



Motivations. Balancing the differing needs of students

Diversity is not just about gender and nationality, it is also about the reasons that students study an MBA.
Stuart Robinson explains

The drive for diversity is a key issue for many business schools. Most business school professionals would agree that it is important to have a diversity of gender, nationality and socioeconomic background in students as well as staff.

Looking out at the faces of my current MBA class, the other diversity aspect that is striking is the range of motivations for embarking on a course of study like the MBA. While colleagues and I are teaching a class, the individual students within it can be interpreting the content and how it will serve their hopes, ambitions and plans in very different ways.

It is very rewarding for an MBA teacher to have diversity in a classroom as this serves up the alternative opinions, views and arguments that encourage breadth and depth of learning. However, it also brings with it the challenge of addressing the different motivations of students and meeting their diverse objectives.

How do you ensure that programme design caters for different motivations? You certainly can't design sessions on one-by-one student needs.

I argue that we can identify five broad categories of student motivations, each calling for different approaches to be combined in teaching. These are the Entrepreneur, Career Changer, Corporate Climber, Badge Acquirer and Lifelong Learner.

The entrepreneur

Over the last decade, entrepreneurship has become a fundamental subject area at many schools and help with developing entrepreneurial skills is a key need for students. In recent editions of the Tomorrows MBA study by CarringtonCrisp and EFMD, entrepreneurship has consistently been in the top 10 of most-demanded subjects.

At Exeter we have a dedicated entrepreneurship research centre and, like many schools, we find increasing numbers of students using their MBA as a springboard for launching new ventures.

So what do these entrepreneurially inclined students need from an MBA programme?

To best serve the diverse needs of students, the MBA should be an integral part of the wider business school and university, partnering with other areas on research, teaching and opportunities for students. I think the best business education is one that reflects the full breadth and depth of business activity that students will encounter in the real world

First is space and encouragement to experiment and put ideas into practice. For many, an MBA programme is seen as a safe environment in which to try to new business concepts and develop skills through initiatives such as start-up competitions and Dragons' Den-style panels.

Second is access to mentors for support, whether that is faculty, alumni or corporate partners.

Finally, is the help to turn ideas into reality and advice on how to access early-stage funding opportunities.

The career changer

An MBA is seen by many as the springboard to a significant career change. According to GMAC's 2018 Alumni Perspectives Survey, approximately one in three prospective MBAs plan to use their management education to pursue opportunities in new industries (27%) or job functions they have not worked in before (36%).

In addition to industry or career, it sometimes means just doing something utterly different. For example, Exeter MBA alumna Sandra Norval trained as an accountant and her career had taken her into a senior environmental role in a rail operator.

But for Sandra, the MBA at Exeter supported a significant change in direction. Since graduation in 2014, she has set up her own professional coaching and business change consultancy, leading her into several senior advisories and non-executive board roles.

The fundamental nature of an MBA gives people like Sandra exposure to a host of different management disciplines. For many Career Changers, some of the softer leadership skills such as influencing and working with others are particularly important.

These students place an emphasis on networking and CV-building, and career support needs to be clearly linked to the content of the programme. Ultimately this group of students are focused on taking up opportunities to learn what it is like to work in different organisations and contexts. Activities such as individual consulting projects, which many business schools run, are particularly valued and can act as a catalyst for a career change.

The corporate climber

The third group of students are those concerned with using an MBA as a means of promotion and increasing salary within their current organisation. This is especially true with part-time or executive MBA students and with full-time students fortunate enough to have an employer that is supporting their MBA.

For Corporate Climbers, the focus is on acquiring knowledge, skills and behaviours that can add to their personal reputation and build up their confidence to tackle new roles.

For example, Nick Beilby, supported through his MBA by his employer, Centrax, found that he was able to use the knowledge, skills and vision he gained from his MBA at Exeter in the workplace. This, along with the opportunity to engage with other students to share ideas from their industries and perspectives, was key to accelerating his career progression in his organisation.

Measurement and accredited learning are something that this group values, which means that business schools need learning assessment systems that create impact back in the workplace. With the advent of Degree Apprenticeships in the UK, where business schools have the dual customer of individual and organisation, the Corporate Climber type of student is becoming more common.

The badge acquirer

For this group, a masters degree is the pinnacle of academic achievement. Having the letters 'MBA' after their name is a major motivation for many students. Their thinking is that an MBA represents a 'finishing school' from which they are ready to go on and pursue a variety of career goals.

Similarly to the Career Changer, Badge Acquirers may not have well-formed career goals beyond that of completing the MBA programme successfully. As with Career Changers, they will, however, place a great focus on career support and coaching that can help them prepare for life post-graduation.

This group will also attach significant importance to a business school's performance in rankings, accreditations and awards as these add credibility and perceived value to their MBA qualification.

The lifelong learner

Finally, there are a group of students that can be labelled Lifelong Learners, for whom an MBA is one step of many they take in continuing their professional education. In the 2019 Tomorrow's MBA study by CarringtonCrisp and EFMD, when asked about study motivations, prospective students placed *"I had always planned to do an MBA as part of my personal development"* second only to *"improving earning potential."*

For these students, the focus is on how they can use an MBA to expand on previous education and learning to build for the future. They may be attracted by the intellectual avenues that MBA study can open and may value connections with the wider university beyond the business school itself. Within this group will be some that consider a PhD and an academic career as possible routes forward.

The variety of motivations that students bring to the MBA calls for careful responses from programme designers.

First, it underlines the importance of the functions and learning opportunities that sit around a core MBA curriculum. This can include entrepreneurial and new business incubation support, career services, project opportunities with external organisations and executive coaching.

To best serve the diverse needs of students, the MBA should be an integral part of the wider business school and university, partnering with other areas on research, teaching and opportunities for students. I think the best business education is one that reflects the full breadth and depth of business activity that students will encounter in the real world.

Second, it supports yet another argument about why a business school must have an engaged alumni community. The relationship with an MBA student needs to be treated as a lifetime commitment not just the one or two years of study, with alumni relations needing to be an integral part of programme design and development.

Third, corporate connections with organisations ranging from large corporates to small start-ups as well as from the public sector to the third sector are vital. All can be valid and valuable partners in business school programmes.

MBA students want the holistic experience of learning and engaging with organisations and individuals outside the classroom. In this regard, the MBA programme design needs to look at how an external network of different partners can be built and maintained.

Finally, it points to the value of efforts that recognise, guide and value students as individuals. This is work that, given the limited time available in many contemporary programmes, must begin on day one and be maintained throughout the programme and after graduation. ■

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