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Tailoring an MBA Degree with a difference in a new University: Case: Université des Mascareignes, Mauritius

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ABSTRACT. This research paper has been prepared with a view to supporting the need to have a Master in Business Administration (MBA General) programme in a new university namely the Université des Mascareignes, Mauritius. The general perception is that MBAs are common commodity worldwide since they are provided by most tertiary institutions specialised in the business management area. The author, who is also the designer of an MBA programme for his university, undertook research in the related area to see whether there is a demand for such courses and how they could be made useful and relevant to prospective students. The research was conducted through questionnaires that initially targeted existing university students ending their undergraduate course and a few external respondents. Findings revealed that there was a strong demand for an MBA course taking into consideration that such a course should be tailor-made to the local students' needs with courses focusing on the Mauritian context. There was also the feedback from the Academic Council including that of two experts who found the course structure appropriate for Mauritius.

1. INTRODUCTION

MBA refers to Master of Business Administration. It is a globally known advanced business degree. It was initially provided by American Universities namely the Tuck School of Business and Harvard University [1]. That school served as the prototype for one of today's most important educational formats: the graduate business school conferring the MBA degree. MBA programmes are now provided both worldwide in both developed and developing countries [2]. They are offered in various formats namely full-time courses, part-time programmes, distance learning and online programmes which are now available from various learning platforms of online universities. MBA programmes are provided by universities as a normal pathway to a post-graduate qualification. Given their broad-based curriculum focusing on management, strategy and business practice, MBA programmes can be mounted by most business universities. In the case of Mauritius, MBAs are already offered by the public universities like the University of Mauritius (UOM), the University of Technology, Mauritius (UTM), the Open University of Mauritius (OUM), private universities with accredited programmes and also through online education [3].

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The purpose of this paper is to see how an MBA programme can be developed in a new university with the intention of being tailor-made for the needs of the country where it operates and the difference that it expects to make with its potential students. The institution concerned is the Université des Mascareignes (UDM) located in the island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean [4]. A very practical way of developing the MBA could be to simply find out a list of MBA courses or programmes available on the Internet and to make a 'copy-paste' exercise and adapt the programme to the needs of the local students. This obscure practice is completely disregarded in this context. The argument of this paper is to see what are the expectations of prospective students regarding an MBA programme and how can the UDM respond to their needs?

From a general point of view, MBAs refer to a generalist qualification [5]. It can be implied and understood that MBAs can be both earned by students reading for business management qualifications and those from other areas – related like finance or economics and unrelated like the social sciences and even linguistics. The concept underlies that MBAs are degrees that can be easily obtained for two valid reasons. Firstly, the programmes are based on a short-time span – usually within two years and secondly, they allow a large number of students to pass if university pass rates are scaled down to 40%.

These illustrations then come to ask the critical question as to whether MBAs are important degrees or not? For example, a degree in Economics or Statistics looks more specialised than a broad-based degree in Management. Additionally, an MBA degree is one which is relatively easily obtained by any prospective student and allows him/her to accede to a Master's degree whose importance might be underestimated. When it comes time to actually act, not plan, MBAs tend to score low [6]. This is what the perception is today and how a university aiming to introduce an MBA degree must be fully aware of.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

It would firstly useful to state the importance of MBA programmes as a vital element of tertiary educational programmes. Masters' programmes represent an advanced step in the provision of higher level tertiary education. Programmes offered up to the Bachelor's level (B.Ed, BSc, BCom) are generally known as undergraduate programmes and they are undertaken within a time period of three to four years of full-time training at a university or higher educational institutions. The next level is the Master's programme that builds on the knowledge and skills gained at the undergraduate level to proceed to a higher level known as the post-graduate programme. Such a programme is earned after one or two additional years of study.

3.1 The purpose of a post-graduate programme

A post-graduate strategy acts as a catalyst for the further development of new forms of high quality research-led education [7]. Post-graduate programmes aim at developing higher competences from existing graduates. They are advanced courses within the previous academic area of expertise – say Economics, linguistics or the Sciences – but move a level further with the intention of developing strategic competence and expertise in a particular field. The term 'Master' implies in itself a mastery of a subject area and good understanding and application of the principles learned. Since Masters' programmes were rarely achieved by the mass of students in the past, they were highly respected by scholars and members of society.

In today's environment, universities are keen to provide a range of programmes that include post-graduate courses. An institution like Université des Mascareignes aims to promote a 'one-stop shop package' like a Licence-Master-Doctorat in eight years full-time of study in a sequence of 3-2-3 years respectively [8]. This aligns the university to a French or European system of education. In this way, post-graduate programmes are much sought out by most universities and all those operating in Mauritius.

3.2 A generalised advanced business degree

The evolution of universities depends on the number of new courses that are added to their existing offer. Bachelor level programmes develop from the existing ones with concepts that stem from them. For example, a course in Entrepreneurship is a corollary of a business management programme. This can differ in the field of Information technology where new courses depend on changes that quickly affect the particular field like 'multimedia' or 'cloud computing'. Masters degrees follow the same pattern but have to be advanced in terms of knowledge, course structure, difficulty and depth. Referred to a second cycle degree, Masters programmes demonstrate knowledge and understanding that extend that of the first cycle and provide a basis or opportunity

for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often in a research context [9]. In the field of business, an MSc Finance has to deeply address new concepts like Forensic Accounting or Corporate Governance. Then comes the question of developing a Master's course in management and a possible venue is thinking of developing MBA programmes.

3.3 MBA General or Specialised

The development of MBA programmes has been quite similar to other Masters' courses offered. On the one hand, MBAs need to be specialised. The latter tend to be targeted to those who already have experience in a particular industry but are keen to gain greater insight than their current role can afford [10]. Since graduates in business management stem from various areas of expertise, MBAs tend to be specialised in areas like Human Resource Management, Finance, Banking or Marketing. These courses are named MBA with specialisation in the field concerned.

The other type of MBA is a generalised qualification known as MBA General. All areas of the business are studied and the incumbents can apply on a very large number of positions [11]. This is a broad-based programme typically based on general management courses with modules like Accountancy, Economics, Strategy, and Mathematics along with Business Ethics. These are followed by electives which are either compulsory or offered as choices for the students. They cover specialisation areas where the student has earlier obtained an undergraduate qualification.

3.4 Purpose of MBA course

Post-graduate students generally claim that an MBA is an addition to their existing undergraduate qualification and adds as a qualification that will make them better equipped with skills needed to find a well-paid job. Mature people who have already obtained an undergraduate degree since long and opt for an MBA view that such a programme can be an opportunity to gain promotion. Most admissions directors say they have no age limits when considering applicants [12]. Students applying for MBA programmes are required to have earned a bachelor's degree, though not necessarily in a business field [13]. These students consider the MBA as a general qualification to shift from their present area of expertise into the field of management and general administration that can solicit the need for an extra qualification.

3.5 The literature gap

There have been questions regarding the worth or viability of MBA programmes. Universities will rarely state the flaw of such programmes since they will prefer boasting the qualities and values of MBA courses. For instance, in 2012, 92 per cent of London Business School graduates found work just three months after graduation – mostly in the corporate sector, consulting and finance [14]. The researcher has purported the following gaps:

Firstly, little has been said on the value or credibility of MBA programmes. A question could be: To whom are MBA programmes targeted?

Secondly, the fact that MBA holders are sufficiently large in number could be an argument against the value of an MBA degree. Although big schools in the United Kingdom boast their MBAs to be AMBA accredited, little is known of how such qualifications differ in content and quality from others [15].

Thirdly, the fact that MBAs are earned fairly easier than other specialised qualifications like an MSc in Financial Markets or an MA in Anthropology raises questions about the access of such programmes to students. As an example, some universities agree that mature students with managerial experience but without a degree can be admitted to an MBA course. Entry requirements can vary dramatically as business schools give different weight to different criteria (e.g. work experience v/s education) [16]. Does this approach look logical?

These gaps have to be given consideration in the Mauritian context where a stereotype of MBA has been developed and where the strength of such a programme could be questioned. Generally, research has proved that reputation of the school was the most important factor in choosing an

MBA programme. If reputation – as distinct from rankings – does not change rapidly, then it may be regarded as a university fixed effect [17]. This might explain the need to set up excellent MBA courses locally and build up a reputation from them.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research questions were developed from the literature survey and gap. They are as follows:
 What is the purpose of an MBA General programme at Université des Mascareignes (UDM)?
 How relevant is an MBA programme to prospective students in Mauritius?
 How should the MBA programme be designed to create a difference in approach to students?
 What are the key considerations taken to ensure that the MBA programme at UDM is a suitable and effective programme?

4.1 Research Hypotheses

Research hypotheses were devised following the key research questions. They are as follows: H_1 , H_2 and H_3 are three hypotheses, H_0 refers to the Null hypothesis;

H_1 : An MBA programme is a useful post-graduate programme depending on the genuine nature of the demand for such a programme.

H_0 : An MBA programme has no usefulness or importance regardless of the genuine demand for such a programme.

H_2 : An MBA programme which is tailor-made for Mauritius will impact positively on students' existing and future needs.

H_0 : Whether an MBA programme is tailor-made or not, it will have no impact on students' existing and future needs.

H_3 : An MBA programme should comprise key concepts and expert advice to be an effective programme.

H_0 : Key concepts and expert advice will have no effect on the efficacy of an MBA programme.

4.2. Research Methodology and Sample

The design or setting up of an MBA programme at UDM firstly depended upon the need of the University Directorate to launch such a course based on their latent demand for such a programme. This was also evaluated in the form of a questionnaire asking students about their choice of a higher level programme. Apart from other specialised Masters' courses, there was a latent demand from students. 50 questionnaires were sent to students having completed or near completing a Bachelor's degree/Licence in a management related field both inside and outside the university.

Feedback was also gained from external people comprising potential students who enquired about a Masters course and responded favourably to an MBA programme offered by UDM. To support the hypothesis, there were issues raised both by members of the Academic Council of UDM and two independent overseas university experts.

5. FINDINGS

The first set of findings covered the questionnaire sent to prospective students both online and information gained onsite – in the University's premises.

A Likert-type questionnaire was provided to the sample with ten questions with 4 options to choose namely totally disagree 1, disagree 2, agree 3, and totally agree 4. Also, open-ended questions were also asked. The scores are listed below.

Table 1: Mean Values of students, Standard Deviation and Variance

No.	Question	Mean Value	Standard Deviation	Variance	Accept/Reject
1.	I value an MBA course at UDM.	3.2	0.6	0.36	Accept
2.	There is a demand for MBA at UDM.	2.92	0.75	0.56	Accept
3.	The MBA course is a suitable qualification.	2.92	0.69	0.48	Accept
4.	The MBA course should be tailor-made for UDM students.	3.27	0.53	0.29	Accept
5.	The MBA course must focus on Mauritius.	3.5	0.5	0.25	Accept
6.	The MBA should focus on immediate and future needs of graduates.	3.3	0.76	0.58	Accept
7.	The MBA must have useful courses.	3.52	0.5	0.25	Accept
8.	The MBA must comprise research and practice.	3.28	0.7	0.49	Accept
9.	The MBA must make me become a better equipped student.	3.16	0.8	0.65	Accept
10.	The MBA must be founded on expert advice to be effective.	3.32	0.74	0.56	Accept

From the scores, mean values were calculated along with standard deviation and variance. Variance is a measure of the strength of the deviation from the mean values.

5.1 Evaluation and support of hypotheses

Questions 1-3 supported the first hypothesis H_1 where an MBA programme is a useful post-graduate programme depending on the genuine nature of the demand for such a programme. Mean values were in the order 3.2, 2.92 (x 2) stating that they were stronger than mean value 2.5. Variances were fairly good except for the value of an MBA course. All responses were accepted in the hypothesis supporting the idea that there is both a demand for MBA at UDM and its usefulness as a post-graduate course.

Questions 4-6 supported the second hypothesis H_2 where a tailor-made MBA programme for Mauritius will impact positively on students' existing and future needs. Mean values were strong namely 3.27, 3.5, and 3.3 respectively. Standard deviations were strong with an average value of 0.5. The options were accepted in the hypothesis. Tailor-made MBAs are useful and will be relevant for the student's future. For example, MBA graduates at Kingston University, UK, are expected to be able to successfully tackle the issues that will affect businesses in the future, including best practice, sustainability, business ethics and corporate social responsibility [18].

Questions 7-10 addressed the third hypothesis H_3 where an MBA programme should comprise key concepts and expert advice to be an effective programme. Mean values ranged from 3.16 to 3.52 for the key questions. Standard deviations varied highly and variances in this hypothesis were stronger than others. All options were accepted in the test hypothesis meaning that the MBA should be well structured with fundamental topics and be vetted by experts.

The chart below shows the strength of each hypothesis. Given that the averaged mean is 2.5, all the three hypotheses significantly vary in a positive way from the averaged mean. Hypothesis 2, H_2 is the strongest one stating that MBA programmes will be valuable for the future needs of the students. The averaged for each hypothesis also supports the strength of the variance from the mean value. The smaller the *squared* standard deviation or variance, the stronger the hypothesis is supported. It is closely followed by the 3rd hypothesis, H_3 and the first one, H_1 .

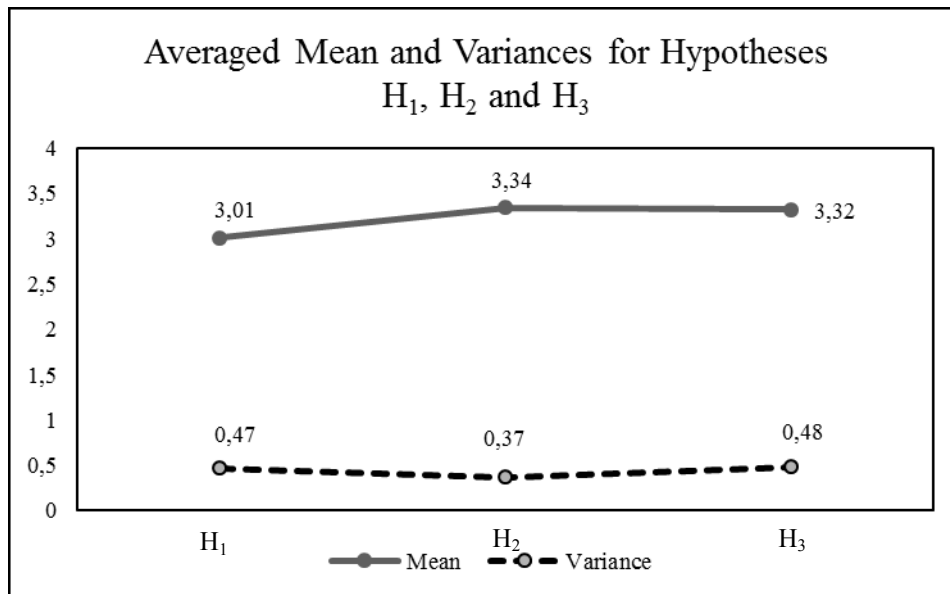


Figure 1: Averaged Mean and Variances for Hypotheses H₁, H₂ and H₃

5.2 Expert Opinion by Academic Council and External Academics

In line with working out the questionnaires that had a high response rate from existing students, the MBA programme was sent firstly to the Faculty Board of Management of the UDM which accepted the programme with certain suggestions like sources of information for research for students on economics and statistics that should be locally sourced out from authoritative organisations and the government.

The Academic Council was the next step for the approval of the MBA programme [19]. The courses were presented per semester. The debate was heated although full explanation was given regarding the techniques and methods needed to develop the course, namely with reference to Bloom's Taxonomy of evaluation of courses. There was a demand for the course to be approved either by existing British AMBA accredited institutions or external ones. British contacts were unsuccessful but there were two expert advices from other national universities that were in favour of the programme.

The feedback is reproduced below with initials of the external independent reviewers.

L.T.N-Zimbabwe Open University, April 10, 2015

“I have read through the proposed MBA Course structure and have found it covering concepts that are both local and international standards. However, bearing in mind that we are in a global village there is need to indicate the credits value of each course. In addition to lecture hours and tutorial hours you need to indicate the credits for each course. In case a student transfers to another country before completing the MBA he or she will need to carry in credits form what he or she will have completed with your university and can continue from where she left in the other university. That can only happen if your credits format are standard.”

G.I, University of Thessaly, Greece, April 29, 2015.

“I checked the programs and have found them excellent and of very high quality.”

6. CONCLUSION

The researcher came to the conclusion that an MBA programme is essential for the Université des Mascareignes since its creation in 2012 stemming from the merger of two polytechnics dating some 20 years. MBAs are generalist qualifications that are provided by most universities in the business management area and are considered as high level qualifications. The remarkable growth of the MBA – largely due to its widespread acceptance by employers and the almost assured return-on-investment of the degree – has been fairly steady during the past half century, making the degree the most successful educational product of the past 50 to 100 years [20]. The fact that there are many providers of MBAs in Mauritius made it a compulsion for the course designer to develop a programme that is tailor-made for the Mauritian context. The key consideration was that the fundamental concepts of an MBA had to be considered and applied as a broad framework namely Economics, Management, Statistics and Social Sciences coupled with electives like Marketing and Human Resource Management. In a general MBA course, all major courses had their importance and their alignment with Bloom's taxonomy namely application and higher application was essential.

The main argument in favour of the MBA at UDM was that there was a latent demand for such a course and this has been genuinely proven by the hypotheses supporting the course. There have been responses both from the Academic Council in support of external validation, and expert opinion that was very positive. It can be summed up that a tailor-made MBA General for the Université des Mascareignes has its relevance and the running and implementation of the programme should be emphasised. This is also a step in pursuing a more promising path both for the university and its prospective students.

Appendix 1: Scores of Respondents to Questions 1-10.

No.	Question	Totally disagree	Disagree	Agree	Totally Agree
1.	I value an MBA course at UDM.	0	5	30	15
2.	There is a demand for MBA at UDM.	2	10	28	10
3.	The MBA course is a suitable qualification.	2	8	32	8
4.	The MBA course should be tailor-made for UDM students.	0	2	30	15
5.	The MBA course must focus on Mauritius.	0	0	25	25
6.	The MBA should focus on immediate and future needs of graduates.	2	3	23	22
7.	The MBA must have useful courses.	0	0	24	26
8.	The MBA must comprise research and practice.	1	4	25	20
9.	The MBA must make me become a better equipped student.	2	6	22	18
10.	The MBA must be founded on expert advice to be effective.	1	5	20	23

Appendix 2: Course Structure-Full-Time and Bloom's Taxonomy Application

Year One Semester One-225 hours

Module Code	Module	Learning	Application
MBA01	Quantitative Analysis	x	x
MBA02	Perspectives of the Mauritian Economy	x	x
MBA03	Operations and Information Management	x	x
MBA04	Advanced Management Concepts		x
MBA05	Entrepreneurship		x
	% of Bloom taxonomy indices	60	100

Year One Semester Two-225 hours

Module Code	Module	Learning	Higher Application
MBA06	Sustainable Development Management		x
MBA07	Ethical leadership	x	x
MBA08	Financial Markets	x	x
MBA09	Interdisciplinary Research and Innovation		x
MBA10	Global Marketing Policy and Practice	x	x
	% of Bloom taxonomy indices	60	100

Year Two Semester One-270 hours

Module Code	Module	Higher Application	Synthesis
MBA11	Contemporary HR Practice	x	
MBA12	International Business Strategy	x	
MBA13	Dissertation		x
MBA14	Industrial Placement		x
	% of Bloom taxonomy indices	50	50

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