# Re-engineering the MBA
# Using Virtual Seminars

Drew Parker
Faculty of Business Administration
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada
*parker@sfu.ca*

Vivian Merrill
LohnLab for Teaching and Learning Technologies
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada.
*rossner@sfu.ca*

Rob McTavish
LohnLab for Teaching and Learning Technologies
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada.
*rmctavis@sfu.ca*

**Abstract:** The delivery of postgraduate education is in a significant state of change. A major participant, the MBA degree, is subject to new technological delivery options, competition, changing and increased demand, and pressure for a better product delivered in a shorter period of time. Many strategies are being developed to respond to these pressures. This paper outlines key elements of the environment, strategies in its delivery, and concludes with a discussion of a particular strategy: virtual seminars. This strategy follows a rather classic re-engineering framework of the program itself, and focuses both on modularity of the educational offering to fit several different purposes and instructional design features needed to optimize learning for different educational purposes.

## Introduction and Purpose

Postgraduate business education is under fire. Universities are subscribing to the notion of executive education, lifelong learning, and program profitability, largely as a result of decreased public funding and greater public demands for accountability. At the same time, novel technologies are starting to prove effective for the delivery of remote and part-time programs. These mounting pressures have led to reviews of program design, delivery, content, and sequence. The result has been a change that eliminates previously held notions of 'catchment' and 'turf.' Schools have started to offer unique programs that are quickly becoming global through novel delivery methods, and to reconsider the way postgraduate degrees are structured. Strategic alliances have been formed, new technologies employed, and resulting increased competition between educational institutions underscores the necessity to re-engineer existing programs to meet learning needs that may span a lifetime. The purpose of this paper is to present a single case exemplar describing how one university re-engineered its MBA program. The challenge was to design a single set of courses that would serve the

different needs of undergraduate and graduate students and working professionals by developing a single set of courses. The goal was to provide high quality and sustainable course and program options in an increasingly competitive educational market place that also reflected the criteria of excellence required by the University.

**The Need for Change**

The North American MBA market has changed dramatically in the past two years. Total enrollments have been dropping (Canadian Business), while product offerings continue to expand. The Universities of Phoenix (http://www.uophx.edu) and Athabasca (http://www.athabascau.ca) have offered completely online programs with increasing success. Queen's University (http://info.queensu.ca/index.html) and The University of Western Ontario (http://www.uwo.ca) have each built an Executive MBA with 'pods' in major cities, initially across Canada and growing global at a steady pace, serviced entirely through videoconferencing facilities. McGill University (http://www.mcgill.ca) is part of an international strategic alliance where students take parts of their degree in several countries. The need for both enhanced communication among dispersed individuals and for increasingly novel applications has led to exploration of computer mediated telecommunications to support and compete with these programs. Similar products are also competing for the executive business education market, such as management development seminars, executive diploma programs, focused Masters programs, like a Master of Technology, and specialized Master's programs for a target client group, such as nurses, physicians, dentists, agriculturists, financiers, or entrepreneurs. The brand 'MBA,' in addition, has been applied to educational programs ranging from broad-based generalist programs, executive programs, and specialized degree program options. The straightforward fact is that by using interactive technologies, programs can now be designed to meet variable needs and related applications. Thus a necessary part of re-engineering the MBA discussed here included developing high quality and sustainable courses that incorporate a range of flexible study options and that can be offered in the virtual classroom setting.

**Re-engineering the MBA**

The concept of re-engineering has a simple premise, that is to look at underlying *processes* and consider how Information Technology can support a redesigned methodology (Hammer, 1991). It has come to mean change in almost any form, but continues to reflect changed business processes. As already noted, the MBA degree is a suitable candidate for re-engineering today due to increased pressure for shortened delivery times, delivery to remote locations, and increased competitiveness. The pressure to shorten an MBA program seemingly conflicts with the demand for better quality education. Consideration of the time required for delivery of this program, however, suggests that the residence portion of the program may be a key element. 'Queen's MBA class, for instance, left behind an average salary of $60,000 to enroll in the program. They, and those like them, want to be separated from a paycheck as briefly as possible.' (Canadian Business). This suggests that the possibility of offering the program while the student remains at work, away from the target campus, offers a competitive advantage as well as the chance to constrain residence time significantly. Further, modularizing such a program will also allow for the consideration of reusability of the material and the creation of a separate diploma program.

**Modularizing the Business Program**

University graduates who move from a specialized role to one of management often look to executive programs to upgrade their management acumen, thus the possibility of a Post-Graduate Diploma program as a standalone module seems a worthwhile experiment. With this in mind, in this paper we discuss how a professional MBA degree offering, and related cross-disciplinary programs can be supported by a series of "pre-MBA" qualifying courses that offer students at different stages in their professional development study options designed to suit their particular needs. We will show, that when strategically re-engineered, a single set of linked courses, used in whole or in part, can allow students a number of viable options. These include the following:

- providing a means for students to acquire a terminal graduate level diploma in business administration,

- using the diploma, if they qualify upon completion, as a means to ladder into an MBA program,

- using selected segments of the program for individual and group professional development needs either in other graduate or undergraduate courses, or in the workplace,

- acquiring business courses that form part of a cross-disciplinary undergraduate degree, such as in computing science and business or engineering and business, and

- allowing Co-op program day MBA, computing science, or engineering students to take their work-based requirements without having to interrupt the ongoing progression of scheduled coursework.

Thus this program is targeted toward students who typically have recently graduated from an undergraduate program and are looking to either extend their business education to graduate school or to acquire business education in addition to another discipline, such as Computing Science or Engineering. The program also appeals to working professionals in business settings who need to acquire a business background or need to update their business education and skills.

**Program Organization**

The new business program offers a Graduate Diploma in Business Administration (GDBA) designed to be offered over the internet. Instructional design features focus on optimizing instruction and learning practices pertaining to the virtual seminar setting and vary with the goals and objectives of the different courses in the program.

*Objectives, principles and organization.*

1. Develop a series of courses that cover most of the first year of a standard MBA. Entrance to the program would normally require an undergraduate degree in any discipline from a recognized institution. Applicants with significant experience plus a recognized post-secondary certification may be accepted into the program.

2. Organize materials so that course modules can be assembled in different combinations for

delivery to different audiences in other programs. Modules can be reassembled for overseas or national delivery, support of on-campus courses or for other diploma programs already available or planned for future development.

3. The program is suitable for students studying in cohorts or on their own. All students are required to participate in on-line group conferencing, and to have, or have access to, necessary computing equipment. Because students meet instructors and study in asynchronous and synchronous learning environments, they will work independently of time and place-based constraints.

4. The program is intended to be revenue generating and teaching faculty will benefit individually and collectively from revenues. This includes payment for course development and supervision and research and travel undertaken on behalf of the program and Faculty.

5. Ownership of the program resides with the Faculty of Business Administration, who is the sole arbiter of decisions with respect to admission, content, delivery, scheduling and program and course modification.

Students complete a total of eight half courses plus a project at a minimum for the diploma, and prospective MBA students must take up the course series, in whole or in part, in the areas of Management Science and Information Systems, Accounting, Finance, Marketing or Human Resource Management. The full program takes four semesters to complete. To the extent possible, a semester will offer one quantitative course and one qualitative course; courses follow a progression in which natural prerequisites are scheduled before courses that build on them. Graduates of this program are expected to have acquired a fundamental mastery of core topics in Business Administration, and have proven ability to work strategically in teams, present and defend complex material, and demonstrated ability to handle a difficult topic by completing a final project.

**Design for the Virtual Seminar**

Faculty members teaching in the GDBA work closely with the University's Centre for Distance Education (CDE) teaching and learning technologies team to plan the program's virtual format and to design, develop, implement and support individual courses. The CDE team assists with all phases of the planning including selection of technologies appropriate for the program. Instructional design expertise is provided using principles of instruction drawn from empirically viable models of teaching and learning that are used to organize and structure the desktop interface. Strategic learning practices are also embedded in the course structure as an option. These are intended to provide mature, returning students with study tips and aids they may find helpful after an absence from study. Examples of course design features will be presented and discussed in terms of their suitability for the content concerned and contribution toward enhancing the instruction and learning process.

**Benchmarks for Success**

Although the material to be covered is known, the form of delivery is radically different from the status quo, and from any previously-offered program. Dealing in a new medium, namely tools provided through the Internet, with students who are remote from the institution, creates

a significant risk. Key risk areas include:

- 🕐 student acceptance and subsequent demand. Students must be willing to participate in the experiment. Some will be expected to complete the Diploma, while others intend to pursue the MBA upon completion.

- 🕐 faculty buy-in. In order for the program to succeed, good faculty must be convinced to make the effort to design and deliver the courses.

- 🕐 program continuance. The program takes approximately one and a half years to complete. Once a starting cohort is accepted, the institution must be committed to completion of that cycle.

- 🕐 metrics. The success of the program must be demonstrable. This includes metrics of student performance, evaluation of the program, acceptance by incoming students, and employers.

Many of these items cannot fully be realized until post-implementation. Each, however, can be estimated by surrogates or benchmarks. Student acceptance has been measured by completion of surveys of applicants to the existing program, alumni, and solicitation of expressions of interest. Each of these proved favorable. Faculty buy-in was initially a problem. This was mitigated by pilot implementation of virtual seminars in the undergraduate program with careful monitoring, adoption of the tools to be used to deliver the program into existing place-based course offerings, and self-selection of faculty to teach on the new program. Further, release time was negotiated for the development and training required to ramp up the new courses. Finally, existing metrics will be set and followed in the new format. The primary numbers kept in the Faculty include raw course applications, number of acceptances who actually start the program, grade distributions, student evaluations, attrition rates, and faculty willingness to continue, measured by acceptance of course assignments in the long term plan.

## Conclusion

The MBA degree can be a nebulous designation. It varies widely across, and often within, institutions. A constant factor remains, however, that it tends to be one of the most lucrative programs to offer. The attractiveness of this designation has led institutions to compete at unprecedented levels to offer enhanced MBA products to a declining pool of applicants. New technology allows these institutions to compete beyond their traditional boundaries. This paper has outlined some of these key issues and described one institution's approach to re-engineer its particular offering. The result is a modularized program offering two distinctly different designations, an MBA from the second module, and a Graduate Diploma in Business Administration from the first. Further, the first module is offered entirely online, making it available to students in remote locations. The advantages of this include:

- the ability for a student to acquire core skills without the required commitment of a full Master's program, a shortened MBA residence requirement,

- an opportunity for both the school and the student to reconsider their involvement in the MBA program at the completion of the diploma module,

- a larger target audience, and

- a core program which can be used in conjunction with other executive development programs.

Success of this program is yet to be determined, but initial response by students, faculty, and industry has been distinctly positive.

## References

Canadian Business (1997), *1997 MBA Guide.*

Hammer, Michael (1991): 'Re-engineering Business: Don't Automate, Obliterate,' *Harvard Business Review*, August.