercial background represent 30 per cent (N = 189) of the respondents.

- A substantial number of respondents were either self-employed in their own businesses (N = 170 or 27 per cent) or employed by firms in the private sector (N = 311 or 49,4 per cent), representing a total employment of 76 per cent in the private sector.
- With regard to professional position held, 27,7 per cent (N = 175) of the respondents indicated that they were managing directors (including directors of business schools). Top executives in operations and production management represented 15,5 per cent (N = 98) of the respondents, financial managers denoted 11,4 per cent (N = 72) while marketing and sales executives represented 8,4 per cent (N = 53) of the respondents.
- As many as 44 per cent (N = 279) of the respondents had followed the distance/modular MBA programme and 42,6 per cent (N = 269) had completed their degree on a part-time basis.
- On average the number of years of business experience prior to enrolling was nine years, while the mean total years of business experience was 17 years.

## **5.2 OUTCOME OF THE MBA PROGRAMME**

As explained, the respondents were invited to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with statements regarding the MBA tuition they had received. Their responses are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Outcome of the MBA programme (N = 633)

The MBA programme actually did	Ranking	Rating %	Mean	Standard deviation
• contribute to an increase in my knowledge	1	90.25	4.61	0.57
• enhance my insight and comprehension of the business world	2	85.50	4.42	0.71
• give me the ability to analyse study material and identify its elements and to integrate them into a whole	3	72.50	3.90	0.83
• develop my ability to identify the relationship between elements, concepts and theories and to integrate them into a new logical whole	4	72.50	3.90	0.84
• provide me with an opportunity for the practical application of material learnt	5	68.25	3.73	0.97
• develop my ability to assess learning material in terms of specific criteria, i.e. the ability to judge logical consistency of study material or to determine the pros and cons of a theory	6	67.50	3.70	0.88

It is significant to note (Table 1) that respondents conceded that the MBA tuition had indeed contributed to an increase in their knowledge, and enhanced their insight in and comprehension of the business world (agreement rating of 85.50 per cent and more). Most respondents confirmed that the MBA programmes had succeeded in developing the ability to analyse study material and integrate the different elements thereof into a whole and to identify the relationship between elements, concepts and theories and to integrate these into a whole, supporting the *Development of Systems or Holistic Thinking* (ranked third and fourth). The pragmatic nature of the MBA course content is reflected in the last statement, which dealt with the ability to assess learning material in terms of specific criteria or to determine the pros and cons of a theory.

### 5.2.1 Factor analysis of the MBA programme outcomes

A factor analysis was undertaken for the six MBA programme outcomes. Two factors were identified. Only one iteration was required, and all the items were retained. The sorted rotated factor matrix for the outcome of the

MBA programme appears in Table 2. The total variance explained by the two groups of factors is 68.0 per cent. Both Cronbach alpha coefficients are equal to and greater than 0.70, confirming the reliability of the factors.

**Table 2:** A sorted rotated factor matrix for the outcome of the MBA programme

The MBA programme actually did	Factor 1	Factor 2
Develop my ability to identify the relationship between elements, concepts and theories and to integrate them into a new logical whole	0.847	
Develop my ability to assess learning material in terms of specific criteria, i.e. the ability to judge logical consistency of study material or to determine the pros and cons of a theory	0.844	
Give me the ability to analyse study material and identify its elements and to integrate them into a whole	0.830	
Provide me with an opportunity for the practical application of material learnt	0.543	
Contribute to an increase in my knowledge		0.899
Enhance my insight and comprehension of the business world		0.827
Variance explained	3.027	1.050
Percent of total variance explained	50.5%	17.5%
Total % variance explained = 68.0%		
Cronbach's alpha	0.80	0.70

Factor 1 groups together the outcomes of holistic thinking and practical application of material learnt, while factor 2 groups together the outcomes of increase in knowledge and enhancement of comprehension. The high inter-correlation between the items in Factor 1 implies that the MBA programme succeeded in developing the ability to identify the relationships between elements, concepts and theories and to integrate them into a new logical whole, while simultaneously providing the opportunity for the practical application of material learnt. This is in agreement with the concept that MBA education is career-orientated.

### 5.3 QUALITY OF THE MBA PROGRAMME

Based on an in-depth analysis of secondary sources pertaining to the quality of MBA programmes, 31 questions on programme quality were constructed (Pesulima, 1990: 103-115; Byrne, 1997: 30-44). These questions have a direct bearing on and relate to the quality of MBA programmes. Using the Likert five-point scale, respondents were requested to indicate their assessment of each statement (1 = poor or never; 5 = outstanding or always), rating their respective MBA schools according to a specific item.

Relative importance ratings are reflected in Table 3. For the sake of consistency and interpretation, the scores for items ranked 20th, 23rd, 24th, 26th and 28th were all reversed before their ratings were calculated. This was necessary, as the questions relating to these items were all negatively phrased, i.e. a high score implies a low rating. The mapping used for these items was therefore 1 = 100 per cent; 3 = 50 per cent; and 5 = 0 per cent. The average scores were calculated using the original scores without reversing them.

A careful analysis of Table 3 will either strengthen or refute certain perceptions of MBA programmes, for example:

- Despite the proliferation of MBA degree structures, the first and second rated items are noteworthy because of the strong rationale they represent for undertaking an MBA.

**Table 3: Relative quality of the MBA programme (N = 633)**

Ranking	Programme quality items	Rating %	Mean	Standard deviation
1	Do you believe your MBA was worth its cost in time, tuition and lost earnings?	80.00	4.20	0.85
2	Would you urge your friends or colleagues to take the same MBA programme at the Business School?	79.25	4.17	0.89
3	Did the syndicate learning method enhance your knowledge and insight as required by business practice?	73.50	3.94	0.89
4	Did the calibre of your classmates enhance the learning process?	73.00	3.92	0.88
5	To what extent did the case study method succeed in transferring knowledge and insight as required by the business practice?	71.75	3.87	0.83
6	How would you judge the Business School's performance in providing you with numerous ways of thinking or approaching problems that will serve you well over the long run?	70.50	3.82	0.85
7	How current was the material/research presented in class for discussion and review?	70.50	3.82	0.86
8	To what extent did your MBA experience fulfil your expectations of what a good programme should be?	70.00	3.80	0.76
9	Were the lecturing staff available for informal discussion when classes were not in session?	70.00	3.80	0.96
10	How would you rate the quality of the lecturing in core courses?	69.75	3.79	0.65
11	How would you rate the quality of guest lecturers (including visiting professors)?	69.25	3.77	0.94
12	Overall, how do you rate the quality of the lecturers compared with others you have had in the past?	69.00	3.76	0.74
13	How would you rate the quality of lecturing in elective courses?	68.75	3.75	0.78
14	Were your lecturers at the leading edge of knowledge in their fields?	68.00	3.72	0.79
15	To what extent were analytical skills stressed in the curriculum?	67.75	3.71	0.79
16	How would you appraise the Business School's performance in preparing you for a successful career in business?	67.75	3.71	0.83
17	How would you assess the relevance of the technical report (treatise) within the total framework of the MBA programme?	64.00	3.56	1.11
18	To what extent were lecturers aware of the material content other departmental members would cover?	63.75	3.55	0.88
19	Did you receive practical information during the programme that was usable in your first job?	63.75	3.55	0.92
20*	Do you believe the lecturers compromised teaching in order to pursue their own research?	63.00	2.48	1.01
21	To what extent was the coursework integrated as opposed to being taught as a cluster of loosely-related topics?	62.75	3.51	0.93
22	How would you judge the responsiveness of the lecturers and administration to students' concerns and opinions?	60.50	3.42	0.96
23*	Is the MBA course content too theoretical in nature?	59.00	2.64	0.97
24*	Do you feel your classmates emphasised individual achievement at the expense of teamwork?	59.00	2.64	0.99
25	How would you assess the responsiveness of the Business School in meeting the demand for popular electives?	58.50	3.34	0.93
26*	Was the amount of assigned work and reading so excessive that it impeded learning?	57.75	2.69	1.02
27	How would you judge the opportunities given to you - either in class or in extracurricular activities - to nurture and improve your skills in leading others?	56.25	3.25	1.02
28*	Is the value of the MBA qualification overemphasised?	55.50	2.78	1.23
29	To what extent were interpersonal skills stressed in the curriculum?	55.00	3.20	0.90
30	As a result of the programme, how would you judge your ability to deal with computers and other analytical tools that affect your ability to manage?	53.00	3.12	1.03
31	How would you judge the Business School's network and connections that can help you throughout your career?	45.25	2.81	1.13

\* Items reversed, i.e. score 5 = 0%, 4 = 25%, 3 = 50%, 2 = 75%, 1 = 100%.

- Equally noteworthy are the high relative support ratings for the items ranked third to sixth. These ratings highlight the importance of learning from one another; the enhancement and transfer of knowledge and insight, as required in business practice; the calibre of classmates; and the use of the syndicate method of learning and of case studies. These strategies enhance the learning process by providing the graduate with numerous ways of considering or approaching problems. In addition, learning from one another in the context of diversity is essential to the development and enhancement of leadership and management competencies.
- One of the main objectives of an MBA programme is to prepare graduates for a successful career in business. A support rating of 67.7 per cent was received on the appraisal of business schools in this regard (ranked sixteenth).
- No support could be found for the assertion that lecturers compromise teaching in order to pursue their own research (ranked twentieth). As can be seen from Table 3, the respondents believed the contrary to be true, as is evident from the support rating of 63.0 per cent.
- Respondents did not consider that the value of an MBA qualification was overemphasised. In this regard, a support rating of 55.5 per cent was obtained.
- Respondents believed that interpersonal skills should receive more emphasis in the curriculum, as is evident from their response to the relevant question (support rating of only 55.0 per cent).

- The statement that business schools' networks and connections could assist graduates in their careers was ranked last, with a support rating of 45.2 per cent.

### 5.3.1 Factor analysis of MBA programme quality

The responses to the question about the relative quality of the MBA programme was subjected to a factor analysis, applying the same procedure as previously described. After a number of iterations to eliminate undesirable items, 18 of the original 31 items loaded on five factors. Three of these five factors have acceptable Cronbach alpha coefficients, whilst the 0.51 and 0.52 obtained for factors four and five can be regarded as adequate, considering that these factors will only be used in this study and are not intended to be used in subsequent studies.

On closer inspection, the factor groupings for the quality of the MBA programme in Table 4 revealed the following:

- Factor 1 brings together six items relating to the value of the MBA programme and the personal expectations of graduates.
- Four items concerning coursework material are included in the Factor 2 grouping.
- Three items regarding the quality of lecturers are assembled in Factor 3.
- Factor 4 relates to three items pertaining to learning methods.
- Factor 5 brings together two interpersonal and leadership skill items.

From the above it seems that, based on the intercorrelation between the items, a realistic inter-item grouping of outcomes was achieved.

**Table 4:** A sorted rotated factor matrix for the quality of the MBA programme

Programme quality items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
Is the value of the MBA qualification overemphasised?	0.760				
Do you believe your MBA was worth its cost in time, tuition and lost earnings?	0.698				
To what extent did your MBA experience fulfil your expectations of what a good programme should be?	0.678				
Would you urge your friends or colleagues to take the same MBA programme at the Business School?	0.605				
How would you judge the Business School's performance in providing you with numerous ways of thinking or approaching problems that will serve you well over the long run?	0.483				
Did you receive practical information during the programme that was usable in your first job?	0.394				
To what extent were lecturers aware of the material content other departmental members would cover?		0.906			
To what extent was the coursework integrated as opposed to being taught as a cluster of loosely-related topics?		0.725			
Were the lecturing staff available for informal discussion when classes were not in session?		0.678			
How current was the material/research presented in class for discussion and review?		0.456			
How would you rate the quality of guest lecturers (including visiting professors)?			0.738		
How would you rate the quality of lecturing in elective courses?			0.714		
Overall, how do you rate the quality of the lecturers compared with others you have had in the past?			0.624		
Did the calibre of your classmates enhance the learning process?				0.761	
Did the syndicate learning method enhance your knowledge and insight as required by business practice?				0.612	
How would you assess the relevance of the technical report (treatise) within the total framework of the MBA programme?				0.535	
To what extent were interpersonal skills stressed in the curriculum?					0.808
How would you judge the opportunities given to you – either in class or in extracurricular activities - to nurture and improve your skills in leading others?					0.790
Variance explained	5.437	1.415	1.167	1.156	1.010
Percent of total variance explained	30.2%	7.9%	6.5%	6.4%	5.6%
Total % variance explained = 56.6%					
Cronbach's alpha	0.79	0.73	0.65	0.51	0.52

#### 5.4 FINDINGS ON THE OPEN QUESTION: FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN MBA PROGRAMME

Enthusiastic responses were obtained from the respondents on the open question inviting recommendations for the future development of the MBA programme in South Africa. Altogether 420 respondents offered their opinions, which can be summarised as follows:

- The MBA courses should incorporate a much larger **practical component**, thereby providing the opportunity for more experiential and action learning (learning by doing) (N = 202, 48.1 per cent) Examples include: South African case studies, including cases on small/medium-sized enterprises and the service industry; guest lecturers who are involved in business practice; assignments in collaboration with a firm; visitations to firms; and presentations to and assessment by managers in business practice. The focus should thus be on practical, outcomes-based learning.
- **The prevention of the proliferation** of the MBA programmes in South Africa was identified as a crucial issue. While the needs of business practice should be met, the business schools should strive to keep the MBA degree unique and of a high standard. There should be no compromise in admission requirements, content and passing standards (N = 87; 20.7 per cent).
- Respondents expressed a strong preference that it be set as an admission requirement to the MBA programme that **prospective students possess a minimum of at least three to five years' of work experience**. This would facilitate meaningful contribution in syndicate work and benefit those involved.

- There seemed to be an urgent need for some form of an **update programme** or refresher course in terms of which MBA graduandi could be exposed, at a later stage, to contemporary management issues. The concept of life-long learning will thus be reinforced.
- The courses should be **contextual, relevant and current**. They should therefore be continuously updated to reflect changes in both the global business world and the national environment.
- More emphasis should be placed on ***Small Business Management and Entrepreneurship*** and less on the management of corporate enterprises. The inclusion of *Small Business Management and Entrepreneurship* courses are considered as vital for future MBA programmes in South Africa.
- The accent should be on developing **more qualitatively-orientated and less quantitatively-orientated skills**. The most prevalent qualitatively-orientated or "soft" skills include: *Entrepreneurial Skills; Leadership Skills* (including lateral thinking skills such as *Creativity, Holistic Thinking and Systems Thinking*); *Team-building Skills*; and *Interpersonal Skills*. *Public Speaking and Presentation Skills* were also emphasised as essential.
- While the respondents highlighted the need for **more specialisation and less generalisation, a holistic approach** illustrating the integration of all subject disciplines was also regarded as critical to a balanced overall development.

- Increased **networking with international business schools** in terms of exchange of students and lecturers as well as discussion of programme content was also deemed essential.
- It was suggested that **lecturers should act as facilitators and have the relevant practical experience**. **International** lecturers should also be invited as guest speakers.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

From the above analyses, the following conclusions seem evident:

### 6.1 **OUTCOME OF THE MBA PROGRAMME**

- Strong support was expressed for the outcomes of the MBA programme, particularly with reference to an increase in graduates' knowledge.
- It was possible to group the MBA programme outcomes by means of a factor analysis into two categories, namely holistic thinking and the practical application of material learnt; and an increase in knowledge and enhancement of comprehension.

### 6.2 **QUALITY OF THE MBA PROGRAMME**

- No support could be found for the assertion that the MBA was a waste of time and money and that the value of the MBA qualification was overemphasised.
- The benefits of the syndicate method of learning, the use of case studies and learning from one another came to the fore.

- No support could be found for the assertion that lecturers compromised teaching in order to pursue their own research.

### **6.3 FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN MBA PROGRAMME**

- Strong support for the incorporation of a greater practical component into the course content as well as the prevention of the proliferation of the MBA programme in South Africa was expressed in the response to the open question.
- Sentiments were expressed that courses should become more contextual, relevant and current.
- More emphasis should be placed on *Small Business Management and Entrepreneurship*.
- The accent should be on developing more qualitatively-orientated and less quantitatively-orientated skills.
- While a holistic approach, highlighting the integration of all core courses, was suggested, there was a tendency towards specialisation rather than a generalist approach.

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